

CARING FOR THE STRANGER IN OUR MIDST:
BIBLICAL AND PRACTICAL GUIDELINES
FOR LOCAL CHURCH MINISTRY IN THE MIDST OF A
REFUGEE CRISIS

By

Anthony Casey, PhD

Assistant Professor of Intercultural Studies

Southeastern Bible College

Birmingham, Alabama

acasey@sebc.edu

Introduction

The world has been plunged into what some are calling a refugee crisis. The statistics are staggering. In Syria alone, 7.5 million people are internally displaced, meaning they have been forced from their hometowns. More than 4 million have been forced to flee the country (UNHCR 2015). Europe is handling the brunt of resettlement, most notably France and Germany (UNHCR 2015 Fact Sheet, 6).¹ The recent terrorist attacks in Paris and elsewhere have raised concern in the eyes of many about the safety of citizens in refugee resettlement countries. In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, 31 governors out of the 50 U.S. states declared they would not allow Syrians to be resettled in their states. Thirty of the 31 governors were members of the Republican Party (CNN 2015).

Consequently, there has been much discussion about the role of countries like the United States and their responsibilities to care for the displaced of the world. Within the U.S., some church leaders strongly advocate for the resettlement of refugees, and Syrians in particular.² Other Christians strongly oppose Syrian resettlement on grounds of national security. Some of the most Bible-minded people in the U.S. are some of those most opposed to Syrians. I recently attended a talk on the refugee crisis by Bernie Anderson of World Relief who noted that Birmingham, Alabama was ranked as the most Bible-minded city in the U.S. in 2015, but had some of the strongest opinions against the resettlement of Syrians. Anderson drew out what he believed was a contradiction of belief, or supposed belief, and practice (Anderson 2016). Anderson noted that Birmingham was the largest city in the U.S. without any refugee

¹European nations as a whole hosted just over 3 million refugees at the start of 2015, while all of the Americas together hosted 509,300. Within Europe, Germany has resettled the highest number of refugees.

²The President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention is among one of the most vocal advocates for Christian compassion toward refugee resettlement. See <http://erlc.com/syria> for a link to several articles articulating their position.

resettlement.

These two perspectives: “resettle because it is the ‘Christian thing to do,’” or “no Syrians because they are a threat to our national security” are espoused by Americans claiming to be Evangelical Christians. Why the disparity? Christians in favor of resettlement say the Scriptures are obvious about God’s heart for the sojourner, which they often interchange with “refugee.” After all, Jesus himself was a refugee in Egypt so we should welcome those like him, the reasoning might go. The Bible uses the word-group of foreigner/stranger/alien/sojourner more than 165 times, so is it not clear that Christians are to welcome the stranger and alien, the refugee? What about the cities of refuge mentioned in Numbers 35 and Joshua 20? Shouldn’t the U.S., of all the nations in the world, be a place of refuge for the persecuted?

Missiologists are sometimes accused of poor theology at the expense of practicality. My goal in this paper is to closely and critically examine the uses of the word-group translated as sojourner/stranger/foreigner/alien in the Scriptures and develop a biblical theology of the sojourner to help bring clarity to the issue for the local church.³ Can we simply point to passages where God commands his people to care for the sojourner among them and declare that the Church today must do the same? The answer is complicated. There are three Hebrew words that are translated as sojourner/stranger/foreigner/ alien and each is used in a general categorical sense, so it depends on which Hebrew word is used because Israel is called to a different relationship with the sojourner depending on a number of criteria associated with each of the three Hebrew words.

³I acknowledge that some hold to a different use of the Old Testament, and the Law in particular, than I espouse in this paper. While I do not believe New Covenant Christians are under the Law in the same way as Old Testament Israel, I do believe the embodiment of the Law is to mark the identity and character of Christians today. Additionally, the theme of God’s care for sojourners runs throughout the entire biblical storyline, is picked up by New Testament authors, and has eschatological significance, as I show throughout this paper.

Stranger/Sojourner/Foreigner in the Old Testament

The language of the stranger and sojourner runs throughout the Old Testament. A word study of these English terms reveals three underlying Hebrew words. After a close study of the contexts in which these words are used, I have determined there are three general categories of “stranger” and Israel is to relate to each category in a slightly different way. In short, the Church today cannot simply point to any English word sojourner/stranger/foreigner/alien in the Old Testament, insert “refugee” in its place, and use the passage to justify resettlement and care of refugees today.

Ger

This word is the most common and is used 92 times. The semantic usage of the word includes 1) sojourner, temporary dweller, new-comer, 2) dweller in Israel with certain conceded, not inherited rights. The word sometimes refers to an ethnic foreigner who has been circumcised and is now treated as an ethnic Israelite (Brown 1999, 158).

God says to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers (*ger*) in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years” (Gen. 15:13).⁴ God is speaking of the captivity in Egypt that begins after Joseph’s death at the end of the book of Genesis. Here, the reference is a literal stranger, and one that would be eventually oppressed by a stronger nation, Egypt.

We see another usage of *ger* in Exodus 12, which seems to imply that the *ger* was, in this case, considered part of the congregation of Israel. The context is the Passover on the eve of the exodus. The verse reads, “For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone

⁴I quote from the New American Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise noted, as a more literal translation is better suited to word studies.

eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land” (Ex. 12:19). In order to be cut off from the congregation of Israel, the *ger* must have in some way been included in the congregation.

We see further nuances of the *ger* as member of the congregation, in contrast to a different kind of sojourner (*towshab*) a few verses later when we read,

No sojourner (*towshab*)⁵ or hired servant may eat of it [the Passover meal]. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger (*ger*) shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it, he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law [“the same law” in the ESV] for the native and for the stranger (*ger*) who sojourns among you” (Ex. 12:45, 47-49).

In light of Old Testament Law, this passage is astounding. A foreigner, a Gentile, is able to be included in the congregation of Israel, and even viewed as “a native of the land.” However, the requirement is circumcision, the mark of a covenant relationship with God. We see the contrast here, which is developed later in this paper, between the *towshab*, a foreigner out of covenant relationship with God, and the *ger*, a foreigner in covenant relationship with God. One is not permitted to partake of the religious ceremonies of the Passover meal, while the other is invited and even treated as an ethnic Israelite.

Exodus 22 occurs in the midst of the regulations of the Law. The Law was intended to shape God’s people. God reminds his people that the Law is God’s grace to his people as his “treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19: 5-6). Their behavior among the nations flows out of their identity as the people of God. Israel is to love what God loves and care for what God cares for. Social justice is the very heartbeat of God (Keller 2010). In light of the common practice in the Ancient Near East to mistreat and oppress foreigners, God says to his people,

⁵I address *towshab* in the next section of this paper.

“You shall not wrong a stranger [*ger*] or oppress him, for you were strangers [*ger*] in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 22:21). We see a similar injunction in Leviticus 19:33 when God states, “When a stranger [*ger*] resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.”

These verses show further that strangers and ethnic foreigners of a certain category (*ger*) were to be treated as equal to Israelites. Israel is not in these cases called to harbor just anyone, but those who are in right relationship with God through circumcision. Again, it should not be surprising that God’s compassion extends to the Gentiles, “even” in the Old Testament. God’s heart for the nations runs throughout Scripture. Foreigners (*ger*) are closely tied with the eschatological mission of God, the *missio Dei*.

The Eschatological Hope of the Nations

The prophets, and in particular Isaiah, are fond of referring to the ingathering of strangers (*ger*) as part of the fulfillment of God’s plan in redemptive history. We see that the gathering of the nations, Gentiles, and their grafting into God’s people through covenant relationship with him is prophesied: “When the Lord will have compassion on Jacob and again choose Israel, and settle them in their own land, then strangers (*ger*) will join them and attach themselves to the house of Jacob” (Isaiah 14:1). Isaiah writes that Messiah will fill the earth and nations will come to him (Is. 11:9-10), as a blessing and his inheritance (Is. 19:24-25). Messiah is a light to the nations (Is. 42:1, 6-7) and in the Old Testament, the strangers and foreigners (*ger*) have a place among Israel.

Caring for the stranger, as noted earlier is a matter of social justice. Strangers are often included in a categorical list alongside the poor, orphans, and widows – these are ones whom are often oppressed and mistreated. Loving and including “minorities” is a matter of social justice that the Lord takes very seriously (see Malachi 3:5). It seems clear that the *ger* were called to

receive special treatment and care from God's people.

In summary, *ger* refers to either an ethnic stranger not part of Israel, but to be treated with kindness (see Lev. 19:33); or more commonly, an ethnic stranger that has been circumcised and is now part of Israel with all attendant rights and privileges (see Lev. 24:22, Num. 9:14). The *ger* receives a welcome for sure, but a different kind of welcome than other categories of "stranger" used in the Old Testament.

Towshab

Towshab is another category of alien/foreigner/traveler used in the Bible and occurs 15 times (Brown 1999, 444). The semantic usage most often refers to one with whom Israel is to not relate, especially ceremonially. For example, in contrast to the *ger*, "A sojourner (*towshab*) or a hired servant shall not eat of [the Passover]" (Ex. 12:45). In this instance, the usage seems to be referring to a stranger who is passing through, possibly seeking temporary refuge with the Israelites but has not accepted circumcision and is not considered in covenant relationship with God.

Towshab is also used when referring to foreigners included in the house of Israel, but unable to eat the religious meals. These *towshab* are often household servants among the Israelites, dependent on their care. God commands that "All of you shall have the Sabbath products of the land for food; yourself, and your male and female slaves, and your hired man and your foreign resident (*towshab*), those who live as aliens with you" (Lev. 25:6). The *towshab* are not to be taken advantage of or sold into slavery (Lev. 25:39-40), but rather are to be treated as a *ger*, an Israelite, until the year of jubilee when they are sent back to their homeland. In some ways, the *towshab* seems to most closely relate to the modern term "refugee." I draw out the implications of this connection later in this paper.

In summary, the use of *towshab* is much less common than *ger*, but has a similar semantic meaning in some cases, but often involves limited involvement in Israelite religious ceremonies and meals. God commands his people to treat the *towshab* as a person with dignity, in contrast to how other nations treated foreigners, and not to oppress and take advantage of the powerless stranger in their land.

Nakar

Nakar occurs 35 times in the Old Testament and most often refers to literal foreign things and false gods. Less often, *nakar* is used to refer to foreign people outside of Israel, those with whom Israel is to have nothing to do (Brown 1999, 647-49). We see an example in Genesis where Jacob was commanded to make an altar before God and then told his household to “Put away foreign [*nakar*] gods which are among you, and purify yourselves” (Gen. 35:2). The majority of the rest of the occurrences in the Torah and book of Joshua have to do with foreign gods.

Other times, *nakar* is used to refer to foreign people, but usually because they are making or selling idols and false gods. We see Abraham circumcising all the men in his household, including those bought as servants from a foreigner [*nakar*] (Gen. 17:27). Here, Abraham brings the servants, who were foreigners, though we do not see the term occur alongside them, into his household through circumcision. It is likely these people were considered *towshab* at least, and probably *ger* because of the circumcision. *Nakar* is used of the foreign person from whom the servants were purchased, and Abraham had nothing further to do with that foreigner himself.

Nakar as taboo is further illustrated in laws for proper animal sacrifices. Israelites are not to accept any animal for sacrifice “from the hand of a foreigner [*nakar*] for offering as the food of your God; for their corruption is in them, they have a defect, they shall not be accepted for

you” (Lev. 22:25). There is a sense here in which the pollution of the *nakar* pollutes the animal, making it unacceptable for sacrifice, likely because *nakar* are described as those who do not worship God and who worship false gods.

Eschatological Hope

This distinction of separation is made clear in the Psalms when God speaks of *nakar* as those who oppose him, but will eventually be made to submit to his sovereignty over them and the nations. “As soon as they [the nations] hear, they obey me; Foreigners [*nakar*] submit to me. Foreigners [*nakar*] fade away, and come trembling out of their fortresses” (Ps. 18:44-45). This passage carries a strong sense of God’s power over the nations, and provides the justification for his ability to draw people from every nation to himself.

In one sense, *nakar* is the category of foreigner to be avoided completely because of their utter opposition to God and immersion in idol worship, but paradoxically, Isaiah especially likes to use *nakar* to draw attention to those outside of Israel, but whom God still pursues until they join themselves to Israel. The Lord says, “Let not the foreigner [*nakar*] who joins himself to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from His people’” (Is. 56:3). And God promises covenant blessing to “the foreigners [*nakar*] who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, and hold fast to My covenant” (Is. 56:6). In light of the use of *nakar* in Scripture, it is almost unfathomable that God would pursue and include them in his household. Such language makes the case even stronger that God loves the nations (foreigners) and is redeeming them, even the worst idolaters, for his name and glory.

In summary, *nakar* is most often used to describe false gods and idols along with individuals most clearly outside the bounds of any relationship with Israel. They are the slave traders, the idol sellers, and the ones who corrupt Israel with the lure of false gods. Even still,

Isaiah shows *nakar* are not beyond the saving hand of the almighty and compassionate God.

Cities of Refuge

In the midst of the current refugee crisis, I have heard many Christians cite the cities of refuge passages in the Bible as proof that the United States should resettle refugees. Yes, the words sojourner and stranger occur in those passages, but after our preceding Hebrew word study, which underlying Hebrew word is used, and what are the categorical implications of that usage?

Numbers 35

The cities of refuge are intended to be a place of safety for the “manslayer,” someone who has accidentally or unintentionally killed someone else. The cities are a place of safety until a proper trial can take place to decide whether the killing was murder (Num. 36:6, 11-12). It was custom in that culture for an “avenger of blood” to serve the sentence against the murderer (Num. 35:21), but lest emotions and ethnocentrism get the best of the avenger, the cities of refuge were intended to act as a safety net for the innocent.

As noted earlier, sojourners were especially likely to experience mistreatment, so we see here in Numbers 35 that both Israelites and sojourners are to be received. We read that these “cities shall be for refuge for the sons of Israel, and for the alien (*ger*) and for the sojourner (*towshab*) among them; that anyone who kills a person unintentionally may flee there” (Num. 35:15). As noted above, *ger* is often a foreigner who is in covenant relationship with God through circumcision and adherence to the Law. *Towshab* often refers to those who live in the household of Israel as servants. *Ger* are to be treated as ethnic Israelites, so it is not surprising that they be included in the protection of the cities of refuge. *Towshab*, while not in ceremonial

communion with Israel, were to be treated with dignity and afforded certain protections because of their relationship with Israelites. Notice that *nakar* are not mentioned in this passage.

Joshua 20

In the conquest, we see the implementation of the instructions for the creation of the cities of refuge mentioned in Numbers (Josh. 20:2). There is an added nuance: the stranger is to “stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and state his case in the hearing of the elders of that city; and they shall take him into the city to them and give him a place and they shall not deliver the manslayer into the hand of the avenger” (Josh. 20:4-5). This wording gives the sense of what we today refer to as extraditing a criminal back to their homeland for trial.

Again, these cities are to be a refuge for both the sons of Israel and for the stranger (*ger*) who sojourns (verb form of *ger*) among them (Josh. 20:9). We know the usage of *ger* from our previous study. Especially in this passage, but in Numbers 35 as well, there is not indication that the cities of refuge were open to just anyone who came along needing help. Here, only *ger* is used.

In summary, it seems an overstatement and a stretch of Scripture to cite the cities of refuge passages and make the claim that the United States should readily receive anyone in need, whatever their predicament. The *ger* and the *towshab* are often already in some kind of relationship with Israel, and were guaranteed certain rights of protection because of this association. The cities of refuge are clearly intended to protect someone from being killed by the avenger until a proper trial can be held.

Israel as Sojourner

In an interesting application of the term, Israel herself is often referred to as a sojourner.

How is it that God's own people can be strangers and foreigners? In the Old Testament, Israel as sojourner is most often used by God to remind his people that they were helpless when he rescued them. He then enjoins them to care for the helpless around them, since they know well what it is like to be oppressed and mistreated.

We see this concept in the midst of the Law when God says, "You shall not wrong a stranger (*ger*) or oppress him, for you were strangers (*ger*) in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 22:21). And again when God says, "You shall not oppress a stranger (*ger*), since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger (*ger*), for you also were strangers (*ger*) in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 23:9). In all instances, the word used to refer to God's people as strangers is *ger*, which is not surprising considering our previous study. That God calls ethnic Israel *ger* reinforces the idea that Gentiles who were circumcised and followed the Law are also called *ger* and were treated as ethnic Israelites.

Israel's previous status as *ger* as a motivation to care for others is made especially clear in Deuteronomy where we read, "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien (*ger*), giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens (*ger*), for you yourselves were aliens (*ger*) in Egypt" (Duet. 10:17-19). This passage reveals the nature and character of God – he is mighty and is not moved. He defends the cause of the oppressed. And he loves the *ger*. Israel, as God's people, is to embody his character (the purpose of the law, see Duet. 4:6-7), and love and care for what God loves and cares for. God cared for Israel when they were *ger*, so they should care for the *ger* in their midst.

Sojourner/Stranger in the New Testament

The New Testament primarily picks up on the language of sojourner to again refer to God's people as sojourners, temporary residents looking toward their heavenly home. There are two primary Greek terms translated as stranger/foreigner/sojourner/alien, and then an assortment of other terms used to describe "peoples" or ethnic groups.

Paroikos

Paroikos is used four times in the New Testament and carries a semantic range of stranger, foreigner, or one without citizenship (Bauer 1979, 629). Stephen speaks of Israel as aliens in a foreign land in his speech in Acts. We read, "But God spoke to this effect, that [Abraham's] descendants would be aliens (*paroikos*) in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years" (Acts 7:6). Stephen is quoting Genesis 15:13 here, and the Hebrew word used in that passage is *ger*. The same wording is used in Acts 7:29, which quotes Genesis 2:15 and 2:22. This usage matches our previous study where God's people are always referred to as *ger* in the Old Testament.

The Apostle Paul refers to the Ephesians as "no longer strangers (*xenos*) and aliens (*paroikos*), but fellow citizens in God's household." This status is in contrast to Gentiles who were "excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers (*xenos*) to the covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12), but have now been brought near by the blood of Christ (2:13). Paul is using the term *paroikos* to refer to those not in covenant relationship with God, outsiders based on religious identity, rather than using the term to refer to believers in a foreign land. This usage accentuates God's compassion for Gentiles, as noted earlier in this paper.

The final use of *paroikos* is by Peter as he urges Christians "as aliens (*paroikos*) and strangers (*parepidemos*) to abstain from fleshly lusts (1 Peter 2:11). The idea is that the

Christian way of life is in stark contrast to the cultural narrative established in the Roman world of sexual indulgence, cult prostitution, and general immorality. In this sense, believers are as aliens who do not belong, as they look toward their heavenly home.

Xenos

Xenos occurs fourteen times in the New Testament and is translated as foreigner, alien, or stranger (Bauer 1979, 548). We have seen one use, in Ephesians when Paul reminds the Gentiles that they were at one time “separated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants,” yet are no “longer strangers (*xenos*) and aliens (*paroikos*), but fellow citizens in God’s household” (Eph. 2:12, 19).

Other Terms

A number of other terms are used in the New Testament to refer to Gentiles (*ethnos*), peoples (*laos*), and tribes (*phule*). These terms carry the connotation of non-Israelites, at least with reference to ethnicity. There is clear evidence that God has made a way in Christ for these groups to find salvation in him, most obvious in the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20) and I will not expound on their uses in this paper.

In sum, there is less distinction in the use of Greek terms translated foreigner/sojourner than in the Old Testament. The divide is primarily Jewish/Gentile rather than different categories of foreigner. The New Testament makes clear that the gospel is for all, without regard to ethnicity.

The All Tribes Thread

Before summarizing the biblical theology of foreigner in the Scriptures, I want to make note of the eschatological association of strangers/foreigners with God’s overarching plan of

redemptive history. There is one Hebrew term, *mishpahah*, that is translated variously as clan, family, tribe, people, or nation. It is this word that William Carey picked up on in his *Inquiry* and was the primary impetus for his going to India.

God tells Abram to “Go forth from your country, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and in you all the families (*mishpahah*) of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3). A study of the term *mishpahah* reveals that in this case, and many others,⁶ we could translate the word as tribes or nations, similar to how the New Testament uses *ethnos*. The Apostle Paul picks up on this passage in Galatians when he writes, “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles (*ethnos*) by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations (*ethnos*) will be blessed in you’” (Gal. 3:9). Paul later makes clear that Christ is the fulfillment of this Genesis passage when he writes that Abraham’s seed is Christ (Gal. 3:16).

We see the culmination of God’s plan for the *mishpahah* and *ethnos* of the world in Rev. 5:9 and 7:5 when people will stand before the Lamb, redeemed from every tribe, tongue, nation, and people. This “all nations” thread draws the entire biblical storyline together, and is at the very heart of God’s plan in redemptive history. Clearly, *ger*, *towshab*, and *nakar* are the very *mishpahah* and *ethnos* that God has in mind in Gen. 12:1-3, Matt. 28, Gal. 3, and Rev. 5 and 7. In this sense, there is a strong connection between God’s plan for redemptive history and his commands for his people to welcome and care for the foreigner among them. Care for the

⁶*Mishpahah* can simply mean a small literal family, and is often used in that manner. However, the word is also used to denote large clans, ect. Examples include Gen 10:5, “From these the coastlands of the nations (*goye*) were separated into their lands, every one according to his language, according to their families (*mishpahah*), into their nations.” We see a link between languages and “families” or clans. Gen. 28:14, in the midst of Gen. 28:10-17 echoes of the Tower of Babel in Gen. 11, but here God initiates salvation of the families of the earth. This passage foreshadows the Great Commission in Matt. 28. Additionally, Psalm 22:27-28 and 96:7 have in mind the nations when they use the word *mishpahah*. Ezekiel 20:32 states, “We will not be like the nations, like the tribes (*mishpahah*) of the lands, serving stone and wood.” And finally, Amos 3:2 states, “You only have I chosen among all the families (*mishpahah*) of the Earth.”

foreigner has eschatological significance.

Summary and Conclusion

In the Old Testament, consideration of foreigners primarily had to do with religious identification. So long as any foreigner covenanted with Israel and Yahweh through circumcision and adherence to the Law, they were to be accepted and treated equally as an ethnic Israelite (*ger*). Even other foreigners who did not covenant were to be cared for and treated with dignity, however, they could not join in the covenantal relationship with Israel for religious matters (*towshab*). Some foreigners were to be totally avoided, but this injunction was usually directly related to religious matters such as the selling of idols and worship of foreign/false gods (*nakar*). Yet, even the *nakar* do not escape God's arm of mercy, as is made clear in Isaiah. It seems that essentially it was religious practice and not ethnicity that was the problem in the Old Testament narratives. Ethnicity, or "foreignness," did not hinder anyone from following Yahweh and becoming a covenant member of the house of Israel with all attendant rights and privileges. In fact, the idea of God drawing all nations, peoples, and tribes to Himself runs throughout the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi (*mishpahah*).

In the New Testament, the primary uses of terms for foreigners were also religiously related. There was nothing stopping a Gentile (*ethnos*) from following Jesus, other than the act of repentance and faith. As Piper points out, we are all genetically descended from the same family whom God appointed to multiply and fill the Earth with His glory (Piper 2011, 206-13), most clearly seen in Noah's sons in Gen. 10 and culminating in Rev. 5:9 and 7:5. The stranger/sojourner (*paroikos* and *xenos*) metaphor is carried over from the Old Testament references to Israel as sojourners in the land, but with the implication that Earth is not our final home. We minister and mediate the blessing of salvation even as we look to our final rest in the

New Heavens and New Earth (echoed in Jer. 29).

Finally, caring for the stranger and foreigner is commanded by God (Malachi 3, ect), primarily because God has cared for his people when they were strangers to Him, separated by their sin and rebellion. A biblical understanding of foreigner/stranger must include matters of salvation, social justice, and eschatology. God's care for the foreigner is so strong throughout Scripture, that regardless of the political laws of our (or any country), Christians must care for the foreigner among us while we have a chance. This care does not always mean looking the other way when it comes to illegal immigrant status, but it does mean having a soft heart and caring hands with all people in our midst.

Application for the Church

Though my primary aim in this paper is to develop a biblical theology of the sojourner word-group, I now move to application for the church today in the midst of the refugee crisis. I do not hold to a wholesale admittance of refugees, but in light of the biblical texts, I do believe Christians have a responsibility to think biblically about, and care for, refugees.

Careful Use of Scripture

Churches should make a careful use of Scripture when advocating for ministry to refugees. The U.S. is not Israel, and is not under a theocracy governed by the Old Testament Law. It is a misuse of Scripture to call for Birmingham, Alabama, or any U.S. city, to be a city of refuge for Syrians in the same way cities of refuge functioned in Numbers and Joshua in the Bible. There is an obvious separation of Church and State so the church cannot expect a secular government to operate according to biblical guidelines. Christians are, however, called to pray for their government leadership and remain obedient to its laws and live as good citizens (Rom.

13, 1 Peter 2).

However, it is clear in Scripture that God's people *are* to care for strangers in their midst. We have seen that God's heart for the foreigner is tied to social justice, salvation, and eschatology. God moves the nations, and they are coming to the U.S. Regardless of the position of our government, the church must care for those foreigners already here by God's sovereign design. It is simply unbiblical to mistreat and extend prejudice to immigrants in our communities. God would quickly say to U.S. Christians, "You were strangers to me, an enemy because of your sin, and I died for you. Therefore, care for the stranger among you for you know what it is like to be a stranger."

I struggle with the substitution of "refugee" for any of the Hebrew or Greek terms translated foreigner/sojourner/stranger/alien. Modern refugees certainly are sojourners, people without a homeland. However, as noted above, there are certain categorical distinctions between the Hebrew terms especially, each with an attendant relationship between the sojourner and Israel. *Towshab*, those foreigners whom God commanded his people to care for and treat with dignity, but were not included in the ceremonial and religious rites, may be the closest to what we call a refugee today. A better way to think of the issue is to advocate the multitude of biblical injunctions to care for the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable among us. Refugees would most certainly fall under this line of thinking.

Realize the Crisis has Become Highly Politicalized

The presidential election year and subsequent political debates have severely politicized the refugee crisis (Migration Policy Institute 2015). It has become a talking point, often using extreme language of refugees coming in "hordes," in order to secure votes and is a regular

conversation in the news. State governors have denied Syrian resettlement on the grounds of national security (CNN 2015). They say it is not a matter of compassion, but of security. I am sure no one wants to govern the state in which a terrorist incident occurs, so better safe than sorry I suppose.

It is the job of the local church to bring clarity to the debate and not be drawn in to a political argument. Christians need a biblical understanding of God's heart for foreigners and his commands regarding social justice. Additionally, Christians need a better theology of risk in order to respond biblically to these kinds of situations (Morris 2012 and Piper 2013). There is certainly a place for political discussion because matters of national security and funding for relocation are real issues, but conversations dominated by political agendas without scriptural insight and grounding are not helpful for Christians.

Realize Much Misinformation and Resultant Fear

Unfortunately, social media, and even major news networks propagate misinformation of the refugee crisis. Many times I have heard people equating refugee to terrorist, and believing terrorist attacks were committed by refugees. For example, the bombing at the Boston marathon was not committed by brothers in the U.S. under refugee status, but one wouldn't know that from the news. The bombings in Paris were not committed by refugees, but by Belgian nationals. The shootings in San Bernardino were not committed by refugees, but by a U.S. born person of Pakistani descent (Migration Policy Institute 2015). 9/11 was not committed by refugees. In the U.S., refugees rarely commit crimes in general, and none of the 784,000 refugees admitted to the U.S. since 9/11 (3 million since 1975) has committed an act of terrorism (Migration Policy Institute Fact Sheet, 3). As the United Nations likes to say, "Refugees flee terror, they don't

bring terror.”

Americans see what has happened in Paris, Brussels, and now San Bernardino and many immediately think refugees are at fault. Fear-mongering by some news outlets and on social media has done more to sway people’s opinions of refugees than Scripture, common sense, fact checking, or real relationships. Relationships humanize people and move them from “refugee” in a categorical sense that is easy to fear to my neighbor Nur, whose kids I love. I suspect that many with strong opinions against refugee resettlement do not personally know any refugees. Again, it is the responsibility of the church to curtail irrational thinking based on misinformation about the refugee crisis. Provide access to fact sheets and, as much as possible, information produced without political agendas.

Understand the Refugee Resettlement Process

The U.S. has probably the most thorough resettlement vetting process of any country in the world (U.S. State Department 2016). There is not a one-to-one correlation that if terrorists “slipped through” in France or Brussels (which has not yet been proven), it is likely to happen here as well. The government has a detailed resettlement process, beginning with the United Nations, who first vets individuals overseas before even establishing refugee status. Individuals are interviewed multiple times by agents, and their stories are compared with others in the camps. U.S. immigration and Homeland Security sends agents to the camps for another round of interviewing. Global databases like Interpol and our CIA, FBI, and Homeland Security watchlists are consulted. If any name appears on any of these lists, the person is not admitted to the U.S. These lists are populated with individuals who *might* have associated with suspected terrorists, but have never been proven to actually have any official connection with terrorism. In sum, if there is any hint of suspicion, the person is not admitted.

On the U.S. side, the federal government partners with state and local governments to provide additional security and infrastructure for resettlement. Local agencies pick up refugees from the airport and help them move in to their apartments. Social workers regularly check in on the refugees. In short, if a terrorist wanted to get into the U.S., trying to come as a refugee is the absolute hardest way to evade detection. It would be much easier to arrive as a tourist or international student than as a refugee. Churches need an accurate understanding of this resettlement process as a means to dissuade irrational thinking and false information about the likelihood of terrorists infiltrating the U.S. through refugee resettlement.

Additionally, resettlement to a third country like the U.S. is a last resort choice by the agencies involved. The first choice would be repatriation, however, this is not usually a viable strategy because it was their own governments that often persecuted the refugees in the first place, causing the initial displacement. The second choice is resettlement in a neighboring country in the same region. On some occasions this is a viable strategy, but in other cases, these surrounding countries are poor and have no structure in place to receive numbers of new comers. In other cases, such as with ethnic Nepali refugees from Bhutan, surrounding countries such as Nepal and India do not recognize the refugees as eligible for citizenship because of historical conflicts. These are now truly people without a home and without a nationality. It takes a global response to the global refugee crisis. Europe is taking the lead, but so are SE Asian countries, Latin American countries like Brazil, and the U.S. and Canada. The American church needs to realize no one is asking us to solve the world's refugee problem, just to be a willing player alongside many other nations.

Pray, Inform, Advocate with your Local Governments

Churches can take designated time to inform their congregations about the facts of the refugee crisis and pray for refugees and their local governments. Agencies like World Relief are already advocating on behalf of refugees with local and federal government offices.⁷ Contact World Relief for a more detailed plan of advocacy. Church members can attend hearings and call and write letters to officials asking for policy change regarding resettlement.

Provide Resources for Current and Future Refugees

Churches can register with local resettlement agencies like World Relief and Catholic Charities and become sponsors for refugees. These agencies need help with the physical components of resettlement and churches can donate apartment furnishings, vehicles, school supplies, clothing, and ESL services. Additionally, churches often host classes to help refugees learn American culture, study for the American citizenship exam, and learn to drive. Most importantly, Christians can provide friendship for people who have been through extraordinarily difficult situations.

Partner with Organizations and Churches Overseas Working in Refugee Camps

Finally, churches can partner with organizations and mission agencies working with refugees in camps around the world. The International Mission Board has many such opportunities, as does World Relief. Churches can send short term mission teams or longer term workers to these camps to share Jesus, make disciples, and provide humanitarian relief and

⁷World Relief is a Christian agency seeking to provide humanitarian care for the vulnerable of the world, including refugees. See www.worldrelief.org.

education for children.

It is often the case that refugees in America still have many contacts and even family members in their former camps. Strategic churches will follow these relationship networks and do ministry in camps with these connections. I personally know several Burmese families now in Louisville, Kentucky who spent time in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia where I previously lived. They have fond memories of missionaries and local Christians in KL who cared for them before they transitioned to the U.S.

Conclusion

I have endeavored to present a biblical theology of sojourner in order to shed light on current missiological thinking about the refugee crisis. Many in the American church desire to receive refugees and look to Scripture for support. We need to be sure we accurately understand Scripture and do not read modern terms like “refugee” back into the Bible in an inappropriate way. We see there are three primary Hebrew terms for sojourner, each with its own categorical usage defining the relationship between the foreigner and Israel. Regardless of the religious distinctions, it is clear that God expects his people to care for and treat with dignity those foreigners in their midst.

Care for foreigners is a key component of redemptive history, as God continually reminds his people that they were sojourners in Egypt when he brought them out so they should treat others likewise. Additionally, foreigners are included in the *mishpahah*, families of the earth, that God cares so much about and continually draws to himself culminating in the diversity of Heaven seen in Rev. 5 and 7. Care for foreigners thus carries an eschatological component.

Finally, I have given practical suggestions for how the local church in America can minister in the midst of a refugee crisis. A proper response must be biblical, factually accurate,

and practically addressed. In many ways, there are no easy answers, but as the crisis evolves, Christians can provide an informed and compassionate response, because of all people, we live as strangers and sojourners in the land, carrying out the mission of God as we look to our better home.

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Anthony Casey (M.Div., Ph.D., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is Assistant Professor of Intercultural Studies at Southeastern Bible College. He has worked with refugees and other immigrants in the U.S. and overseas for fifteen years and is author of *Church Planting among Immigrants in U.S. Urban Centers: The Where, Why, and How of Diaspora Missiology in Action* (Portland: Institute for Diaspora Studies, 2014). He can be reached at acasey@sebc.edu.