Love the Stranger for You were Strangers: The Development of a Biblical Literary Theme and Motif

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LOVE THE STRANGER FOR YOU WERE STRANGERS: 
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A BIBLICAL LITERARY 
THEME AND MOTIF

by

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Marquette University, 
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ABSTRACT
LOVE THE STRANGER FOR YOU WERE STRANGERS:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A BIBLICAL LITERARY
THEME AND MOTIF

Helga Kisler, B.A., M.A.
Marquette University, 2016

The Hebrew Bible recounts the development of Israel’s self-identity as “Strangers and Sojourners” and their relationship with God and other Strangers. A significant passage that connects these relationships says that God “loves the Strangers…You shall also love the Stranger, for you were Strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:17-19). In the same book that commands love for the Stranger, God tells Israel to separate themselves from foreign nations in the land that they will occupy.

In order to investigate an evident disparity concerning the relationship with the Stranger, this dissertation examines the literary motif of the Stranger and the theme of God’s love for the Stranger in the Torah/Pentateuch, as well as the Book of Ruth, by looking at the different representations of the Stranger and how the motif developed with both positive (gēr) and negative implications (nēkār, and zār).

The love command in Deuteronomy 10:17-19 specifically concerns the Stranger who is a sojourner (gēr), evoking Israel’s collective memory as sojourners in order to inspire their empathy and compassion. On the other hand, the Stranger who is foreign (nēkār) evokes fear and enmity. The Book of Ruth acts as a commentary on the negative perceptions of the foreigner in the Torah/Pentateuch by serving as an example of love from a Stranger. Ruth gives new meaning to the love command by broadening the sphere of compassion to include the Strangers who are traditionally viewed as foreign threats or enemies.

While other research generally focuses on a particular form of the Stranger, this study expands on the research by examining the occurrences of all three forms (gēr, nēkār, and zār) in order to understand the different levels of meaning connected to the Stranger and how that meaning is dependent on the historical context of the literature, the rhetorical and theological interests of the final redactors, and the methods of interpretation by later readers.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Helga Kisler, B.A., M.A.

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CHAPTER 1

LOVE THE STRANGER FOR YOU WERE STRANGERS:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A BIBLICAL LITERARY THEME AND MOTIF

1.1. Introduction: The Stranger as Other

A fundamental reality of human experience is that we encounter one another either as kindred or strangers. We relate to others as members of our family, kin, community, and nation or as strangers who do not share our worldview. L. Silberstein writes that “we form our sense of self, our identity, in relation to Others over and against whom we define ourselves.”¹ K. Rahner says that a person’s self-awareness is developed “only within a community of persons, in the experience of history which he never makes alone, in dialogue, and in experience which reproduces the productive self-interpretation of other people.”² While community significantly shapes our self-understanding, it can also influence a perception of the Other, or the Stranger, as a person who is not a member of our family, kinship, or chosen community.³ In a theological/ethical interpretation of the Stranger, R. Benet asserts that “cognitive and ontological questions are subordinated to the ethical obligation of respecting the stranger’s alterity and of being concerned with

¹ Laurence J. Silberstein, “Others Within and Others Without: Rethinking Jewish Identity and Culture,” in The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions on Jewish Thought and Identity (ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn; New York: New York University Press, 1994), 5-11. Silberstein writes that the concept of otherness is particularly prominent in postmodern writers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, as well as feminist, Black, and postcolonial writers.

² Karl Rahner, Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 160, 400. Rahner posits that, both in the religious and secular spheres of human experience, self-awareness and our understanding of the Other is formed by the traditions of our community. He also recognizes that this awareness of difference can lead to conflicts between competing worldviews as human beings struggle to define their understanding of Transcendent truth.

³ Patrick D. Miller, “Israel as Host to Strangers,” in Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays (JSOT SS 267; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 548. Miller says terms of kinship such as “brother” or “sister” infer familiarity and a positive relationship while the categories of the “stranger” or the “alien” imply uncertainty and the possibility of danger.
the misery it implies.” Rather than defining and emphasizing the differences and divisions that can breed fear and hostility, choosing to recognize and appreciate universal human experiences of suffering may cultivate empathy and compassion for the Stranger. In discussing philanthropy, B. Lonergan writes, “it rested not on kinship, or noble blood, or common citizenship and laws, or even on education, but on the fact that another, particularly a sufferer, was a human being.” In an existential understanding, the Stranger is perceived as one who is other than the self. S. Beauvoir posits that “the category of Other is as primordial as consciousness itself.”

The origins of self-awareness and awareness of the Other are clouded in mystery. Despite the empirical and scientific evidence that suggests our common origins in a prehistoric tribe in Africa, the moment when humans first developed self-awareness and awareness of the Other cannot be unearthed to be placed under scientific scrutiny. It is through myths and legends that we learn how individuals and communities developed a sense of self-identity and a realization of an Other who was decidedly distinct from the self. According to J. F. Bierlein, “myth is the ‘glue’ that holds societies together; it is the basis of identity for communities, tribes, and nations.”

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4 Rudolf Bernet, “The Encounter with the Stranger: Two Interpretations of the Vulnerability of the Skin,” in The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (ed. Jeffrey Bloechl; New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 51-55. Reflecting on the writings of Levinas, Benet says that the Other is the “orphan, widow, and stranger” whose face is our own face as well as the image of God.

5 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, Method in Theology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Lonergan Research Institute of Regis College, 1999), 97.

6 Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xxii-xxiv. Beauvoir says that historically the distinction of “otherness” has included foreigners, Jews, blacks, aborigines, the lower classes, and women. Their designation as Other has been determined by privileged individuals and groups.

7 J. F. Bierlein, Parallel Myths (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 5-6. Bierlien says that “myth is a shared heritage of ancestral memories…Myth may even be part of the structure of our unconscious mind, possibly encoded in our genes.”
patriarchal and ethnological legends in the Bible as stories that are concerned with the origins of Israel and their distinction from other ancient tribal peoples.⁸

### 1.1.2. The Command to Love the Stranger

The Hebrew Bible consists of myths, narratives, law codes, and poetry that recount the development of Israel’s self-identity as a displaced people who become united and blessed through their relationship with YHWH. The narratives include interactions between fellow Israelites as well as encounters with strangers. As the biblical writers formed a particular identity and worldview, the motif of the Stranger and the experience of displacement recurred throughout the literature.

A significant and unusual biblical passage concerning the Stranger is, “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:17-19).⁹ According to J. Ramírez Kidd, the imperative to “love” the Stranger is unique in the biblical literature. One is commanded to love God or to love the fellow Israelite, but only this passage and Leviticus 19:34 command love for the Stranger.¹⁰ The statement that God loves the Stranger is also highly unusual. Typically, God loves Israel, the ancestors, holiness, and

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⁹ I will be using the NRSV translation in this dissertation unless otherwise indicated.
¹⁰ In chapter four of this dissertation, I will be looking at the meaning of “love” in these passages.
If we consider the Stranger as alien or foreign to Israel, the designation of God’s love for the Stranger is exceptional.

In the same book that commands love for the Stranger, another passage commands Israel to annihilate the alien nations in the land they will occupy, “When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you…and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy” (Deut 7:1-2). This raises the question: Why does one biblical passage inspire love and compassion for the Stranger while another provokes hatred and violence for other nations? In order to investigate an evident disparity concerning the Stranger, this dissertation will examine the narratives and law codes in the Torah/Pentateuch, along with the character development in the Book of Ruth, to see how the motif of the Stranger was distinguished and developed in the biblical literature.

1.2. The Stranger in the Hebrew Bible

The biblical literature recognizes kinship as a social support system for individuals and families and as a means of protecting the identity and unity of the clan as a whole. Kinship entails shared ethnicity, traditions, location, religion, and values, and it can include family, neighbors, and community. On the other hand, the Stranger represents a person standing outside the established structures of kinship, religion, or

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12 The other nations that are mentioned, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites are traditional enemies of Israel who are here described as “mightier and more numerous” (Deut 7:1) than the Israelites.
nation. Strangers can be persons who are displaced from their homeland, along with people who are alien or foreign to an established community. The Stranger is viewed as someone who is Other, and the underlying issues in Israel’s relationship with the Stranger concern political, socioeconomic, and religious survival. In addressing these issues of survival, the biblical literature presents two methods of engagement with the Stranger: Particularism, which entails separation and exclusion from the Other; and Universalism, which looks towards acceptance and inclusion of the Other.

There are primarily three ways of speaking about strangers in the Hebrew Bible: gēr, nēkār, and zār. The questions that arise concerning these designations are: How are they distinguished from one another? In what sense do they share a common status? What is their purpose in the Hebrew Bible? Before examining these questions in the biblical literature, a definition of each term is needed.

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13 Miller, “Israel as Host to Strangers,” 548. Miller writes that the primary relationship of kinship is built upon “the network of persons who in some fashion function as brother/sister (that is, family member), or neighbor (that is, community member), persons with whom one lives, works, plays, or shares interests, values, and commitments.” The stranger is the outsider, often termed the “alien” who is unknown and threatening to the kinship group.

14 Norman K. Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 423-425. The primary crises that threatened Israel’s survival was the Babylonian exile and the post-exilic period when political survival was threatened by the shadows of foreign empires, socioeconomic survival was determined by the control of resources and land, and religious survival required the establishment and maintenance of a unique identity as YHWH’s chosen people. Gottwald points out that, unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonian regime did not introduce foreign populations into Judah, but neighboring peoples, such as the Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites, may have reclaimed territories in Transjordan.

15 Moshe Weinfeld, “Universalistic and Particularistic Trends During the Exile and Restoration” in Normative and Sectarian Judaism in the Second Temple Period (Library of Second Temple Studies 54; London: T & T Clark, 2005), 251-266. Weinfeld writes that this reflects “two different religious worldviews, prophetic universalism and pentateuchal particularism.” He says that while Deuteronomy and the Priestly literature looked to separate Israel from foreign nations, Deutero-Isaiah promised foreigners not only inclusion, but complete participation in Israelite worship.

16 Tōšāb is another term designating a stranger but, since it is often linked to the gēr, I will be looking at this word in connection to the gēr in later chapters.
1.2.1. Gwr/Gēr

According to Hebrew lexicography, the root gwr has several meanings: “to dwell as a sojourner;” “to attack;” and “to be afraid.” D. Kellermann questions whether these are three independent homonymous roots, or whether the various meanings represent different perspectives concerning the Stranger. He comes to the conclusion that the foreigner is often connected to the experiences of hostility and fear and, therefore, there is a relationship between the meanings.

The substantive noun form gēr appears 92 times in the Hebrew Bible and is the semantic equivalence of the root gwr. It is defined as, “a sojourner, resident alien, or stranger who, either alone or with his family, leaves homeland and tribe to reside in a foreign land, either for a fixed period of time or permanently.” J. Ramírez Kidd asks whether the verb gwr and noun gēr are, in fact, equivalent and concludes that the verb does not necessarily determine the semantic value of the noun. He determines that the verb is mainly used in narrative non-legal texts, whereas the noun is mainly used in legal texts pertaining to males since there are no feminine forms for gēr, and only the verb is used in connection to women and families. While I agree that the majority of references to the gēr are in the legal texts, I will also consider the indications of this noun in the narratives since I view them as integral to the formation of Israelite identity.

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19 HALOT 1:201; DCH 2:372-73; TDOT 2:443.
20 Ramírez Kidd, Alterity and Identity in Israel, 33. Kidd asserts that, “one cannot automatically turn to a verb in order to establish the meaning of a noun. The weight assigned to the root meaning in the definition of the noun should not be given to the detriment of the semantic value of the noun in its actual context.”
21 Ibid., 28-29.
22 For example, the noun gēr appears as Israelite self-identity in Gen 15:13, 23:4, and Exod 2:22.
examining lexicon entries and particular studies of the noun gēr, I hope to uncover the
different levels of meaning regarding the gēr in the ancestor narratives, the Exodus
account, and the legal references.23

1.2.2. Nēkār/Nokrî

Lexicons distinguish between two roots: nkr, “to recognize” and nēkār, “to be
foreign.”24 The noun nēkār appears 36 times as that which is “foreign.”25 Ben-nēkār,
designating “foreigners,” appears 19 times and is sometimes translated as “aliens” or
“strangers.”26 Nokrî, translated as “foreign,” “strange,” or “alien,” appears 45 times. The
term is used both as an adjective and a noun.27 According to H. Ringgren, nokrî always
refers to a relationship, such as the relationship of the self with the “Other” or of the
individual/clan with the “unfamiliar,” standing outside of the family.28 The Ben-nēkār or
nokrî is typically understood as an unassimilated foreigner distinguished from the gēr
who shares in some of the privileges reserved for native Israelites.29 While the gēr could

23 For lexicon entries see: HALOT 1:201; DCH 2:372-373; TDOT, 2:439-449. For particular
studies see: José E. Ramirez Kidd, Alterity and Identity in Israel: The ˘r in the Old Testament (BZAW
283; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999); Christiana van Houten, The Alien in Israelite Law (JSOT 107;
Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); Christoph Bultman, Der Fremde im Antiken Juda (FRLANT 153;
24 HALOT 2:699-700; DCH 5:694-695; TDOT 9:423-432
25 For example: foreign gods (Gen 35:2; 4; Deut 31:16; 32:12; Jos 24:20, 23; Judg 10:16; 1 Sam
7:3; 2 Chr 33:15; Ps 81:9; Jer 5:19; Dan 11:39; Mal 2:11); foreign altars (2 Chr 14:3); foreign land (Ps
137:4); everything foreign (Neh 13:30).
26 For example: Gen 17:12, 27; Exod 12:43; Lev 22:25; 2 Sam 22:45,46; Neh 9:2; Ps 18:44, 45;
144:7, 11; Isa 56:3, 6; 60:10; 61:5; 62:8; Ezek 47:7, 9).
27 For example: strangers/foreigners/aliens (Gen 31:15; Exod 21:8; Deut 14:21; 15:3; 17:15;
23:20; 29:22; Judg 19:12; Ruth 2:10; 2 Sam 15:19; 1 Kgs 8:41,43; 11:1:8; 2 Chr 6:32,33; Ezra 10:2, 10, 11,
14, 17, 18, 44; Neh 13:26, 27; Job 19:15; Ps 69:8; Prov 2:16; 5:10, 20; 6:24; 7:5; 20:16; 23:27; 27:2, 13;
Eccl 6:2; Isa 2:6; Lam 5:2; Obad 1:11, 12); foreign land (Exod 2:22; 18:3); an extraordinary/strange act (Isa
28:21); a foreign/strange vine (Jer 2:21); foreign/strange garments (Zeph 1:8).
ever has neither emotional ties to the family, nor legal protection from society. When a member of a family is
excluded or cast out, all ties are lost.
29 The nokrî was distinguished from the gēr who participated in Israel’s religious and social
welfare system. For example: Deut 29:10-11; 31:12 includes the gēr along with all of Israel in the
be confident of divine and human help in Israel’s laws, the nokrî was excluded from protection and often discriminated against.\textsuperscript{30}

Although the nokrî is sometimes depicted negatively in the biblical literature, Ringgren writes that isolation from foreigners, or xenophobia, was not prevalent before and during the monarchy but seems to arise when Israel was living under foreign powers and concerned with preserving their religious and cultural identity.\textsuperscript{31} For example, during the Davidic monarchy, the biblical narratives name some foreigners who were members of King David’s court while during the post-exilic period mingling with foreigners was condemned by Ezra and Nehemiah.\textsuperscript{32}

1.2.3. Zwr/Żār

L. Snijders describes three meanings to the root zwr: “to press or to crush;” “to turn away or be estranged from;” or “to be loathsome or offensive.”\textsuperscript{33} From this root, the word zār occurs 56 times as a noun and 14 as an adjective.\textsuperscript{34} Żār, as a noun, is translated as stranger, alien, foreigner, layman, or non-Israelite, and is often understood as an enemy. As an adjective, zār can mean strange, foreign, alien, or forbidden.\textsuperscript{35} The term

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\textsuperscript{30} Ringgren, \textit{TDOT} 9:426. Ringgren points out that the privileged gēr was the “protected” alien, but the nokrî was not entirely without protection and rights; the ancestor narratives reveal that hospitality appears to have been offered to foreigners (Gen 19).

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 9:426.

\textsuperscript{32} Two examples of foreigners in David’s court are: Uriah, the Hittite (2 Sam 23:39); Ittai the Gittite (2 Sam 15:21).

\textsuperscript{33} L.A. Snijders, “Żār,” \textit{TDOT} 4:52-53.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{HALOT} 1:279; \textit{DCH} 3:98-99; \textit{TDOT} 4:52-58.

\textsuperscript{35} For example: stranger/ alien/foreigner (Deut 25:5; 1 Kgs 3:18; Job 15:19; Ps 54:3; 109:11; Prov 5:10; 6:1; 11:15; 14:10; 20:16; 27:13; Isa 1:7; 25:2; 61:5; Jer 2:25; 3:13; 5:19; Lam 5:2; Ezek 11:9; 16:32; 28:7; 30:12; 31:12; Hos 5:7; 7:9; 8:7; Joel 3:17; Obad 1:11); stranger/layman (Exod 30:33; Lev 22:10, 12, 13; Num 1:51; 3:10, 38; 16:40; 18:7); strange woman/adulteress (Prov 2:16; 5:3, 20; 7:5; 22:14); enemy (Isa 29:5); strange god (Deut 32:16; Ps 44:20; 81:9; Isa 17:10; 43:12); strange act (Isa 28:21; Hos 8:12); strange fire (Exod 30:9; Lev 10:1; Num 3:4, 26:61); estranged (Job 19:13; Ps 69:8; Isa 1:4; Ezek 14:5).
has complex levels of connotation that encompass social, political, cultic, and theological meaning and, according to Snijders, the context in which the word appears is crucial in its definition.36

In a social context, the zār, is similar to the nēkār/nokrî, typically a non-Israelite outsider, but the term can also designate an Israelite who is perceived as an outsider by members of his/her family or tribe.37 Politically, the zārîm are alien nations who have nothing in common with Israel and they are usually depicted as an enemy, aggressor, or occupying power.38 In a cultic context, the zār is not necessarily a foreigner, but a layperson outside of the priestly cult of YHWH.39 The term can also designate an Israelite apostate who turns away from the religion of YHWH and breaks away from the community. By forsaking religion and culture, they are perceived as aliens by their own people.40

In conclusion, the terms gēr, nēkār, and zār designate different types of strangers in the biblical literature. In my further research, I will examine specific narratives and passages in the Torah/Pentateuch and Book of Ruth where these terms appear in order to see why some strangers were depicted in a positive light while others were seen negatively.

37 For example: in Ps 69:8, the psalmist declares that he is a stranger (zār) to his brothers, an alien (nokrî) to his kin; in Job 19:17, Job laments that his dependents and servants regard him as a stranger (zār) and an outsider (nokrî) and that he is now repulsive (zārâ) to his wife.
38 Snijders, *TDOT* 4:54. Snijders writes that zārîm is synonymous with ʽārîtsîm which means “usurers” or “tyrants” and is often linked with violent foreign nations. See: Job 6:23; Ps 86:14; Isa 13:11; 25:3, 4, 5; 29:5; Jer 15:21.
39 For example: the RSV translates zār in Lev 22:10 as “outsider,” while the NRSV, NAB, and JPS translate the noun as “lay person” which gives a more accurate translation in the context of the term.
40 Snijders, *TDOT* 4:54. According to Snijders, in Hos 5:7, the alien children (bānîm zārîm) are not foreign but domestic enemies who practice apostasy against the YHWHist religion. They have created a new race that threatens the existence of Israel, like the zārîm who are foreign nations.
1.3. Survey of Scholarly Research

1.3.1. Ethnicity and Identity

There has been extensive scholarly research on the concepts of ethnicity and identity in ancient Israel. In the monograph, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel*, K. Sparks concludes that ethnic identity is interwoven with other forms of identity, such as political, religious, and sociocultural identity. He points out that ethnicity in the ancient world is determined not only by genealogical characteristics, but by cultural traits such as language, shared history, customs, religion, and political identity. Sparks examines questions of ethnic identity and social boundaries in relation to the Other by focusing on the prophetic sources and historical writings in the biblical literature rather than the ancestral narratives of Israel. He posits that Israelite ethnic sentiments arose earlier than the 9th century CE, amidst the tribal and religious conflicts between Canaanites and Yahwists, conflicts that were also spurred by economic competition for control of lands, resources, and trade routes. In the 8th century CE and after, as Israelites were living

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43 Ibid., pp. 15. Sparks argues that, since the sources of the ancestral narratives cannot be dated with certainty, the starting point for evidence of the emergence of a distinct ethnic identity should be writings that can be dated with greater certainty, such as the Song of Deborah, the prophetic literature, and Deuteronomy.

44 Ibid., 119. Sparks sees evidence of these conflicts in the Song of Deborah, one of the oldest texts in the Hebrew Bible.
under the shadow of foreign empires, religious and ethnic identity intensified. While some groups supported separation from foreigners, others encouraged their inclusion as religious identity supplanted ethnicity in defining the covenant community.

M. Brett writes that, “as with all social groups, the formulation of boundaries is a crucial feature of self-definition. Who should be considered one of us and who should be considered other?” Brett recognizes the complexities of defining and maintaining these boundaries in the biblical literature and says that, while blood-ties can be determining factors of either inclusion or exclusion, religious or spiritual ties can also serve as markers of identity within a community.

These complexities are also considered in J. Levenson’s examination of particularism and universalism in the Hebrew Bible. He asserts that, since the Bible is an anthology representing different theological positions, “there is no one biblical position.” On the other hand, Levenson points out that, despite the diversity represented in the collection, there is also a purposeful coherence laid out by the final redactor, especially in the Torah.

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45 Ibid., 314-315. According to Sparks, this is especially evident during the exilic and post-exilic periods when the exilic community in Babylon faced the threats of cultural assimilation and the potential loss of the homeland to the Judean community that had remained in the land. The threats were met by the development of criteria for religious and cultural identity, such as Sabbath keeping and ritual purity, and by compiling and recording documents that declared the exilic community as the rightful heirs to the land.

46 Ibid., 309. Sparks relates that those who favored separation, represented by Ezra and Nehemiah, were responding to the threat of assimilation and loss of identity while those who invited inclusion, like Deutero-Isaiah, were reflecting “an advanced stage of ethnic inclusiveness” whereby YHWH’s servant, Israel, is tasked to be “a light to the nations.”


48 Ibid., 12. Brett cites the importance of genealogy in Ezra and Nehemiah as a marker for inclusion while other Jewish sects, such as the Qumran community and Jewish-Christian groups, looked to the spiritual connection as a marker for group identity.


50 Ibid., 146.
1.3.2. The Stranger as Sojourner, Alien, and Foreigner

Scholars who have particularly focused their studies on the sojourner, alien, or foreigner in the Hebrew Bible include J. Ramírez Kidd, C. van Houten, and N. Nam Hoon Tan.\textsuperscript{51} In the monograph, \textit{Alterity and Identity in Israel}, J. Ramírez Kidd examines the use of the noun \textit{gēr} in the Hebrew Bible and concludes that a transition occurs between speaking about the \textit{gēr}, the Other who is a subject of the law codes, and speaking as a \textit{gēr}, as a collective memory and theological motif.\textsuperscript{52} He says legal texts typically distinguish the \textit{gēr}, a stranger or foreigner, from the Israelite community or native born, but a transition occurs in Lev 25:23 where the Israelites are described as \textit{gērîm} in the land that belongs to YHWH.\textsuperscript{53} According to Ramírez Kidd, “the majority of references to the \textit{גֶּר} in the Old Testament appears in texts written or edited in exilic and post-exilic times. The particular interest of Israel in the theme of the \textit{גֶּר} from that moment on, mirrors its own situation. The attitude towards the \textit{גֶּר} in the Old Testament reveals Israel’s understanding of its own identity.”\textsuperscript{54}

In her study, \textit{The Alien in Israelite Law}, C. van Houten looks at the legal status and historical identity of the alien (\textit{gēr}) in the Pre-Deuteronomic, Deuteronomic, and


\textsuperscript{52} Ramírez Kidd, \textit{Alterity and Identity in Israel}, 11.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 102-105. Ramírez Kidd points out that the concept of being \textit{gēr} before YHWH is found in only two other texts, Ps 39:13 and 1 Chr 29:15. He says that “the transition of Israel’s self-understanding from former \textit{patron} of the needy in the legal texts, to \textit{protégé} in the prayers of Psalms and 1 Chronicles, represents a significant reversal of roles.”

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 116.
Priestly laws.⁵⁵ Her research determines that the meaning and status of the gēr changes over time. According to van Houten, the Pre-Deuteronomic laws understand the gēr as someone from another tribe, an Israelite or non-Israelite, “strangers who are vulnerable and need protection and charity because they are out of their familial context.”⁵⁶ These laws are based on hospitality for the stranger and are intended to protect vulnerable people who are not part of one’s family or clan. In the Deuteronomic laws, the gēr were landless foreign individuals, not Israelites from another tribe.⁵⁷ The socioeconomic status of the gēr was among the marginalized and needy, and Israel was promised YHWH’s blessings if they were generous to the landless and poor in their midst. Van Houten writes, “they were accorded generous treatment, unlike foreigners, but they were never given the option of becoming Israelites.”⁵⁸ She finally concludes that a significant development in the legal and social status of the gēr occurs in the Priestly laws where “they are not only the resident aliens who need aid, but they are also given the rights of members of the community. They are granted not only civil justice, but also privileges of the insider on certain conditions.”⁵⁹ Van Houten’s position is that this legislation was revised by the priests as a response to the Babylonian exile, as the exilic and post-exilic community sought to reestablish self-identity and to redefine membership in a new community where outsiders can become insiders.

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⁵⁵ Christiana van Houten, The Alien in Israelite Law (JSOT 107; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 13-14. The “alien” for van Houten is the gēr. She does not discuss other terms for alien, such as nēkār and zār.
⁵⁶ Ibid., 67.
⁵⁷ Ibid., 106. Van Houten says that the intended audience for the Deuteronomic laws concerning the gēr are well-to-do Israelite landowners, compelled to remember their own past as marginalized gēr and to recognize that YHWH is the source of all their blessing and prosperity.
⁵⁸ Ibid., 107.
⁵⁹ Ibid., 155. The primary means for a gēr who was an outsider to become an insider was through circumcision and keeping the Sabbath and purity laws.
N. Nam Hoon Tan analyzes the motif of the foreigner in *The “Foreignness” of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9*. Although her study focuses primarily on foreign women, she begins by looking in depth at the meaning of נֶכַר in the Hebrew Bible, especially when the term is used together with זָר. Tan concludes that “the use of נֶכַר is essentially tied up with the ideas of ‘foreignness,’ and the זָר is a flexible term used to denote the sense of ‘otherness,’ which is totally dependent on the context for its specific referent.” When both terms are used together, the writer emphasizes the otherness of the subject, and the foreigner, especially the foreign woman, will come to be seen as dangerous and destructive.

1.3.3. The Stranger as Biblical Literary Device

Some scholars write about the Stranger in terms of a biblical literary motif or theme. According to M. H. Abrams, “a motif is an element, a type of incident, device, reference, or formula which recurs frequently in the literature. The term theme is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘motif’ but the term theme is more usefully applied to a general claim, or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader.” In this understanding, the theme acts as a rhetorical device that is meant to influence the reader/audience.

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61 Ibid., 42. Tan says that “foreigner” in the Hebrew Bible has different meanings in different historical periods. For example, foreigners could be Egyptians, Moabites, and Edomites in the Torah narratives, but could also refer to the Judeans who did not participate in the exile, according to Ezra and Nehemiah.
62 Ibid., 171. The foreign woman was especially dangerous since she led the Israelite male to apostasy.
63 M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (5th ed.; Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1988), 110-111. According to Abrams, motif is related to the leitmotif, or guiding motif, which is the “frequent repetition of a significant phrase, or set description, or complex of images.” For example, the
W. Fields says that the biblical storytellers employed recurring motifs and themes, implanted in the collective memory of the community, for the “formation” of their audience. He writes that “while the surface level of narrative tells a story, the deep level often serves as a vehicle for the expression of concepts, with motifs conveying that deeper information.” According to Fields, motifs are recurrent characters, events, situations, or themes that have their basis in real life and function as “narrative support for established legal norms; the positive portrayal of an ideal ‘dramatis personae’ who is rewarded for acting in accordance with the norm; or the negative portrayal of the ‘dramatis personae’ who violates the norm and suffers punishment.” Motifs can also be employed to “rationalize experiences not positively appreciated by or running counter to the norm.” Fields examines the motif of the “stranger in your gates” and the submotif of “hospitality” and posits that the motif is enhanced when set in the “constitutive era” of Israelite history.

F. Spina posits that the central theme/narrative in the Hebrew Bible concerns Israel as God’s chosen “insider” community with a special mission to restore fallen

64 Weston W. Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah: History and Motif in Biblical Narrative* (JSOT SS 231; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 15. Fields writes that the purpose of the storytellers, as they attempted to form the minds and attitudes of the readers, “went beyond informative, relating historical information, to formative, giving theological and sociological justification for a particular historical situation.”

65 Ibid., 19. For example, while the Book of Ruth tells a surface story about the relationship between Naomi and Ruth, it addresses the relationship between Israel and foreigners on a deeper level.

66 Ibid., 19-20. For example, in considering the motif of “the stranger,” Abraham’s hospitality is held up as an ideal of hospitality for the stranger while the people of Sodom are depicted as an example of inhospitality that leads to severe punishment.

67 Ibid., 20. For example, Tamar and Ruth reflect the motif of “the foreign woman,” but the narratives depict them in a positive light, integral to Israel’s later history, rather than as a danger to the community.

68 Ibid., 23-24. Fields considers the period from creation to the settlement of Canaan as the “constitutive era.” He says that “whatever happens in the Torah is paradigmatic, creating prototypes for all times.”
humanity to right relationship with God.69 According to Spina, “outsiders” are persons or groups who are not specifically chosen by God as vehicles of restoration, but sometimes outsiders become insiders through their understanding and promotion of the agenda of Israel’s God.70

1.4. Methodology
1.4.1. Giving Attention to the Other

Although historical literary criticism which considers the historical context of the original author and audience is an important first step in scholarly research, other methods which are significant to this study and have influenced my reading and interpretation include feminist and postcolonial criticism which critique some traditional methods of interpretation. In addressing the critique of “value-free objectivity” which is one of the goals of historical literary criticism, J. Collins recognizes that historical method is “a tradition with its own values and presuppositions, derived in large part from the Enlightenment and Western humanism” and that all interpreters inevitably bring their own presuppositions to their reading. On the other hand, he cautions that “the inevitability of presuppositions should not be taken as an invitation to excel in bias.”71

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69 Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 1-6. Spina says that the “metastory” of the Hebrew Bible begins with the goodness of creation becoming corrupt through sinful human actions. In order to reverse the fallen state of creation, God forms a specific covenant community that will bring about a restoration. He points out that the idea of a “chosen” community may promote exclusivity, but taken in what Spina terms “a proper theological perspective,” Israel was chosen to make it possible for everyone to be included in this restoration.

70 Ibid., 10. For example, some outsiders who become insiders are Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute whose awareness of Israel’s God influences her to assist the Israelite spies in the conquest stories, and Ruth, the Moabite widow who adopts the God of her Israelite mother-in-law and acts to secure their survival and the future of the community.

Collins asserts that historical literary criticism remains the most satisfactory context for biblical scholarly discussion and that while the scholar should be aware of personal presuppositions, one should be open to dialogue with differing points of view and new insights.  

Postcolonial and feminist biblical criticism, which give attention to the Other in history and literature, offer opportunities for dialogue with more traditional approaches to interpretation.  E. Schüssler Fiorenza writes that critical feminist and postcolonial interpretation operates on two levels, the historical level of the text and the contemporary level of the interpreter, looking not only at what the texts “mean” in their original historical context but also what they “do” in later contexts. She points out that while the biblical texts were produced by people living under imperial domination, the writings would later be used by imperial power structures as a tool for the domination of women and colonized peoples.

F. Segovia considers the emerging voices and diverse interpretations coming from Latin America, Africa, and Asia in developing a postcolonial methodology. Although he

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72 Ibid., 22.
74 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 127-129. Also see: Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 44-45. In this earlier study, Schüssler Fiorenza also looks at how biblical interpretation both shapes and supports oppression and violence as well as promoting human dignity and justice. She makes an interesting connection between women biblical scholars and resident aliens. She writes, “the notion of resident alien positions one as both insider and outsider: insider by virtue of residence or family affiliation to a citizen or institution; outsider in terms of language, experience, culture, and history. The metaphor of the “resident alien” seems an apt figure for a feminist movement and politics that seek to open up a theoretical space and sociopolitical position from which critical feminist scholars in religious studies can speak.”
questions the ideal of a universal, objective interpretation connected to some traditional forms of biblical interpretation, he looks at how the different methods of interpretation can be employed for “creative interaction.” Segovia examines historical, literary, and cultural criticism, and then discusses the centrality of the text and the objectivity of the reader in each method. He writes “these texts constitute an ‘other’ to us and follow principles and conventions of another time and culture; at the same time, such ‘otherness’ is always apprehended through our own lenses as readers, socially and historically constructed as we are.” The tasks are to recognize that there is always more than one point of view in history and literature, and to be aware of one’s own social location and presuppositions. While feminist and postcolonial criticism look at the use of the biblical literature as one of the tools employed by imperial structures to conquer, colonize, and oppress others, it is also important to consider that the literature itself developed under the shadow of empire as a means to maintain a unique identity and to avert the assimilation experienced by so many other colonized people. Therefore, while the literature was often later employed by empires to conquer the Stranger, the biblical narrative could also be turned around to speak for the Stranger and against empire.

76 Ibid., 110. Segovia argues that “there is no universal or objective reader out there, engaged in scientific and value-free interpretation, abstracted from all the social and historical circumstances of this world; on the contrary what one finds is a host of flesh-and-blood readers, socially conditioned and historically situated.”
1.4.2. Literary Analysis

My primary methodological approach will be a literary analysis that integrates narrative criticism with rhetorical and redaction criticism. Narrative criticism examines the Bible as a work of literature, containing themes, motifs, images, and symbols, and considers the work of the final redactor who weaves together diverse genres and theological perspectives into a purposeful whole. R. Alter says that the Bible is a “coherent unfolding story in which the meaning of earlier data is progressively, even systematically, revealed or enriched by the addition of subsequent data.”77 According to Alter, one of the tasks of narrative analysis is examining how a narrative works in itself and how it interacts with other narratives through connections of theme and motif.78 The biblical literature contains many themes and motifs, such as covenant, election, and community, to name only a few.79 This dissertation will focus on the development of the motif of the Stranger and the theme of love for the Stranger in the Torah/Pentateuch and the Book of Ruth.

The motif of the Stranger occurs frequently throughout the biblical literature, along with experiences associated with the Stranger, such as situations of displacement and alienation, migration and settlement, endangerment and rescue, and hostility and hospitality. Some questions that I will ask in connection to the narratives are: Who is the Stranger and how does the reader know that he/she is a stranger? How is the Stranger depicted by the narrator or perceived by other characters in the narrative? What is his/her

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78 Ibid., 3-4. Along with motif and theme, Alter also looks at genre, setting, characters, type scenes, repetition, and narrator’s point of view in literary analysis.
relationship to Israel? What is his/her relationship with YHWH? What is the Stranger’s purpose in the narrative?

Alter writes that “a theme is an idea which is part of the value system of the narrative; it may be moral, moral-psychological, legal, political, historiosophical, or theological; it is made evident in some recurring pattern.”

The theme, a common thread that is woven throughout a work of literature, typically transcends the historical and cultural context of the original audience because it has universal significance. The biblical theme that I will consider, “love the Stranger,” is explicit in biblical law, but it can also be apparent in the words and actions of a character in a narrative. The full impact of the theme is often not fully understood until the reader contemplates the collection of literature as a whole. Some questions in connection to this particular theme are: What does it mean to love the Stranger? What are the expectations? What are the consequences? Does the imperative to love the Stranger encompass the nēkār and zār, as well as the gēr?

The repetition of a word, motif, or theme is usually purposeful and sometimes serves as a commentary or analysis of earlier narratives. According to Alter, “variations in the pattern of repetitions could serve the purposes of commentary, analysis, foreshadowing, and thematic assertion.” In my research, I will consider the purpose of the repetition of the motif of the Stranger and the theme of “love the Stranger” in the Torah/Pentateuch and Book of Ruth. Some questions that I will consider are: Does the repetition of the motif and theme reinforce, expand, or contrast with earlier passages?

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80 Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 95. Alter says that a theme is often associated with one or more *Leitwörter* or motifs. He writes that repetition of a lietwort, motif, theme, or type-scene serves the purpose of commentary or analysis of earlier texts, as well as the assertion and development of a theme.  
Does it reveal a development of the motif and theme or a changed point of view? Does repetition of the motif and theme in the Book of Ruth serve as a commentary on the Torah narratives?

Along with literary analysis, I will engage in rhetorical criticism, which considers how a writer advocates a position and seeks to convince an audience of the validity of the position, and redaction criticism, which gives attention to the viewpoint and theology in the final form of the Hebrew Bible. N. Gottwald writes that rhetorical and redaction criticism are closely related to the “Bible as literature” movement. He also points out that canonical criticism overlaps with some aspects of redaction criticism since both methods are concerned with the final form of the Bible. Gottwald mentions that some biblical scholars notice a “canonical process” or “canonical consciousness” at work in shaping the texts, even before the formal canon was established. During or shortly after the Babylonian Exile, the final redactor of the Torah arranged the smaller units of the first five books to convey a purposeful theological perspective. The final collection of writings, including the Book of Ruth, were not given rabbinical canonization until the first century CE. In my dissertation, I will consider how the perspective of the Torah redactor relates to the Book of Ruth in their treatment of the Stranger.

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83 Ibid., 103. Gottwald says that the formation of the Torah was “simultaneous with the decision of the postexilic community to make this document the written foundation of its developing style of religious faith and practice.” He posits that this may have occurred around 450-400 BCE during the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.
84 Ibid., 109. Gottwald writes that there was considerable literary activity during the foreign oppression and domestic turmoil of the Second Temple period. Different views concerning the final collection of writings reflect serious sectarian splits within Palestinian Judaism. The circumstances of the Jewish revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem left only the Pharisees in control of the final canonization process.
1.5. Thesis and Overview of Chapters

In my dissertation, I have dialogued with other scholars who have particularly focused their studies on the sojourner, alien, or foreigner in the Hebrew Bible. These include: José Ramirez Kidd whose monograph, *Alterity and Identity in Israel*, looks at the *gēr* as a sojourner/resident alien, both distinguished from the Israelite community and as a collective memory that forms Israelite identity; Christiana Van Houten whose study, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, examines the legal status and historical identity of the *gēr* in biblical laws; and Nancy Nam Hoon Tan who analyzes the motif of the foreigner, the *nēkār* and *zār*, in *The Foreignness of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9*. While the above mentioned literature focuses on a particular form of the Stranger, my study expands on the research by examining the occurrences and development of all three forms, the *gēr*, *nēkār* and *zār*, in the Torah. And while each of these studies gives a brief mention to the Book of Ruth, my dissertation looks at Ruth as an important commentary on the Torah narratives and laws concerning the Stranger.

The love command in Deuteronomy 10:17-19 specifically concerns the *gēr*, reminding Israel of their own past history as sojourners in order to inspire empathy and compassion for this particular type of Stranger. The Book of Ruth does not command love for the Stranger, but rather serves as an example of love from a Stranger, a *nokriyāh*. Acting as a commentary on the negative perceptions of the foreigner, the Book of Ruth gives new meaning to the love command by broadening the sphere of compassion to include the Strangers who are traditionally viewed as foreign threats or enemies.

In chapter two, I will look at the stories of Israel’s origins and ancestors, beginning with the primeval myths and their account of the displacement and alienation
of all peoples. I will then consider the motif of the Stranger in the ancestor narratives by asking: Who is the Stranger in the ancestor narratives? What do we learn about the character? What is his/her status in relation to others? What are the motivations to migrate? What is his/her relationship with God?

In chapter three, I will examine the motif of the Stranger in the Exodus account, the central event in the Torah where YHWH acts to liberate an oppressed people from bondage and binds them in a covenant relationship. The questions that this chapter will consider are: Who is the Stranger in the Exodus narrative? What do we learn about the relationship between the Stranger and God? What is expected of Israel concerning the Stranger? How is the perception of the Stranger similar to/different from the ancestor narratives?

In chapter four, I will look at the Stranger in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. As the Israelites journey through the wilderness of Sinai, laws develop as new situations arise. Some questions to consider are: Who is the Stranger in the law codes? What do we learn about Israel’s relationship with the Stranger? Who are the insiders and who are the outsiders in the law codes? How is the perception of the Stranger in the law codes similar to/different from the earlier narratives? Do the categories of gēr, nēkār, and zār become more distinct from one another?

In chapter five, I will consider the motif of the Stranger in the Book of Ruth, a story about an Israelite and Moabite woman, working together, sharing resources, and forming community. Some questions to ask in connection to this narrative are: Who is the Stranger in the narrative? What are some of the characteristics of the Stranger? What
is the relationship between the Stranger and other characters in the story? How is the perception of the Stranger similar to/different from the Torah accounts?

Finally, in chapter six, I will consider how/whether the biblical narratives concerning the Stranger contain a universal message that transcends the original context by asking: Who is the Stranger today, at the beginning of the 21st century? Are the issues and conflicts linked to the Stranger similar to/different from the ancient world? What lessons can we learn from the biblical literature regarding our relationship with strangers? How should we deal with migrants and refugees? How should we handle conflict over religion, land, and resources? How do we recognize and respect the Other while maintaining our own sense of identity? How do we cultivate compassion for the Stranger? In examining these questions, I will also attempt to integrate Catholic Social teaching with the biblical narrative.

While an encounter with the Stranger often leads to enmity and conflict, my hope is that this dissertation will provide evidence that when we see ourselves in the face of the Stranger, the encounter can lead us to cultivate compassion and create community with the Other.
CHAPTER 2
THE STRANGER IN THE ANCESTOR NARRATIVES

2.1. Introduction

Myths and folktales are two means of establishing self-identity and a realization of an Other who is decidedly different from the self. 1  As other cultures in the ancient world developed distinctive identities within their oral and written traditions, the biblical writers also looked to the art of storytelling to narrate Israelite identity and their relationship with other peoples. Beginning with the common origins of humankind, Genesis 1-11 touches on the universal experiences of estrangement and struggle. As the biblical narratives develop the origins and meaning of Israelite identity, peoples become more differentiated from one another and conflicts often occur as tribes migrate from their place of origin to a strange land.

2.2. In the Beginning

One could argue that the biblical account begins with the story of the estrangement/displacement of humankind after the first sin of disobedience when “YHWH sent the man forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken” (Gen 3:23). 2  As the man and woman leave their place of origin in the garden, the reader has learned that their innocence has been lost and that life will be a

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1 Gunkel, *Legends of Genesis*, 17-23. Gunkel writes that myths and legends attempt to answer questions concerning origins of people and things, the origins of differentiation among peoples, and how different peoples relate to one another.

2 Here the passage is referring specifically to YHWH. The “Name,” or tetragrammaton, will not be revealed to a person until Exod 4:14, but YHWH does appear in these earlier narratives. Other names for God include Elohim (Gen 1, for example) or El-Shaddai (Gen 17:1).
struggle, but we also learn that God does not send the man and woman away from home without some protection as he “made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them” (Gen 3:21).³ The theme of the story implies that the human condition after the fall is one of displacement, but that God shows a special concern for the displaced humans despite his initial punishments.

The theme of displacement continues in the next generation after the first murder is committed. Envy leads to murder as elder brother Cain kills his younger brother Abel when “YHWH had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (Gen 4:4-5).⁴ After Cain kills his brother, God’s punishment involves estrangement between Cain and the earth, along with exile from his home and kin. The ground which once offered sustenance no longer yields a crop since it is now polluted with the blood of Abel, and Cain will become “a fugitive and wanderer on the earth” (Gen 4:12).⁵ He connects his displacement from home to estrangement from God, “hidden from your face” (Gen 4:14), and complains that his punishment of exile will leave him without protection and vulnerable to violence. Again, God responds with mercy by placing “a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him” (Gen 4:15) and promises severe punishment for those who seek to kill Cain.⁶

³ God’s act of “clothing the naked” could be seen as the first corporal work of mercy in the Bible.
⁴ Robert Alter, Genesis: Translation and Commentary (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 16. Alter comments that the story reflects a culture-founding story of rivalry between the herdsman and farmer as well as a recurring biblical theme of the displacement of the firstborn son by the younger brother.
⁵ This may reflect the relation between sojourning and famine in the land, as well as sojourning and exile due to blood guilt.
⁶ Later biblical laws (Exod 21:12; Num 35:16-21; Deut 19:11-13) proclaim premeditated murder as a capital offense resulting in the execution of the murderer by the “avenger of blood.” In this account, God exhibits mercy by sparing Cain’s life and warning others that revenge killing will bring severe consequences.
As the primeval narratives concerning God, humankind, and sin and its consequences continue humankind becomes increasingly alienated from God and from one another. The story of the Tower of Babel, the last of the primeval narratives, begins with the whole earth having one language and concerns a civilization that attempts to “make a name” for itself by building “a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens…otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:4). As a punishment YHWH “confused their language there…and scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth” (Gen 11:7-8). It would seem that this civilization is attempting to unify humanity, but we do not learn their underlying intent for doing so. The phrase that they desired to “make a name” for themselves infers human ambition and pride, and it implies that they look to do this without any dependence on God. In building “the tower with its top in the heavens,” the story implies that humans are also attempting to be “like God” similar to the ambition of the first man and woman. The narratives in Genesis 1 through 11 include all of humankind, and the stories of the Fall and the Tower of Babel can serve as bookends for the theme of universal displacement. In both, humans refuse to accept subordination to the Creator by attempting to cross the boundary between divine and human, and in both stories the consequence is displacement. However, as the next collection of narratives unfolds, the reader will learn that displacement is not God’s final desire for humanity. Whereas displacement functioned as punishment in these early narratives, it will become the way

7 This is evident in the stories of the Nephilim (Gen 6:1-4) and the Flood (Gen 6:5-9:17).
8 Alter, Genesis, 45. Alter comments that the “Tower of Babel” story is a polemic against urban culture and humankind’s overconfidence in technology.
9 Both Gen 3:1-24 and Gen 11:1-9 can be seen as cautionary tales about individuals who aspire to be “like God.”
of return in the ancestor stories. Israel, represented by the sojourner Abraham, will be chosen to play a decisive role in bringing about a return to right relationship with God.

2. 3. God and the Stranger in the Ancestor Narratives

The main characters in the ancestor narratives are God and the ancestors of Israel who are depicted as sojourners (gērîm) that migrate from one place to another. As a reader, one might question what motivates individuals and families to uproot themselves from their clan and home country to sojourn in a foreign land? *HALOT* describes the gēr as “a man who, alone or with his family, leaves village and tribe because of war, famine, epidemic, blood guilt, etc. and seeks shelter and residence at another place, where his right of landed property, marriage, and taking part in jurisdiction, cult, and war has been curtailed.” According to this definition, the motivation to migrate is preservation of one’s self and/or family, yet the consequence can lead to a sense of displacement, an experience of vulnerability and foreignness, and a loss of certain rights and privileges. Therefore, the decision to leave one’s homeland and become a stranger in a strange land surely is not made lightly and the benefits of migration often come at a high cost to individuals and families.

In my analysis of the stranger in the ancestor narratives, I will consider characters that have been displaced from their country of origin through either voluntary or forced migration. I will investigate how the narrative reveals: the character’s motivation to migrate, the status of the character in relation to others, the development of conflicts and

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10 *HALOT* 1:201.
11 The ancestor narratives include Genesis 12 through 50, and I will look at not only the displacement of Israel’s ancestors but also other characters who are displaced from their country of origin, such as Hagar the Egyptian.
resolutions in connection to the character, and the theme of God’s special concern for the stranger. I will also take into account the purposeful structuring of the narratives by the final redactors as a means of inner-biblical commentary and the assertion of significant literary and theological themes.

2. 4. Abraham the Sojourner

Israel’s ancestral account in Genesis begins with a family’s migration from Ur to the land of Canaan as Abram is called by YHWH to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen 12:1-2). The reader might infer that Abram’s motivations in leaving his home country are God’s promised blessings, but the next verse states that “Abram went, as YHWH had told him” (Gen 12:4), revealing his obedience and faithfulness to God’s call. Abram and his family migrated from Ur to Haran, and then to the land of Canaan where they lived as tent dwellers.

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12 D. J. Wiseman, “Abraham Reassessed,” in Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives (ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 159. The patriarch is called Abram in Genesis 12 through 16, and Abraham in Genesis 17 and thereafter which may be evidence of different traditions/stories about the ancestor that were combined into one narrative by the final redactor. Wiseman writes that although some interpreters argue that Abraham is a dialectical variant of Abram, the change in Genesis 17 is meant to mark both a “new era and a new status” for the patriarch.

13 The blessing of a “great name” in connection to Abram’s faith and his submission to God’s will may serve as a commentary on an earlier text; whereas the builders of the tower of Babel sought to “make a name” for themselves (Gen 11:4), YHWH says to Abram, “I will make your name great” (Gen 12:2).

14 The migration of Abram from Ur to Canaan and from Canaan to Egypt foreshadows the path of later journeys of his descendants in the Exodus narrative and the Babylonian Exile.
2. 4. 1. Wife/Sister Tales

The first conflict to develop revolves around the survival of the patriarch and matriarch who must migrate to Egypt because there is a famine in the land of Canaan. As Abram goes down to Egypt to “reside there as a gēr” (Gen 12:10), the narrator reveals the vulnerability of strangers in a strange land and the compromises they often must make in order to survive. As he is about to enter Egypt, the patriarch fears for his own life and asks Sarai to deceive the Pharaoh by telling him that she is Abram’s sister rather than his wife. His self-interest is evident when he says, “so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account” (Gen 12:13). The biblical account says that “Sarai was taken into the Pharaoh’s house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram, giving him sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys and camels” (Gen 12:15-16). Although Abram shows resourcefulness, his request of Sarai is morally problematic since he seems to prosper at her expense. The man of faith introduced in Genesis 12 is presented in this narrative as a character with complex motives and ambiguous morals. In this particular account, the conflict over Sarai is resolved, not through Abram’s efforts, but through YHWH’s intervention when

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15 Famine and the scarcity of resources in the land were the most frequent motivations for migration. Other examples of sojourning due to a famine in the land: Isaac and Rebekah sojourn with Abimelech (Gen 26:3); Jacob and his sons sojourn in Egypt (Gen 47:4); Elijah sojourns with the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:20); Elisha advises a widow to sojourn to another land because of a coming famine (2 Kgs 8:1); Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons sojourned in the country of Moab because there was a famine in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:1-2).


17 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 117. Alter writes that through the “conscious artistry” of the biblical writer, there is often a tension between election and moral character through “the shadow of ambiguity.”
plagues afflict the Pharaoh’s house and he sends Abram and Sarai away with all their possessions.18

The narrative highlights not only the vulnerability of the male sojourner, but especially the powerlessness of the women who traveled with these men.19 The only dialogue that we hear is Abram’s proposal to deceive the Pharaoh in order to save his own life and the Pharaoh’s reprimand of Abram when he discovers the duplicity. Sarai’s voice remains silent and we are left to speculate at her objections or complicity in the scheme, and we are also left to imagine her fate when she was taken into the Pharaoh’s house.20

The endangered patriarch and the matriarch who is presented as a sister to the ruling power occur in two other narratives: Abraham and Sarah at Gerar (Gen 20:1-18) and Isaac and Rebekah in Gerar (Gen 26:1-11).21 In Genesis 20:1-18, Abraham resides in Gerar as a gēr under the rule of King Abimelech. He once again claims Sarah as his sister in order to save his own life; but in this account, the reader is assured that Sarah’s virtue remains intact. Abimelech sent for Sarah but never approached her because Elohim warned the king in a dream to stay away from her. When Abimelech confronts Abraham about his deception, he admits that he acted out of fear for his life; but Abraham maintains his integrity by explaining that Sarah is indeed his half-sister. In this narrative, along with the dialogues between Abraham and Abimelech, we hear an exchange between God and Abimelech. Elohim comes to Abimelech in a dream to warn

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18 This foreshadows the plagues of the Exodus narrative and the expulsion of the Hebrews.
19 Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, 97-98. Frymer-Kensky asserts that “according to the social conventions of his time, Abraham has done nothing wrong. As head of the household, he has the right to do whatever he would with the members of his family.”
20 Pace Jeansonne, Women of Genesis, 17. Pace Jeansonne says that Sarai’s silence is not an indication of her complicity in the deception, but rather her powerlessness in the situation.
21 Genesis 12:10-20 and Genesis 26:1-11 are the J source; Genesis 20:1-18 is the E source.
him and the king defends himself by accusing Abraham and Sarah of deception. God recognizes Abimelech’s integrity and warns him rather than immediately sending punishment. Sarah again remains silent although Abimelech, in his defense to God, quotes her as saying, “He is my brother” (Gen 20:5) and the king speaks directly to Sarah at the end of the narrative when he provides monetary restitution to her “brother” in order to exonerate her. Abimelech’s character is more developed and positively portrayed than that of the Pharaoh in Genesis 12:10-20; whereas the Pharaoh sent the sojourners away, Abimelech invites Abraham to settle in his land.22

R. Alter writes that the repetition of type-scenes such as the wife/sister tale has the purpose of “commentary, analysis, foreshadowing, and thematic assertion.”23 Both narratives assert the vulnerability of the sojourners under foreign powers and their use of deception to ensure survival. The difference in the narratives lies primarily in the depiction of the foreign rulers. The Egyptian pharaoh sends Abram and Sarai away, foreshadowing the expulsion of the Hebrews after the final plague in Exodus, while Abimelech invites them to settle in his land, foreshadowing the settlement of the twelve tribes in Canaan. In both narratives, the thematic assertion is that the ancestors are endangered but with God’s help and protection they survive that danger and increase their possessions and wealth.

22 Abimelech is also the ruling power in the Isaac and Rebekah wife/sister tale; but in that account, he seems more antagonistic towards the sojourners and sends them away. Both Abraham and Isaac eventually make a covenant with Abimelech concerning a dispute over a well (Gen 21:22-34; 26:17-33).
23 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 91.
2.4.2. God’s Special Concern

Abram returned to Canaan from the sojourn in Egypt as a wealthy man with silver, gold, livestock and many servants, yet he still had no land to claim as his own and no children to inherit his possessions. In the ancient world, land and progeny were a sign of divine blessing and Abram still possessed neither. He feared that his servant, Eliezer of Damascus, would be his only heir. In Genesis 15, God shows a special concern for the sojourner Abram by reaffirming his initial promises in the form of a covenant. He tells Abram “your very own issue shall be your heir” (Gen 15:4) and that his descendants will be more numerous than the stars. The character of Abram is once again presented as a man of faith because “he believed YHWH; and YHWH reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). Along with progeny, God reaffirms the promise of the possession of land (Gen 15:7, 18-21).

In Genesis 15, the covenant promise of land will not be fulfilled immediately as the narrative foreshadows the Exodus revealing that Abram’s descendants will be “gēr in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and be oppressed for four hundred years” (Gen 15:13). The foreshadowing of the Exodus narrative continues in the next

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24 Land and progeny were not only a sign of divine blessing, but land insured legal protection and progeny insured survival of the family name.

25 Abram has already been promised blessings (Gen 12:2-3), land (Gen 12:7; 13:15), and progeny (13:16), but this chapter formalizes the promises in a covenant ceremony that reflects the ancient Semitic rite of “cutting a covenant” by the splitting of animals and passing between them to seal the oath.

26 The revelation that Abram’s “issue” will be his heir leaves the identity of the mother open and sets the stage for the conflict that develops between Sarai and Hagar in Genesis 16. It is not until the second covenant account (Gen 17:1-27) that Abraham is told that Sarah’s son Isaac will be the heir of the Abrahamic covenant. In the second covenant (the P source), God repeats the promise of numerous progeny and land, but adds the promise of kings as offspring and then stipulates circumcision as a sign of the covenant. The law of circumcision includes not only the immediate members of Abraham’s household, but “the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner” (Gen 17:12).

27 The boundaries of the promised land (Gen 15:18-21) may reflect an ideal rather than a reality.
chapter of Genesis, but in this story the oppressor is an ancestor of Israel and the slave is an Egyptian who flees into the wilderness to escape from abuse.

2. 5. Hagar the Egyptian

Genesis 16 begins with a dilemma. God promised Abram many descendants, but his wife Sarai is barren, and this situation introduces a new character into the ancestor narratives. Hagar the Egyptian is the Stranger in this narrative since she is the character displaced from the homeland. The reason for her displacement is that she is a slave to Sarai, although the narrator does not reveal how she came to be a slave girl in the household of Abram. Her status as a slave to Sarai implies that she must submit to the will of her mistress, and her powerlessness is evident as Sarai “took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went in to her and she conceived” (Gen 16:3-4). Because of her barrenness, Sarai takes control of the situation and hands Hagar over to Abram to act as her surrogate. Like Sarai when she was given to the Pharaoh, we do not hear Hagar’s voice in this arrangement; nor do we hear Abram’s voice, only that he “listened to the voice of Sarai” (Gen 16:2).

28 Pace Jeansonne, Women of Genesis, 44. According to Pace Jeansonne, the story of Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant of Sarai, is an example of a non-Israelite foreigner who experiences God’s concern for her suffering. She writes that the root etymology of Hagar’s name is unknown, but the sound is similar to haggēr, the sojourner. This interpretation lends a sense of moral interest in terms of Sarai’s treatment of a stranger.

29 Phyllis Trible, “Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing,” in Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives (ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 37. Trible writes that Hagar may have been one of the female slaves that Abram acquired from the Pharaoh in Genesis 12:16.

30 Niditch, “Genesis,” 20. According to Niditch, surrogate motherhood was a practice that was not uncommon in ancient Near Eastern culture. It allowed a barren woman to maintain her value and status in the household; although in this account, Sarai seems to feel that her status is diminished when Hagar conceives.

31 Sarai’s assertiveness in this account is a stark contrast to the silent wife in the wife/sister tales.
A conflict develops when Hagar conceives and she “looked with contempt on her mistress” (Gen 16:4). The narrative is rather ambiguous concerning the form of Hagar’s contempt, but pregnancy may have brought about a change of status for Hagar that posed a threat to Sarai. Hagar’s attitude may have challenged the hierarchy of mistress and slave, but in the context of the ancient world both women, the slave girl and the barren wife, may have felt marginalized. When Sarai demands justice from her husband, Abram says, “Your slave girl is in your power; do to her as you please” (Gen 16:6). The only dialogue given to Abram in this account grants Sarai sole authority in this domestic affair and gives her unrestricted power. This exposes the pregnant Hagar to Sarai’s anger and presents the reader with a dilemma regarding the moral character of a passive patriarch and an abusive matriarch. The narrator tells us that Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar and she fled into the wilderness.

Through a remarkable encounter with the Angel of YHWH, Hagar receives a promise and an important revelation about God. The Angel found Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness on the way to Shur. After questioning her whereabouts, the Angel sends her back to Sarai and tells Hagar to “submit to her” (Gen 16:9). We are not told why Hagar is told to return and submit, but this command is immediately followed by a promise to Hagar that reflects the patriarchal promise made to Abraham, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for their multitude” (Gen 32

32 The conflict between two women over offspring or, lack thereof, is not uncommon in biblical narrative; for example: Rachel/Leah (Gen 30:1); Hannah/Peninnah (1 Sam 1:1-8); the two harlots before Solomon (1 Kgs 3:16-27).
33 This is a reversal of the Exodus story where Israel is treated harshly by Egyptian taskmasters and flees into the wilderness.
34 Alter, Genesis, 69. The angel is a divine messenger; but by the end of the encounter, the angel is referred to as a manifestation of God.
16:10). This is the only textual evidence in the Torah of this promise made to a non-Israelite.\(^{35}\)

The Angel’s pronouncement of the future child’s name and Hagar’s own experience of the deity who spoke to her is an important revelation concerning God that will be carried into later narratives. Hagar’s son will be called “Ismael, for YHWH has given heed to your affliction” (Gen 16:11) and Hagar will name this deity who spoke to her “El-Roi” (Gen 16:13), the God who sees.\(^{36}\) The narrative implies that God has seen and heard Hagar’s affliction and has responded. The revelation to Moses in Exodus will parallel this when YHWH says, “I have observed the misery of the people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters” (Exod 3:7). The story of Hagar asserts that God has a special concern, not only for the ancestors of Israel, but for all strangers who undergo displacement and suffering.

The story of the conflict between Sarah and Hagar is told twice: Gen 16:1-16 and Gen 21:8-21.\(^{37}\) In the second account, Sarah has finally given birth to her own son Isaac and once again the two women come into conflict, with Abraham caught in the middle. Sarah expresses fear that “the son of the slave woman” (Gen 21:10) will inherit along with Isaac and she demands that Abraham send them away.\(^{38}\) In this account, Abraham

\(^{35}\) Hermann Gunkel, *Water for a Thirsty Land: Israelite Literature and Religion* (ed. K. C. Hansson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 75. The story of Hagar can be interpreted as an ethnography about the ancestry of the Arab peoples, called the Ismaelites, who are part of Israel’s family tree but are culturally distinct from them. Although Ismael and Isaac live separately from one another, they are briefly rejoined at the burial of their father (Gen 25:7-11). According to the Torah narrative, the patriarchal blessing passes to Isaac, but the promise to Hagar is not forgotten as her son becomes the father of “twelve princes according to their tribes” (Gen 25:16).

\(^{36}\) Pace Jeanson, *Women of Genesis*, 47. In the narrative, not only does God see Hagar, but she implies that she has “seen God and remained alive” (Gen 16:13). Those who see God and live have special status in the biblical narratives (Gen 32:30; Exod 33:20).

\(^{37}\) Genesis 16:1-16 is the J and P source and Genesis 21:8-21 is the E source.

\(^{38}\) Sarah’s omission of the names of Hagar and Ismael indicates a lowered status and even contempt of these two characters from her point of view. Here Sarah tells Abraham to “cast them out” whereas in the first account, Hagar takes the initiative to leave.
is described as distressed over Sarah’s demands but he relents after Elohim speaks to him saying, “Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also because he is your offspring.” (Gen 21:12-13). Sarah is again given authority while the promise made to Hagar in the first account is now initially given to Abraham. In this narrative, Hagar does not leave of her own accord, rather she and her son are sent away into the wilderness with some bread and a skin of water. When their water was gone, Hagar became extremely distraught over the impending death of her child; she placed him under a bush so that she would not have to witness his death, and she began to weep. In this account, God hears the voice of Hagar’s son and responds by calming her fears and reaffirming the promise that Ismael will be a great nation. God “opened her eyes and she saw a well of water” (Gen 21:19). The theme of “seeing” in connection with God’s special concern recalls the first account; here God ensures that Hagar “sees” the well of water that will ensure their survival.

In both narratives, Hagar incurs Sarah’s jealousy and anger, is abused/expelled with Abraham’s seeming approval in one account and his distress in the other, and receives a divine revelation and promise. In both accounts, Sarai/Sarah is the dominant figure in the Abrahamic household, protecting her honor and authority as the first wife, while Hagar is the suffering servant for whom God has a special concern. In both accounts, Hagar and Ismael are portrayed as the sympathetic characters but in the second account there is more concern with the question of inheritance and the assertion of the

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39 These verses stress that the covenant with Israel will come through Isaac, but that Isaac does not entirely displace Ismael because he will also receive a portion of the promise made to Abraham.
40 In this narrative, Hagar is weeping but God responds to the cry of the child which fulfills Ismael’s name, “God hears.”
covenant promises made in Gen 17:1-27.\textsuperscript{41} Although the covenant with Israel will come through Isaac, the Hagar narratives reveal that God’s special concern for the displaced person includes non-Israelites as well. The stories also foreshadow the Exodus and serve as inner-biblical commentary, when in a turnaround, Abraham’s descendants will be the Strangers who are suffering mistreatment at the hands of Egyptians.

2. 6. A Stranger and an Alien

Abraham calls himself “a stranger (gēr) and an alien ( tôšāb)” (Gen 23:4) in the land of Canaan and he is thus dependent on the hospitality, good will, and legal protection of others for the survival of his household.\textsuperscript{42} As he and his family travel from one location to another, they experience good will and hospitality as well as conflict and antagonism. When conflicts arise, the narratives show that the Stranger must employ all of his/her resources to ensure survival. In the wife/sister tales, Abraham is depicted as a vulnerable sojourner who must employ deception in order to secure his life, while in other accounts, he is presented as a powerful tribal leader who commands an army. By interweaving these seemingly disparate aspects of Abraham, vulnerability and power, the redactor creates a complexity in the character of the “stranger and alien” that must employ both wit and strength in the struggle for survival.

\textsuperscript{41} In Gen 17:15-21, God promises Abraham that Ismael will be blessed, but the covenant with Israel will be established through Sarah’s son, Isaac.

\textsuperscript{42} I will be discussing the meaning of tôšāb in chapter 4.
2. 6. 1. *Conflict with the Four Eastern Kings*

An account of Abram’s rescue of Lot from the army of the four eastern kings presents the patriarch as a powerful warrior in command of an army (Gen 14:1-24). It begins with the report of a battle between four eastern kings and the Canaanite kings that results in the defeat of the Canaanites. Before departing from Canaan, the eastern kings pillage the land and abduct Abram’s nephew Lot. The narrative mentions that “Abram the Hebrew was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner, who were allies of Abram” (Gen 14:13). In this narrative, the allies of Abram are Amorites, a people who will become Israel’s enemies, and eventually displaced by the Israelites when the covenant promise of land is fulfilled in later narratives. In contrast to Abram’s vulnerability in the wife/sister tales, this account depicts his leadership and military skill as he leads a small army of retainers that overtake the alliance of eastern kings and rescue his nephew Lot. In the aftermath of Abram’s victory, the king of Sodom and the Canaanite priest-king Melchizedek meet him to offer their gratitude and blessing. When the king of Sodom offers to split the spoils of war with Abram, he refuses by saying, “I will not take so much as a thread or sandal strap of what is yours” (Gen 14:23). Abram’s polite refusal of the king’s gesture of honor and generosity may be interpreted as graciousness, pride, or it may be seen as Abram’s faith that prosperity will come through God, not a Canaanite king.

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43 Alter, *Genesis*, 58. This narrative is not identified with any of the other sources in the Pentateuch.
44 Ibid., 60. Hebrew is an ethnic or social term usually used by non-Israelites (Gen 39:14; 40:15; Exod 1:19; 1 Sam 4:6; Jon 1:9).
45 See: Gen 15:18-21; Deut 1:7-8
46 Abraham accepts only what his servants have used up and gives the rest of his share to his Amorite allies.
47 God is not a character in this particular narrative outside of his mention in the blessing of Melchizedek and the oath of Abram.
2. 6. 2. Conflict over a Well

The recognition that Abraham prospers because God is with him is evident in the words of Abimelech, another Canaanite king. He says, “Elohim is with you in all you do; now therefore swear to me by Elohim that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have resided as a gēr” (Gen 21:22-23). Abimelech’s words imply a mutual respect between the king and the patriarch. When a dispute arises over a well that Abimelech’s men have seized, Abraham makes a covenant with the king by exchanging livestock for the rights to the well. After the wife/sister controversy, Abimelech had invited Abraham to “settle where it pleases you” (Gen 20:15), but the invitation did not include the acquisition of land. Abraham’s payment of seven ewe lambs to Abimelech provides ownership of the well to Abraham, but it does not change his status. The account ends by saying, “Abraham resided as a gēr many days in the land of the Philistines” (Gen 21:34).

2. 7. Hospitality for the Stranger

As a sojourner, Abraham was dependent on the hospitality of others to ensure his survival. According to Fields, a convention of hospitality developed among nomadic societies due to the geographical and climatic conditions of the desert. He writes that the host typically extended a greeting and formal offer of hospitality that included: washing of the feet, rest, an offering of drink and food, sleeping quarters and protection, care for the traveler’s animals, and seeing the guest safely on his way.48

48 Weston W. Fields, Sodom and Gomorrah, 56.
2. 7. 1. Abraham “keeps the way of the YHWH”

In the ancestral narratives, Genesis 18:1-8 provides a paradigm of hospitality and generosity toward strangers. Abraham, who is sojourning by the oaks of Mamre, sees three visitors approaching his encampment and he hastens out of his tent to meet and welcome them.⁴⁹ The first to speak is Abraham; he bows down to the visitors and offers food and rest. Abraham’s humble offer of “a little water and bread” becomes a feast of “choice cakes, a calf tender and good, curds, and milk” (Gen 18:6-8), and the host stands and tends to the needs of the visitors when they eat.⁵⁰ Visitors often appear in a narrative with some news to impart to the host, and in this account Abraham learns that Sarah will bear a son in the coming year.⁵¹

As the men set out to leave for Sodom, YHWH’s inner monologue discloses God’s special relationship with the sojourner Abraham and his task for the chosen patriarch, to “charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice” (Gen 18:19). God confides in Abraham by telling him of the “outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah, and how very grave is their sin!” (Gen 18:20), and that God will now investigate the matter and deal appropriately with them.⁵² The dialogue that ensues between Abraham and YHWH reveals the patriarch as a man of justice with the courage to question God’s own moral code of justice.

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⁴⁹ The chapter begins with “YHWH appeared to Abraham” (Gen 18:1), but when Abraham looks up he sees three men. The relationship of YHWH to the visitors is unclear, but some interpretations are that the visitors are God and two angels.

⁵⁰ In the ancestral narratives thus far, the only person that has offered food and drink to Abraham has been the priest-king Melchizedek who brought bread and wine after the battle with the four eastern kings (Gen 14:18).

⁵¹ This parallels the announcement in Gen 17:15-15, but in the first account (P source) Abraham laughs while in the following announcement (J source), it is Sarah who laughs and, unlike Abraham, she is scolded by God for doing so.

⁵² We do not learn what the “grave sin” is, but the contrast of Abraham’s treatment of the visitors with that of the men of Sodom infers a sin concerning the mistreatment of strangers.
God has not yet revealed the method of punishment, but Abraham assumes that the whole population will be punished, and he pleads for justice and mercy, “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen 18:25). Abraham’s argument is not that the guilty be punished and the innocent spared, rather that the whole city be spared for the sake of at least ten innocent individuals. Abraham prevails in the argument and YHWH agrees that “for the sake of ten I will not destroy it” (Gen 18:32); however, in the following narrative the reader learns that ten righteous men are not to be found in Sodom.

2. 7. 2. The Visitors in Sodom

The Sodom and Gomorrah narrative stands in stark contrast to the preceding account in terms of the inhospitality shown to the visitors and the unrighteousness of the men of Sodom. Lot and his family are not counted among the wicked, but his character lacks the righteousness and strength that Abraham embodies. When the two angels arrive in Sodom, Lot offers the basic needs of food and lodging; however, in contrast to Abraham’s hospitality, Lot does not seem as gracious to the visitors. He rises to meet them, bows down, and invites them to his house to spend the night; he does not run out to meet them as Abraham did. In this account, the visitors initially refuse Lot’s offer; whereas, they immediately accepted Abraham’s hospitality. When the visitors agree to come to Lot’s house, he offers them a “feast” (Gen 19:3), but he serves them unleavened

53 There is an element of humor in the dialogue as Abraham and God haggle, not over the price of some land or goods but over the population of Sodom. The deeper theological message is that a few righteous individuals effect the deliverance of an entire community, as the righteous Abraham will serve as a way of deliverance for all peoples.
bread in contrast to the “choice cakes” (Gen 18:6) that Abraham provided. When Abraham’s guests ate, he stood next to them and tended to their needs, while Lot eats alongside them. Lot’s hospitality is genuine, but Abraham serves as the true model of hospitality because he exceeds the expectations of hospitality for the Stranger.

The event that ensues discloses the sinfulness of the men of Sodom as well as the vulnerability of strangers in a foreign and often hostile environment. The men of the city surround the house of Lot and seek to assault the visitors in order to humiliate them. In order to justify the coming punishment, the narrative tells us that there were no innocents among the population, “the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house” (Gen 19:4). Lot’s responsibilities as a host include the protection of his guests and he offers his daughters to the men of Sodom in place of the visitors. Lot’s moral character seems diminished when he offers his daughters to the crowd in exchange, but in many respects this again brings to light the moral ambiguity that is connected to the survival tactics of the sojourner, as in the wife/sister tales.

Lot’s own life is endangered when the crowd calls attention to his status as a sojourner, “This fellow came here as a gēr, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them” (Gen 19:9). The narrative imparts the danger that sojourners faced in a foreign environment and the lack of legal protection for them.

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54 Fields, Sodom and Gomorrah, 178. Fields writes that Sodom’s sin was primarily a social sin of inhospitality to strangers.

55 See Judges 19:22-25. In this similar account, the Levite and his concubine spend the night in the house of an old man residing in Gibeah. Both the Levite and the old man are strangers, and as in the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, the Levite’s concubine and the old man’s daughter are offered in exchange for the threat of homosexual rape. In this account, the concubine is not spared as the daughters of Lot were.

56 In Lot’s case, poetic justice determines that he will pay the price for the offer of his daughters when they get him drunk and engage in incestuous relations with him (Gen 19:30-38). Their offspring, the Moabites and Ammonites, will be depicted as traditional enemies of Israel in later narratives.
is ironically called a “judge” because seemingly there is no human judge or laws to protect him in this situation. His rescue and protection come, not from any human sources, but from the two angels who were his visitors.\textsuperscript{57}

Genesis 18 and 19 are placed together with the first narrative serving as a teaching on justice and righteousness as the “way of YHWH” and the second account serving as a cautionary tale that warns of punishment when strangers are treated inhospitably. After YHWH’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, there is a brief shift in scene and perspective as Abraham “looks down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace” (Gen 19:28). The scene recalls Abraham’s efforts to save the city on behalf of the innocents there. The next verse shifts to God’s perspective as he “remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow” (Gen 19:29). God has a special covenant relationship with the sojourner Abraham and those who are connected to him will also receive special consideration and protection.

2. 8. Abraham purchases a Burial Ground

Near the conclusion of the Abraham narratives, Sarah has died in Hebron and Abraham needs to acquire a burial ground. As a resident alien, he owns no land to bury his dead, and he must go before the Hittites, a Canaanite people, in order request the purchase. The scene depicts a formal legal process where Abraham identifies himself and his need, “I am a stranger (gēr) and an alien (tôšāb) residing among you; give me

\textsuperscript{57} Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” This passage in Hebrews is usually related to Abraham’s visitors and God’s revelations to him, but it could also apply to Lot’s visitors and the protection that they provided.
property among you for a burying place so that I may bury my dead” (Gen 23:5).  

In their response, the Hittites formally recognize Abraham as a “mighty prince” (Gen 23:6) and they offer him the “choicest of burial places” (Gen 23:6). The offer does not include a price of purchase, and would not, therefore, grant Abraham legal ownership and the rights of a landowner. Abraham presses his case for ownership by offering to pay the full price for the cave of Machpelah. When the owner of the cave, Ephron the Hittite, offers to give Abraham the land, the two men engage in a dialogue that results in the sale of the field and cave for an exorbitant price that Abraham pays willingly. The acquisition of the field and the cave for a burying place is resolved, not through the gift-giving of the Hittites, but through a legal purchase. In some respects, this account recalls the king of Sodom’s offer of the spoils of war as a gift (Gen 14:21). The blessings of wealth and the land will not come as a gift from the Canaanites, but only from God. The paradox in the story is that Abraham is a resident alien without ancestral land rights or protection in the social and legal order, but he is also God’s chosen representative to whom this land has been promised.

In purchasing the burial place, Abraham establishes the first foundation between the land promised in the Abrahamic covenant and his descendants; the next two generations of patriarchs and matriarchs will also be buried there. As Abraham puts his affairs in order, he not only secures the family burial place but seeks a wife for Isaac.

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58 Alter, *Genesis*, 110. Abraham had to go before a council that would grant approval of the purchase.

59 The fact that Abraham did not bargain over the price shows that he was seriously intent on acquiring the property.

60 It is impossible to know what the field and cave were actually worth, but as a comparison Abraham paid four hundred shekels of silver for this burial place while Jeremiah will later pay only 17 shekels for all of his ancestral lands.

61 See: Gen 49:29-32; Traditionally, this was the burial site of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah.
(Gen 24) and decrees the distribution of his assets (Gen 25). At the beginning of the Abraham account, he was called by God to leave his home country of Ur and promised blessings, descendants, and land. Throughout the narratives, he is presented as a man of faith, integrity, and hospitality, who has acquired wealth and seems to be respected by the Canaanites. As his story concludes, we learn that God has fulfilled the promise of many descendants, but the land that was promised in the Abrahamic covenant is still the land where his descendants sojourn as гērîm. The sojourner who enters into a covenant relationship with God will continue to be the prevalent theme throughout the ancestral narratives of Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes.

2. 9. The Descendants of Abraham

In the stories of Abraham’s descendants, I will once again consider characters that have been displaced, either voluntarily or through forced migration, from their country of origin or from family or tribe. In these accounts, the reasons for migration include famine, fear of retribution, and marriage. As Abraham’s descendants sojourn in the land of Canaan, their relationships with the native populations become more integral to some of the narratives and intermarriage with those outside of the tribe becomes an issue of concern.

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62 Along with the mention of Abraham’s sons Isaac and Ismael, this chapter includes descendants of Abraham from another wife, Keturah. One of their sons, Midian, is linked to the place where Moses seeks refuge and settles after his murder of an Egyptian taskmaster.
2. 9. 1. Isaac and Rebekah

Before his death, Abraham sends his servant to his kinsfolk in Haran to acquire a wife for Isaac saying, “You will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred” (Gen 24:3-4). It seems integral that Isaac’s wife come from Abraham’s home country, but it seems equally important that Isaac should not return there himself. Abraham remembers his commission to leave the land of his birth in connection with God’s promise of blessings in a new land. In the scene that follows, Abraham’s servant meets Rebekah at a well in the city of Nahor; he introduces himself, and she runs to tell her kinsmen of the visitor, ultimately leading to a betrothal. Rebekah mirrors aspects of Abraham’s character in her acts of hospitality towards his servant and especially in consenting to leave her father’s house and adopt the life of a sojourner by entering the household of Isaac.

In a repetition of the wife/sister tale, Isaac and Rebekah sojourn in Gerar because of a famine in the land. YHWH appears to Isaac and tells him not to go to Egypt, but to remain in Gerar and “reside in the land as a gēr:” (Gen 26:3); then YHWH reaffirms the Abrahamic promises of descendants, land, and blessings with Isaac. This variation of the wife/sister tale differs from the previous ones in that the matriarch is not taken into the king’s house, and the deception is discovered, not through the punishment of plagues or warnings in a dream, but because King Abimelech sees Isaac fondling his wife. Despite

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63 Intermarriage with foreigners will be strictly forbidden in later texts. See: Deut 7:1-4; Ezra 9-10.

64 Kinship seems significant for marriage in the patriarchal narratives, but the kinsmen who have remained in the home country are typically not presented as positive characters. For example, Laban who is not a sojourner is depicted as manipulative and greedy. See: Gen 24:30; 29:27; 31:7, 14-15, 41.

65 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 52. This is the typical formula of the betrothal type-scene.
the deception, Isaac prospers with “wealth, possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household” (Gen 26:13-14). His prosperity breeds envy among the Philistines, a conflict develops over wells that were dug by his father Abraham, and Isaac is forced to settle in another part of Gerar. Abimelech seems to fear Isaac’s power which recalls Abraham’s military strength in the conflict with the four eastern kings. In the Abraham narrative, Abimelech invited the patriarch to settle in the land but in this account Isaac says, “You hate me and have sent me away” (Gen 26:27). In this version, the covenant with Abimelech does not center on a well but on developing a peace agreement between the king and Isaac. There seems to be a growing animosity developing between the sojourners and the people of Canaan.

2. 9. 2. Jacob and Esau

Life is becoming more of a struggle for the descendants of Abraham. The sojourners encounter conflicts not only with the Canaanites, but amongst themselves as brother struggles with brother. The Jacob narrative begins with a struggle within the womb of Rebekah as one twin attempts to supplant the other. Esau is the firstborn, but Jacob will become the heir of the birthright and the son who receives Isaac’s final blessing. Although Jacob is depicted as a trickster who gains the birthright and blessing

66 This is an unusual depiction of Isaac who is typically portrayed as a passive character.
67 The ascent of the younger son over the elder is also represented in the relationships between Ismael and Isaac, as well as Joseph and his elder brothers.
through deception, his character is given a more positive portrayal than Esau. There are physical and intellectual contrasts in that Esau is described as hairy and is easily deceived while Jacob has smooth skin and is clever. Perhaps more significantly, Esau is depicted as “a skillful hunter and man of the field” while Jacob is described as “a quiet man, living in tents” (Gen 25:27). The contrast may reflect the redactor’s preference for the nomadic lifestyle over the more settled life of a farmer with God’s blessing coming to the “man living in tents.”

After Jacob’s deception of his brother, Esau vows retribution and Rebekah fears for her younger son’s life. She advises Jacob, “flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, and stay with him a while, until your brother’s fury turns away” (Gen 27:43-44). Before Jacob leaves his home and family, his father Isaac warns him not to marry any of the Canaanite women, but to take a wife from one of the daughters of Laban. He then passes on the blessings promised to Abraham so that Jacob may one day “take possession of the land where you now live as a gēr” (Gen 28:4). In a reversal of Abraham’s migration, his grandson Jacob will leave Canaan and sojourn to their tribal home.

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68 Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 53. Niditch writes that Jacob’s ascent through deception is a trickster tale, and that the biblical narratives are rich with tales of the underdog, such as the foreigner, the younger son, or other marginalized characters who are least likely to succeed and yet do. She says that the foreignness of some of the characters “may have held special appeal for Israelite authors and audiences, whose very founding myths tell of departure from an original homeland and subsequent enslavements abroad.” Although Jacob’s success is gained through deception, it will be balanced by Laban’s deceptions when Jacob sojourns with him in Haran (Gen 29:23-27) and by his sons’ deception concerning the disappearance of their brother (37:32-35).

69 The contrast between the farmer/shepherd and settler/nomad is also evident in the Cain and Abel story. Interestingly, Esau is Isaac’s favorite and in Gen 26:12, Isaac is described as a man that “sowed the land;” yet he is also described as a nomad in Gen 26:17.

70 Esau has already disappointed his parents by marrying two Hittite women (Gen 26:34-35); in a move to appease his parents, he marries a daughter of Ismael (Gen 28:6-9).
On the journey to Haran, Jacob experiences a revelatory dream at Bethel. YHWH renews the patriarchal promise with Jacob and assures him of God’s presence and protection and that his exile will be temporary. When Jacob is most vulnerable, fleeing from home and family to a foreign land, God reveals Jacob’s destiny and becomes his divine protector.

2. 9. 3. Jacob’s sojourns with Laban

Jacob’s journey leads to the household of his mother’s brother, Laban in Haran, where he eventually marries both of Laban’s daughters, Leah and Rachel, by promising years of service. During the time of his sojourning, Jacob becomes the father of his own household, but he still serves his father-in-law. When Jacob asks to be sent away, “so that I may go to my own home and country” (Gen 30:25), Laban negotiate with Jacob for his release and wages, but then tries to cheat Jacob. In a turn of events, Jacob outwits his father-in-law and becomes “exceedingly rich and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys” (Gen 30:43). Following on the experience of his father and grandfather, Jacob the gēr has become a wealthy man during the time of his sojourning.

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71 Jacob’s first encounter with God is told as a dream of a ladder reaching to heaven (Gen 28:10-22), relating to Jacob’s naming of the sanctuary of Bethel (“house of God”). On his return home, he wrestles with a divine being (Gen 32:22-32), resulting in the naming of the sanctuary of Penuel (“presence of God”).

72 The account of Jacob’s marriages involves both a well betrothal type scene where Jacob meets Rachel (Gen 29:1-14) and a trickster tale where Laban deceives Jacob into marrying the elder daughter Leah first (Gen 29:15-30). In another account, Laban attempts to trick Jacob again, but in this instance Jacob turns the tables on him (Gen 30:25-43).

73 The text implies that Jacob has the status of an indentured servant who could not leave without Laban’s permission. Also see: Exod 21:2-4 that deals with release of slaves in the seventh year. Jacob’s request to be released will be echoed in Moses’ request for the release of the Hebrew slaves from the pharaoh (Exod 5:1).

74 This is similar to the description of Abraham’s riches when he prospered in Egypt (Gen 12:16) and Isaac’s prosperity in Gerar (Gen 26:13-14).
Fearing retribution from Laban and his sons, Jacob persuades his wives to leave their father’s house by recounting Laban’s injustices against him and by affirming God’s protective presence. Leah and Rachel express their own anger towards their father who has used up their inheritance and “regarded them as foreigners” (Gen 31:15). When God commissions Jacob to “return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred” (Gen 31:3), it is a turnaround of Abraham’s charge to his servant, “go to my country and my kindred and get a wife for my son” (Gen 24:4). The definition of home country and kindred seem to be undergoing a transformation in the narratives, whereby “the land of your birth” (Gen 31:13) is becoming understood as the land of Canaan.

After serving Laban for twenty years, Jacob must leave secretly with his family and possessions. Laban pursues and confronts Jacob and a verbal conflict ensues with Laban making accusations as well as claiming ownership of Jacob’s household as “my daughter, my children, my flocks” (Gen 31:43) while Jacob rebukes his father-in-law for the injustices that he has suffered in his time of servitude. Jacob asserts that “Elohim saw my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night” (Gen 31:42). He implies that only God’s concern and protection brought about his just recompense. To resolve the conflict, Laban suggests that he and Jacob make a covenant with God acting as a witness to their peace agreement and a stone pillar serving as a boundary that neither of them would cross. Laban’s last gestures of kissing and blessing to his grandchildren

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75 The Hebrew nokrîyôt is translated as “foreigners.” Rachel goes so far as to steal her father’s household gods in a trickster tale (Gen 31:30-35). Rachel and Jacob are both portrayed as tricksters: “Rachel stole her father’s household gods. And Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean” (Gen 31:19-20), but Jacob was unaware of Rachel’s theft.

76 Alter, *Genesis*, 169. The reference to “Laban the Aramean” (Gen 31:20, 24) may suggest that his identity in relation to Jacob is no longer as a kinsman but as an ethnic foreigner.

77 The “God who sees” the suffering of the afflicted echoes Hagar’s revelation in Gen 16.

78 God is depicted as integral to the resolution of conflict in that he appears to Laban in a dream warning him not to interfere (Gen 31:24).
and daughters provide a scene of reconciliation between the two households, although he fails to kiss Jacob.\textsuperscript{79} This may serve to show that the covenant between Jacob and Laban is somewhat tenuous; promises have been made, but forgiveness for past offenses on both sides may not be as easily attained. As Jacob continues on his journey, the theme of past grievances and reconciliation is carried into the following narrative as he prepares to meet his brother Esau.

2. 9. 4. Return and Reconciliation

Fearing Esau’s retribution, Jacob prepares to meet his brother by sending messengers with this communication, “Thus says your servant Jacob, I have lived with Laban as a \textit{gēr}, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight” (Gen 32:4-5).\textsuperscript{80} When Jacob learns that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men, he fears that his brother is coming to kill him and his entire household.\textsuperscript{81} In a distressful plea for deliverance, he respectfully reminds God that he commissioned this return journey and promised that goodness and blessing would follow and now that promise seems threatened. In order to appease Esau’s anger, Jacob sends gifts of livestock in several spaced groups to allow ample time to placate his brother before their meeting so that when “I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me” (Gen 32:20). Before their face

\textsuperscript{79} This is unlike the gesture of welcome when Jacob initially arrived as Laban “ran to meet him; embraced him and kissed him” (Gen 29:13).

\textsuperscript{80} Jacob’s address to Esau as “my lord” and himself as “servant” reverses the relationships foreshadowed in Isaac’s blessing where Esau will serve Jacob (Gen 27:40). Jacob’s reversal of language may be a clever attempt to placate his brother in hopes of saving his household.

\textsuperscript{81} The mention of four hundred men with Esau emphasizes Jacob’s vulnerability. Although he has wives, children, livestock, and possessions, no mention is made of his military strength, unlike the mention of Abraham’s retainers in Gen 14:14. Jacob’s fear of Esau leads to his division of the household so that if one company is killed, the other will be spared. (Gen 32:7-8).
to face encounter, Jacob sends all of the remaining members of his household and his possessions across the ford of the Jabbok and he was “left alone” (Gen 32:25). \(^{82}\)

Ironically, the danger to Jacob comes not from Esau but from a “face to face” encounter with a divine being who wrestles with Jacob until daybreak. When Jacob prevails, he names the place Peniel, saying, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (Gen 32:30). \(^{83}\)

In the following narrative, Jacob looks up and sees Esau approaching with four hundred men. Jacob’s defensive actions imply fear at his brother’s approach: he divides the women and children into three groups and as he approaches his brother he bows to the ground seven times. \(^{84}\) Esau’s running out to meet Jacob could be seen as a form of attack, meeting Jacob’s expectations. But instead of violence and hostility, Jacob is met with Esau’s embraces and kisses, reflecting the hospitality of their grandfather, Abraham. Jacob reacts by saying, “to see your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such favor” (Gen 33:10). \(^{85}\) He had expected retribution, but instead he encountered forgiveness from his estranged brother. Esau turns out to be not at all menacing, but a paradigm of forgiveness. Jacob offers some of his God-given blessings as a gift to his brother, perhaps to reconcile the blessing that was taken from Esau and that led to the estrangement. \(^{86}\) Despite the theme of reconciliation, Jacob still seems

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\(^{82}\) His lack of companionship and possessions recall his situation when he first left Isaac’s household to sojourn with Laban, before God blessed him with a family and great wealth.

\(^{83}\) This account parallels Jacob’s revelation at Bethel (Gen 28:10-22); but in this story, Jacob undergoes a name change: Israel, one who strives with God and humans

\(^{84}\) Alter, *Genesis*, 184. Sevenfold prostration is a gesture of homage to one’s lord. The scene reverses the dominance of Jacob over Esau in Gen 25:23; 27:29.

\(^{85}\) This account parallels Jacob’s “face to face” encounter with the divine being (Gen 32:30). In both meetings, he believed that his life was in danger and instead it was preserved.

\(^{86}\) Alter, *Genesis*, 186. “Accept my present” can also be translated as “take my blessing” and reflects Jacob’s acknowledgment that he had taken away Esau’s blessing (Gen 27:35-36) and now he offers retribution. This gift may be the livestock mentioned in Gen 32:13-15.
unsure of his brother’s intentions and he gives deceptive excuses rather than journeying on to Seir with Esau. Instead, Jacob separates himself from Esau and travels to the Canaanite city of Shechem where “he bought for one hundred pieces of money the plot of land on which he had pitched his tent” (Gen 33:19). In purchasing some land to pitch his tent, he builds on the legal connection to the land established in Abraham’s earlier purchase of a burial ground. Although they are still nomadic tent dwellers, the ancestors are becoming more settled and connected to the land of their sojourning through the purchase of land.

2. 9. 5. Jacob’s Offspring

When Jacob and his household return to Canaan, the narratives involve conflicts between the Canaanites and Jacob’s sons as well as conflicts within the family itself. The stories concern matters of intermarriage between Jacob’s offspring and the native Canaanites, honor and shame, and jealousy and deceit among the sons of Jacob. Moral ambiguity is a prevalent theme giving the reader a sense of an impending downturn in the fate of the ancestors.

When Dinah, Jacob’s only daughter by Leah, went out to visit the women of the region of Shechem, she became the endangered daughter of the patriarch as Shechem, prince of the region, “seized her and lay with her by force” (Gen 34:2). The story goes on to say that Shechem’s “soul was drawn to Dinah” (Gen 34:3) and he fell in love with

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87 This maintains Jacob’s depiction as a trickster in the narratives, but it also serves to show that Jacob and his offspring will maintain a distinctive identity from the surrounding peoples.
88 The only accounts of ancestors purchasing land in Canaan are in Gen 23 where Abraham acquires a burial plot and in this instance where Jacob pitches his tent.
89 Shechem is both the name of the city and of the prince who is the son of Hamor, the Hivite. The Hivites are one of the peoples that the Israelites are commanded not to marry and to utterly destroy (Deut 7:1-3).
her, but the act of seizing Dinah implies that she was powerless in relation to the prince. It echoes the wife/sister tale in connection to endangered women who sojourn with their tribe, but here the character is an endangered sister rather than an endangered wife. In this account, the woman is not protected by God and Dinah’s defilement by Shechem leads to the vengeful fury of her brothers because the family’s honor has been violated. In an attempt to avert conflict, Hamor, Shechem’s father, attempts to make an agreement concerning intermarriage between Jacob’s children and the people of Shechem. The agreement would seem to benefit Jacob and his offspring in that Hamor states, “You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it” (Gen 34:10). The sons of Jacob would only agree to live among them and become “one people” (Gen 34:16) on the condition that every male be circumcised, but their seeming assent hid deception and a plot of vengeance. Simeon and Levi eventually killed the men of Shechem when they were healing from the circumcision, and then they removed

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90 The two brothers that eventually commit the violence, Simeon and Levi, are some of Dinah’s nearest brothers since they are also children of Leah.

91 This proposal is repeated when Hamor and Shechem attempt to influence the men of Shechem by saying, “These men are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them” (Gen 34:21); but they seem to have some self-serving motives as well when they include, “Will not their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours?” (Gen 34:23).

92 Following in their father’s example, Jacob’s sons employ deception since they had no intention of becoming “one people” with the Canaanites. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant that included not only Abraham’s immediate family, but every male in his household, including “the slave born in your house and the one bought with money from any foreigner (Gen 17:11-14). This narrative implies that circumcision alone does not allow inclusion into the covenant community since this agreement might lead to the absorption of Israel into the Canaanite peoples. This agreement also violates a later commandment not to enter into a covenant with the Canaanites (Ex 23:32); yet in an earlier narrative, Isaac makes a covenant with the Canaanite king, Abimelech.
Dinah from “Shechem’s house” (Gen 34:26). The other sons of Jacob plundered the city taking “their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their prey” (Gen 34:28-29). These acts of vengeance serve to restore the family’s honor, but appear unwise to Jacob. He expresses anger at his sons’ actions and fears retaliation by “the inhabitants of the land” (Gen 34:30) which infers that even though he has purchased land in Canaan, he does not identify himself with the people of the land and is still in a position of vulnerability. Unlike the wife/sister tales, there is no mention of protection from God; instead Dinah’s brothers take matters into their own hands by engaging in revenge and violence, and the acquisition of wealth comes not through God’s blessing but through human brutality. The familial rift between Jacob and Esau has just recently been healed but now a new one opens when Simeon and Levi defy their father in their act of vengeance. The remaining narratives of Genesis focus on Jacob’s oftentimes dysfunctional family and their eventual sojourn in Egypt.

93 The fact that Dinah’s brothers remove her from Shechem’s house implies that they may already be married. Although Shechem’s initial acts against Dinah are not justified, the narrative builds some considerable sympathy for him when he proclaims his love for her and offers to pay any bride price in order to marry her. But, the earlier patriarchs have gone to great lengths not to intermarry with the Canaanites (Gen 24; 27:46-28:9), and this narrative seems to support that ideal. Another account of intermarriage has Judah marrying “the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua” (Gen 38:2), but in this story the marriage does not seem as problematic nor is that of Judah’s son to Tamar. In a contrast to the Dinah narrative, Tamar takes control of the situation and ensures the future of Judah’s family line as well as her own future (Gen 38:27-30).

94 This is the first time that Jacob asserts himself in the story. Before this, he “held his peace” (Gen 34:5) after Dinah’s defilement and waited for his sons’ reaction. They are the ones who negotiate the agreement with Hamor, albeit with deception underlying their words.
2. 10. *Joseph and the Sojourn to Egypt*

As Jacob and his family return to Bethel, God reappears in the narrative as a protective presence on their journey so that “no one pursued them” (Gen 35:5), and he recalls the ancestral covenant with Abraham and Isaac that will now be carried on through Jacob and his descendants.\(^95\) During this period of sojourning in Canaan, Jacob experiences both joy and sorrow. He is blessed with another son, but his beloved wife Rachel dies on their journey.\(^96\) Jacob also experiences the loss of his father Isaac “at Mamre, where Abraham and Isaac had resided as *gērîm*” (Gen 35:27). The greatest grief for Jacob seems to come from his own children.\(^97\)

As Jacob’s story draws to a close, he “settled in the land where his father had lived as a *gēr*, the land of Canaan” (Gen 37:1). In the following narratives, Jacob’s character recedes into the background and his son, Joseph, takes the central role.\(^98\) Joseph is not called a sojourner, but he does experience displacement at the hands of his brothers due to their jealousy and hatred because Jacob “loved him more than all his brothers” (Gen 37:4).\(^99\) Initially, the brothers conspired to kill Joseph, but then decided...

\(^{95}\) This is the only time that God speaks or appears in the remaining chapters of Genesis, yet God is implied to be guiding events as Joseph will reveal to his brothers (Gen 45:5-8; 50:20). Unlike the parallel accounts in Gen 28:10-20 (E source) and 32:22-32 (J source), in this revelation (P source) there are no heavenly visions or dangerous encounters.

\(^{96}\) In the biblical account, Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin and is buried on the way to Ephrath (Gen 35:19). The simultaneous birth of Benjamin and death of Rachel lead to accounts of Jacob’s deep attachment to Rachel’s sons in the Joseph narrative.

\(^{97}\) The narrative concerning Dinah’s defilement has Jacob’s sons defying him; after the account of Rachel’s death, we hear that Reuben “lay with his father’s concubine” (Gen 35:22), an act of rebellion. In the Joseph narrative, his brothers sell him into slavery and then lie to their father about his disappearance.

\(^{98}\) Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 176. The rivalry among the brothers reflects previous fraternal conflicts, but this account is unique in that it is an elaborate continuing narration rather than self-contained episodes. Rather than accounts of God’s revelation and relationship with the ancestors, the story explores character and motive in the themes of wisdom, discord, and reconciliation. In contrast to the earlier ancestral narrative, the Joseph story is set mainly in Egypt rather than Canaan. The events that lead to the return to the promised land in Exodus occur after the death of Joseph.

\(^{99}\) The brothers also hated Joseph because of his dream that revealed that he would one day have dominion over them.
to sell him as a slave to a caravan of Ismaelites for twenty pieces of silver. “And they took Joseph to Egypt” (Gen 37:28) begins the migration of Abraham’s descendants to Egypt. Betrayal of their brother leads to deception of their father as Jacob’s sons convince him that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal.\textsuperscript{100}

Although God does not appear or speak in the Joseph narrative, God’s presence and protection is implied as the narrator tells us that, “YHWH was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that YHWH was with him, and that YHWH caused all that he did to prosper in his hands” (Gen 39:2-3).\textsuperscript{101} For Joseph’s sake, God blessed his Egyptian master’s house as well. Like his ancestors, Joseph also encounters danger in a foreign land; but in this account, the male character is endangered by an Egyptian woman.\textsuperscript{102} Joseph’s status as a foreigner is implied when Potiphar’s wife confronts her husband with the accusation that “the Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me” (Gen 39:17). Although Joseph is falsely accused of sexual impropriety by Potiphar’s wife and imprisoned, his ability to interpret dreams leads to his release from prison and his rise up in the ranks of the Egyptian court.\textsuperscript{103} In appointing him as his governor, the pharaoh recognizes the “spirit of God” (Gen 41:38) in Joseph’s wisdom and discernment. Joseph’s rise in status from a slave to the right hand man of the pharaoh brings a change

\textsuperscript{100} The deception echoes the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau; as in that account, there will eventually be reconciliation between the brothers.

\textsuperscript{101} This reflects God’s continuing presence with Abraham’s descendants and echoes earlier accounts of an outsider recognizing God’s presence and blessing of Israel’s ancestors. For example: Abimelech in Gen 21:22; Laban in Gen 30:27-30.

\textsuperscript{102} Frymer-Kensky, \textit{Reading the Women of the Bible}, 88. Frymer-Kensky notes that foreign women are often depicted as a villainess in the biblical literature.

\textsuperscript{103} Again, the narrator mentions that “the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love” (Gen 39:21). Joseph credits his ability to interpret dreams to God (41:16).
of clothing, a name change, and a wife, Aseneth.\textsuperscript{104} As Egypt experienced seven years of plenty, Joseph stored up grain in anticipation of the coming years of famine.\textsuperscript{105} The narrative states that, “the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world” (Gen 41:57). Included among those who come to Egypt for grain are Joseph’s brothers, and when they come before him they do not recognize him. On the other hand, he recognized them but “he treated them like strangers (nēkār) and spoke harshly to them” (Gen 42:7).\textsuperscript{106} In a turn of events, the deceived becomes the deceiver as Joseph tests their loyalty to their youngest brother, Benjamin, and provides an opportunity for their redemption and eventual reunion with Joseph. When Joseph reveals himself, his forgiveness includes the recognition of God’s hand in the events in order “to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors” (Gen 45:7). The Joseph narratives close with the resolution of the conflict within Jacob’s family and their sojourn in the land of Egypt.\textsuperscript{107}

As Jacob reenters the final narratives in Genesis, God also makes a reappearance and foreshadows the Exodus narrative saying, “I will make of you a great nation in the land of Egypt” (Gen 46:3). Before they settle in the land of Goshen, the brothers come before the pharaoh and present themselves saying, “We have come to reside as gēr in the land; for there is no pasture for your servants’ flocks because the famine is severe in the

\textsuperscript{104} Aseneth gives Joseph two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Joseph’s intermarriage with an Egyptian woman does not seem to be an issue in this narrative, and later Jewish interpretation sees Aseneth as a prototype of a convert to Judaism. See: Joseph and Aseneth.

\textsuperscript{105} This is in connection to Joseph’s interpretation of the pharaoh’s dream of the seven fat cows and the seven lean cows (Gen 41:14-36).

\textsuperscript{106} The Hebrew nēkār is translated as “stranger.”

\textsuperscript{107} The pharaoh, like Abimelech in the Abraham narrative, invites the Israelites and offers them land (45:18).
land of Canaan...let your servants settle in the land of Goshen” (Gen 47:4).\textsuperscript{108} Nearing the end of his life, Jacob reiterates his identity and that of the ancestors by proclaiming, “The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred thirty; few and hard have been the years of my life. They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn” (Gen 47:9). The recurring motif of the ancestors as sojourners in the narratives is evidence that this self-designation was integral to the formation of Israelite identity.\textsuperscript{109} Jacob’s last request is to be carried out of Egypt and buried with his ancestors after his death.\textsuperscript{110} As Israel temporarily settles in Egypt, they “gain possessions in it, were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly” (Gen 47:27). Joseph’s story completes the ancestral narratives and serves as a bridge to the Exodus account when he foretells that God will “bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Gen 50:24).

\textbf{2. 11. Conclusion}

In my analysis of the ancestor narratives in the Torah/Pentateuch, I examined the motif of the stranger as both an Israelite who is called a sojourner (\textit{gēr}) or a non-Israelite who is displaced from either their place of origin or kinship group. The ancestor stories begin with God’s “chosen” main character, Abraham, who leaves his country of origin and migrates to the land of Canaan. The setting for these narratives is primarily the land

\textsuperscript{108} Genesis 46:34 implies that they must settle away from the Egyptians because “shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians,” yet Genesis 47:6 has the pharaoh placing Joseph’s brothers in charge of his livestock.

\textsuperscript{109} Another example of the recurring motif is in Deut 26:5 which states, “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.”

\textsuperscript{110} See: Gen 47:29-31; 49:29-33. Jacob’s request implies that, although the tribes sojourn in Egypt, this is not the land promised to the ancestors. After his death, Joseph has Jacob embalmed and returns him to the ancestral burial grounds in Canaan.
of Canaan, but there are occasional sojourns to Egypt due to famine, or movements back to Haran when the patriarchs seek a wife. As the narratives develop, the ancestors become increasingly linked to the land of Canaan. Initially, Abraham trades animals for the rights to the use of a well and, after the death of Sarah, he purchases land as a burial site for his family. Near the conclusion of the ancestral stories, Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, purchases land near Shechem to set up his tents. Abraham’s place of origin, the ancestral home in Haran, is the place where one seeks a wife, but it is not a point of return. Despite their growing connection to the land, the ancestors maintain the social status of gēr throughout the stories.

The main characters in the ancestor narratives are God, who is usually named as YHWH or Elohim, the patriarchs and matriarchs, and some members of their households. Israel’s ancestors are portrayed as gērîm, or sojourners, and they are typically vulnerable and lacking the protection and privileges of the native population. When the patriarchs sense endangerment to their life under foreign ruling powers, they employ their wits, through deception of the rulers, and not only survive situations of danger but thrive and prosper in foreign lands. The narrator makes clear that, ultimately, the ancestors owe their survival and prosperity to the protection and blessings of God who develops a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants.

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111 For example: Abraham orders his servant to find a wife for Isaac in Haran, but specifies that Isaac should not be taken back there (Gen 24:6-8); Jacob is told by God to “return to the land of your ancestors and your kindred” (Gen 31:3), with the “land of the ancestors” referring to Canaan, not Haran.

112 Carol L. Meyers, “Everyday Life” in Women’s Bible Commentary, 253. According to Meyers, the family household included more than the people related by marriage and descent who lived together; it centered on the social structure that offered housing, food, clothing, and other means for survival and the persons that worked together to ensure that survival. The household would include the patriarch, matriarch, concubines, children, servants and slaves.
The writer portrays the ancestors of Israel as complex characters who exhibit both virtue and moral ambiguity. Abraham is described as a man of faith who obeys God’s call to become a sojourner and, throughout the narratives, he submits to the demands placed upon him by God. He is called a person of justice and righteousness who walks in the “way of the YHWH;” yet he is not afraid to question God’s justice when the situation arises.

Some of the narratives lead the reader to question the moral virtues of the patriarchs and matriarchs. In the wife/sister tales, the patriarch is portrayed as deceptive and self-serving when his life is seen to be threatened. In the Hagar narratives, the actions of Israel’s ancestors are also self-serving and lead to the abuse and affliction of Hagar, the Egyptian. Through a conscious interweaving of the narratives, the final redactor presents the ancestors as both honorable models of virtue and flawed individuals whose actions are sometimes driven by selfishness and fear.

Hagar, Sarah’s maidservant, is not an ancestor of Israel; nevertheless, she is an important character in the collection of narratives. Although Hagar is a member of Abraham’s household, I interpret her as the Stranger in their midst since she is displaced from her country of origin, Egypt. The significance of her stories is due to the affliction that she experiences at the hands of a patriarch and matriarch of Israel and the revelation that she receives from God. Her abuse and affliction foreshadow the experience of Abraham’s descendants in Egypt in the Exodus account and her character’s experience parallels that of Abraham’s in a number of ways. Hagar was not called from her country of origin, as Abraham was; but, she was called by the Angel of YHWH to return to the household of Abraham and to submit to her mistress; and Hagar obeyed, just as Abraham
obeyed God. She received a promise of a multitude of progeny who will become a great nation, similar to the covenant promise given to Abraham. I conclude that one of the most important elements in the Hagar narratives is the revelation that God sees and hears the affliction of persons who are suffering abuse, oppression, or displacement, and God responds to their affliction. The theme of God’s special concern for the Stranger will be evident in later narratives as well.

The sub-characters are the rulers of Egypt and Canaan, relatives of the patriarchs who are not members of their household, and the native peoples of Canaan. The rulers are given both positive and negative portrayals; in some accounts, they are antagonistic towards the sojourners and in others they respect and elevate them to positions of honor. The relatives of the patriarchs are initially depicted as important members of their kinship group, but Israel’s ancestors become increasingly disconnected from them as their own children are born and grow up in the land of Canaan. As for the natives of Canaan, the patriarchs typically look to live peacefully among them, but intermarriage with Canaanites is seen as undesirable.

In looking at the collection of ancestor narratives, the most important character in relation to the ancestors is God. God instigates the journey of Abraham and cultivates a covenant relationship with the patriarch and his descendants, promising land, progeny, and blessings throughout the generations of Israel. The narrator continuously reminds the reader that Israel’s ancestors are prospering in the land of Canaan due to God’s continuing concern and protection. In some stories, God appears in dreams or visions, and in others as an anthropomorphic being. Even when God does not appear or speak in
In conclusion, the stranger in the ancestral narratives is both an Israelite who is called a sojourner (גֶּר) and the non-Israelite who is displaced from either their place of origin or their family and kin. With the social status of גֶּרְמִים, the patriarchs were often depicted as vulnerable and lacking the protection and privileges of the native population. Essentially an underdog, the גֶּר, through his own wit and with the help of God, transcends these obstacles to become successful, wealthy, and prosperous. Despite the many threats and difficulties that they faced, the ancestors not only survived but thrived
in foreign lands, acquiring the blessings of wealth and progeny. Through the covenant promises and blessings, the writer reveals that God has a special concern for the Stranger.

God’s concern for the Stranger’s protection is inclusive of both Israelites and non-Israelites when the Stranger is a displaced person. This is evident in the Hagar narratives when YHWH is revealed as a deity who sees and hears the suffering of the Stranger and responds by reiterating the covenant promises and blessings of many descendants. When the main character in the story is most vulnerable and endangered, God reveals his/her destiny and becomes the divine protector. The theme of God’s special concern for the Stranger will become a thread that connects the later narratives.

Genesis culminates in the migration of Abraham’s descendants to the land of Egypt, and in the next chapter I will examine the motif of the Stranger and the theme of God’s special concern for the Stranger to consider any new understandings or developments of the motif and theme in the Exodus narrative.
CHAPTER 3

THE STRANGER IN EXODUS

3. 1. Introduction

At the conclusion of Genesis, Abraham’s descendants, specifically Jacob’s tribes, were sojourning in Egypt because of a famine in the land of Canaan. The Exodus narratives introduce new settings and characters, but they also reiterate some significant motifs and themes contained within the ancestor accounts such as: the Stranger in a foreign land; the experience of displacement; and God’s special concern for the Stranger.

As these themes and motifs are developed within the Exodus account, they take on a complexity of meaning that encompasses: the formation of a collective identity rooted in displacement; the development of a moral code that includes an imperative to cultivate a special concern for the Stranger; and the developing revelation of God’s character, concerns, and expectations.

The central events in Exodus are the liberation of Jacob’s descendants from suffering and oppression in Egypt (Exod 1-15), Israel’s wandering and testing in the wilderness (Exod 16-18), and the establishment of the Sinai covenant (Exod 19-24). The principal characters in the liberation narratives (Exod 1-15) are YHWH and the protagonist Moses, who are opposed to their antagonist, the Pharaoh. In the wilderness accounts (Exod 16-24), the main characters are YHWH, Moses, and the Israelites who

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1 Exodus 25-40 is primarily concerned with the priesthood and cultic practices, and will not be a focus of this chapter.

2 M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 139. Abrams defines the protagonist as “the chief character in a work, on whom our interest centers......the hero or heroine, and if he or she is pitted against an important opponent, that character is called antagonist.”
are sometimes in conflict with their liberators. Supporting characters, such as the Hebrew midwives or the extended family of Moses, typically receive only brief mention, but they often play important roles in the development of the narrative.

The book’s prologue forms a bridge between Genesis and Exodus by listing the “sons of Israel” (Exod 1:1), descendants of Jacob who came to reside in Egypt as “gērîm in the land” (Gen 47:4). The setting of Egypt links the final chapters of Genesis with the beginning of Exodus, but the narrative infers that considerable time has passed. Joseph and his brothers are now dead, and “a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Exod 1:8). In the past, Egyptian rulers, aware of Joseph’s wisdom and discernment, acted with hospitality toward Joseph and his family. The new Pharaoh’s lack of knowledge, concerning both Joseph and the God of the ancestors, foreshadows his acts of hostility and oppression toward the Israelites.

In Genesis, God’s covenant with Abraham promised the patriarch and his descendants the blessings of land and progeny. The fulfillment of many descendants is evident as “the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew increasingly strong, so that the land was filled with them” (Exod 1:7).

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3 See Gen 46:5-27, for a more comprehensive description of Jacob’s descendants.
4 Carol Meyers, Exodus (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34. Meyers points out that the Egyptian king is unnamed and this may be an intentional rhetorical device employed by the narrator. It provides an “ahistorical quality” to the narrative. The pharaoh who oppresses the Israelites can, therefore, represent all oppressors throughout history.
5 In Gen 41:37-39, the Pharaoh recognizes “the spirit of God” in Joseph and that “there is no one so discerning and wise.”
6 Thomas B. Dozeman, Commentary on Exodus (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 70-71. Dozeman writes that the Pharaoh’s “lack of knowledge” concerning Joseph is crucial to the thematic developments in the narrative. He asserts that “the purpose of the exodus, according to the P writer, is to bring all of the Egyptians, including Pharaoh, to the knowledge of God.” In Gen 18:19, to know the “way of the Lord” is to act with righteousness and justice.
7 Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 308. Alter translates this as “the sons of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied” and points out that this is an allusion to the P creation account at the beginning of Genesis.
the twelve tribes had increased greatly in population, but Abraham’s offspring were still *gērîm*, landless aliens, and their lives became increasingly oppressive in the land where they resided as strangers.

3. 2. *The Oppression of Abraham’s Descendants*

The oppression of Abraham’s descendants is foreshadowed in the ancestor narratives when God tells the patriarch, “your offspring shall be *gērîm* in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years” (Gen 15:13). At the beginning of Exodus, the Israelites are not specifically named as *gērîm* but earlier narratives have stated this as their social status in Egypt.  

As in some of the ancestral accounts, the sojourners are seen as a possible threat to the ruling power. Due to their increasing population and strength, the Pharaoh comes to perceive the Israelites as a political threat that will join Egypt’s enemies, revolt against them, and “escape from the land” (Exod 1:10). Instead of expelling the sojourners from Egypt, the Pharaoh attempts to suppress their numbers and power by enacting a policy of subjection that becomes increasingly oppressive and deathly.

The Pharaoh appoints taskmasters over the Israelites “to oppress them with forced labor” (Exod 1:11). C. Meyers writes that the bondage is not slavery, in the sense of

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8 In Gen 47:4, Joseph’s brothers state, “We have come to reside as *gērîm* in the land.”

9 For example: Gen 12:10-20 where the Pharaoh and his household are afflicted with plagues when the matriarch is endangered; Gen 26:12-22 where Isaac comes into conflict with some Canaanites over a well; Gen 34:25-21 where Simeon and Levi avenge their family honor by killing the men of Shechem.

10 Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 71. Dozeman comments that, “the fear that Israel might leave the country is somewhat odd, since the pharaoh fears their presence in the land.” He translates “escape” as “go up” and posits that the narrator is alluding to future events when YHWH says, “I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt” (Exod 3:17).

11 The redactor arranges successive stages of oppression, with the J writer representing the oppression as corvée labor (Exod 1:11) while P describes it in terms of full enslavement (Exod 1:13-14).
ownership of persons, but rather the bondage of corvée labor, in which groups of people were conscripted for large building projects.  As sojourners, without recourse to legal protection, the Israelites are vulnerable to the disposition of the ruling power of the land in which they reside as foreigners.

Despite the ruthlessness of the Egyptian taskmasters, the Israelites not only survived, but continued to thrive, and “the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites” (Exod 1:12). In order to control the numbers of the Israelite population, the Pharaoh initiated a policy of male infanticide. This creates a situation of danger for Abraham’s progeny and might have led to disaster were it not for the actions of two Hebrew midwives. When the Pharaoh orders the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill the male infants and only allow the girls to live, they disobey him because they “feared God” (Exod 1:17).

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12 Meyers, Exodus, 34. Meyers points out that the word “slavery” does not appear in English translations, but the Hebrew text of Exod 1:13–14 contains repeated uses of the root ‘bd which means “to serve, work” and that the frequent repetition of the root in “imposing task,” “service,” and “labor” intensifies the impression of the bondage and suffering of the Israelites.

13 The text stresses the oppressive power of the Egyptians over the subjective vulnerability of the Israelites: “The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them” (Exod 1:13–14).

14 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 311. According to Alter, the Israelites would presumably be eradicated through the elimination of male progeny while the girls were spared so that they could be assimilated into Egyptian culture through sexual exploitation and domestic service. The edict to kill the male and allow the female to live also echoes Abram’s fears that he would be killed by the pharaoh while Sarai was allowed to live (Gen 12:12).

15 Dozeman, Commentary on Exodus, 76–77. Dozeman says that the ethnic identification of Israelites as “Hebrews” is not common in the Hebrew Bible. The designation of some form of social alienation is central to the word “Hebrew,” in the perception of Hebrews as “other” (Gen 14:13) or in the lower social status of Hebrews as servants or slaves (Gen 39:14). He writes that, “the repeated use of ‘Hebrew’ in the opening chapters of Exodus underscores the alienation and tension between Israelites and Egyptians, especially from the point of view of Egypt.

16 Meyers, Exodus, 37. Meyers points out that Shiphrah and Puah, female members of an outcast group, are the first characters named in Exodus, in contrast to the nameless Egyptian king. She asserts that they are the first of twelve women who appear in the beginning of Exodus as “rhetorical counterparts to the twelve tribes whose freedom depends on the women’s deeds as well as the leadership of Moses.” The other women are: Moses’ mother and sister, the Pharaoh’s daughter, and Zipporah and her six sisters.
“God” is the first mention of God in the Exodus, and the civil disobedience of the midwives foreshadows the conflict over power and authority that will develop between the deity and the earthly king.\textsuperscript{17}

Questioned by the Pharaoh, the women vindicate themselves through deception, spinning a tale about the vigorousness of the Hebrew women who give birth before the midwives arrive.\textsuperscript{18} The narrative does not mention whether the Pharaoh believed the midwives or punished them, but says that “God dealt well with the midwives...because the midwives feared God, he gave them families” (Exod 1:20-21). In the ancestor narratives, the “endangered” characters were sojourners who perceived that their lives were threatened by ruling powers.\textsuperscript{19} The patriarchs and matriarchs employed deception to outwit the ruling powers; but ultimately, their survival was dependent on divine intervention.\textsuperscript{20} In this account, the midwives are the characters who employ deception in order to save the endangered offspring of the sojourners. God does not directly intervene, but Shiphrah and Puah are motivated by their “fear of God” and they receive God’s blessing because of their choices.

The private arrangement between the Pharaoh and the midwives becomes a public proclamation when he commands all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews, you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live” (Exod 1:22). The motif of

\textsuperscript{17} Dozeman, \textit{Commentary on Exodus}, 75. According to Dozeman, since the midwives do not know the deity as YHWH at this point in the narrative, their “fear of God” is rooted in wisdom tradition and the importance of following one’s conscience. Dozeman mentions that some commentators question whether the midwives are of Hebrew or Egyptian ethnicity, and he points out that the interpretation of the story does not depend on their ethnicity but on the fact that they “fear God” more than the Pharaoh.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 73. The midwives accentuate the differences between Egyptian women and the vigor of the Israelite women, along with playing on the Pharaoh’s fears of the growing population and strength of the Israelites.

\textsuperscript{19} See the wife/sister tales: Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-11.

\textsuperscript{20} God intervenes by afflicting the Pharaoh and his household with plagues (Gen 12:17) and by warning off King Abimelech in a dream (Gen 20:3).
the sojourner’s endangerment by the ruling powers is expanded to include their endangerment by all of the population.\(^{21}\) There is some irony in the Pharaoh’s directive to kill all the boys because it is girls who will prove to be more dangerous to the Egyptian king; it is through the efforts of women that the hero’s survival will be ensured.

3. 3. Birth, Endangerment, and Rescue of the Hero

The introduction of the protagonist, Moses, begins with a marriage as a “man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman” (Exod 2:1).\(^{22}\) The woman “conceived and bore a son” (Exod 2:2), an event that would have been considered a divine blessing in the ancestor narratives; in this account, the blessing is joined to danger. The mother sees the goodness and value of her infant son, but the child is endangered by the Pharaoh’s proclamation, and she is compelled to hide him from detection.\(^{23}\) After three months, when he could no longer be hidden, the mother and sister of the infant enact a plan to save the child’s life. They put the boy in a papyrus basket and place it among the reeds along the river bank.\(^{24}\) They did not simply abandon him there, but

\(^{21}\) All Egyptians are expected to carry out the Pharaoh’s directive; thereby, the punishment of all will be justified due to their complicity.

\(^{22}\) Meyers, *Exodus*, 15. Meyers posits the significance of Moses’ Levitical ancestry and points out that several other biblical characters with Egyptian names (Hophni, Phineas, and Pashhur) are Levites. She asserts the possibility “that the Levites were the people who sojourned in and departed from Egypt, becoming dispersed among the highland communities of Canaan without territories of their own, functioning as guardians, transmitters, and shapers of the past.” See: Exod 6:14-25 for Moses’ Levitical ancestry. The parents of Moses are not named until Exodus 6:20 where his father Amram marries Jochebed, his father’s sister.

\(^{23}\) Like the midwives, Moses’ mother is disobeying the Pharaoh’s orders.

\(^{24}\) Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 85. A parallel to the birth, endangerment, and rescue of Moses is found in the annals of Sargon I where Sargon, the child of a priest, is hidden in a basket by the banks of a river, is discovered and taken into the royal household, and with the help of a deity becomes a great leader.
continued to show a concern for the child’s fate, as “his sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him” (Exod 2:4).  

As the infant’s sister watches, the daughter of the Pharaoh enters the scene and becomes another character integral to the child’s survival. When she comes to bathe at the river, the daughter of the Pharaoh notices the basket and sends her maids to bring it to her. When she opened the basket, “she saw the child; he was crying and she took pity on him” (Exod 2:6). She saw and heard the infant’s distress, had compassion for him, and responded by rescuing him. 

She recognizes that he is “one of the Hebrews’ children” (Exod 2:6), and the infant’s sister steps forward to offer assistance in finding a wet nurse for the him from among the Hebrew women. In arranging for the birth mother to nurse the child, his sister succeeds in returning the boy to his familial roots for a short period of time. After the child was weaned, the Pharaoh’s daughter “took him as her son and named him Moses” (Exod 2:10). The daughter of the Pharaoh, like the mother and sister, is not named, but she also serves as a significant character in connection to the survival of the hero. Like the midwives and Moses’ mother and sister, the Pharaoh’s daughter shows disobedience towards the Pharaoh’s decree. Her compassion for the infant stands in marked contrast to the brutality of her father towards the Israelites. In the context of the story, Moses is

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25 Miriam is not named until Exod 15:20 where she is named as a prophet, and Num 26:59 where she is seen as a threat to the authority of Moses.

26 The reaction of the Pharaoh’s daughter recalls the Hagar narrative where God “saw and heard” Hagar’s suffering and responded with concern (Gen 16:1-16; 21:8-21).

27 Myers, Exodus, 41. Since this is a wet-nursing agreement, the child would have remained until he was weaned, around the age of three. Myers writes that wet-nurses were typically only employed by royal families or other elite women.

28 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 314. The name “Moses” is an Egyptian name meaning “one who is born” or “son” which links the name to his Egyptian adoption. Another interpretation is from the Hebrew word “to draw out” which relates to Moses’ rescue from the river.
adopted into the royal household, but he is displaced from his family of origin. The complexity of Moses’ identity as both Egyptian and Hebrew will gain significance in the unfolding narrative.

3. 3. 1. The Flight to Midian

As the narrative progresses, we learn that time has passed and Moses has grown up, and “he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk” (Exod 2:11). In pointing out that Moses went out to “his people” and saw “one of his kinsfolk,” the narrative implies that he knows his origins and kinship ties despite his current place in the Egyptian royal household. We are not told how he attained this knowledge and can only speculate whether the Pharaoh’s daughter provided Moses with this information or whether his sister may have continued to have contact with him. When he observes the Egyptian taskmaster beating one of his kinsfolk, Moses reacts by “looking this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (Exod 2:12). Moses’ actions can be interpreted as a person who seeks just retribution for the abuse of a kinsman, but he can also be seen as a man with a quick temper who is inclined to violence. In looking about to ensure that his actions are unobserved and then attempting to conceal the murder, Moses’ actions imply an awareness that he was doing something wrong that would get him into trouble.

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29 Meyers, Exodus, 44. The Hebrew word nākā, translated as “beating” in Exod 2:11 is the same word used for “strike” in referring to God’s retributions against Egypt (Exod 3:20; 7:17, 20, 25; 8:16-17; 9:15; 12:12-13, 29).
30 Dozeman, Commentary on Exodus, 84. Dozeman says that Moses never lost his identity as a Hebrew. The Pharaoh’s daughter recognizes him as a Hebrew when she discovers him, and his Hebrew origins would have been reinforced during his early years with his birth mother.
31 Moses’ violent temper will again come into play when the Israelites worship the Golden Calf at Sinai (Exod 32:19).
When Moses went out the next day, he observed two Hebrews in a physical conflict and he attempted to adjudicate between them by questioning the one he perceived to be in the wrong. Moses’ effort to resolve this conflict results in one of the Hebrews turning against him and questioning, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” (Exod 2:14) His own tendency to violence seems to undermine Moses’ authority with the Hebrews, and when he realizes that his killing of the Egyptian has become public knowledge, he fears for his own life, and “Moses fled from the Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well” (Exod 2:15). The setting has changed from Egypt, representing oppression and death, to the wilderness of Midian, which will come to represent a new life. The well motif introduces the next stage in the development of the hero’s character: marriage and children.

3. 3. 2. Encounter at a Well

Moses encounters the seven daughters of the priest of Midian at a well, and comes to their aid and protection when some shepherds attempt to drive the daughters away.

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32 This foreshadows Moses’ later role as judge (Exod 18:20-22). Moses’ question, “Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?” (Exod 2:13) seems like an attempt to justify his murder of the Egyptian since he was not a “fellow Hebrew.”

33 This begins the pattern of the Israelites “murmuring” against Moses. Later disputes include: Exod 15:22-17:7; Num 11:14; 16.

34 Fear of retribution was one of the chief reasons for sojourning to another land. Moses experience has parallels to: Jacob (Gen 27-33); Jephthah (Judg 11); David (1 Sam 20). As in the Jacob narrative, Moses’ sojourn leads to an encounter at a well and marriage.

35 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 52. The narrative convention of Well/Betrothal type scene includes: the future bridegroom encounters a woman at a well in a foreign land; water is drawn; the woman hurries home to bring news of the stranger’s arrival to her family; he is offered hospitality; and a betrothal is agreed upon. For other Well/Betrothal Type scenes see, Gen 24 and 29.

36 Drorah O’Donnell Setel, “Exodus” in Women’s Bible Commentary (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon A. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 35. The Midianites are mentioned in Genesis 25:2 as nomadic offspring of Abraham and Keturah. Here, the Midianite is a priest, a religious leader in his community. As Midianites of a priestly lineage, the daughters may themselves have been
The narrative says that, “Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flock” (Exod 2:17). This passage points to Moses’ roles both as a heroic savior and as a shepherd who attends to the needs of the flock, foreshadowing his rescue of Israel and the care of their needs in the wilderness.

Following the literary format of the well betrothal narratives, the daughters return to their family and tell of their encounter with the Stranger, “an Egyptian” (Exod 2:19), who came to their rescue and drew water for them. When their father, Reuel, learns about Moses’ heroism, he insists that his daughters return to find the man and “invite him to break bread” (Exod 2:21). Reuel’s eagerness to offer hospitality to the Stranger implies that he is a person who acts with righteousness and justice. The hospitality of Reuel in Midian is a distinct contrast to the inhospitality and endangerment that awaits Moses in Egypt, and he agrees to stay with the man and marries one of the daughters, Zipporah. They have a son that Moses names Gershom; for he said, “I have been a gēr residing in a foreign land” (Exod 2:22). This is the first time that Exodus mentions the word gēr, and the meaning in this context could refer both to Moses’ sojourn in Midian and the experience of the Israelites living as aliens in Egypt. In either case, the passage endowed with a priestly status. The number “seven” infers perfection and completion, recalling the P creation account, and the mention of “seven daughters” may have some cultic significance.

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37 Dozeman, Commentary on Exodus, 90. Dozeman writes that Moses’ act of rescue/salvation at the well prefigures YHWH’s rescue/salvation of Israel at the Red Sea.

38 The ambiguity of Moses’ identity once again comes to the surface when the daughters identify him as an Egyptian.

39 Reuel means “friend of God” in Hebrew. The character who will become Moses’ father-in-law is named Jethro in Exod 3:1; 18:1, and Hobab, Reuel’s son, in Num 10:29.

40 Reuel’s actions echo Abraham’s eager hospitality in Gen 18, and contrast with the inhospitality of the Egyptians. Both of the hospitality narratives precede narratives concerning God’s hearing an “outcry” against unrighteous behavior and then responding with severe punishment.

41 Matthews and Benjamin, Parallels, 130. Moses’ flight from Egypt, settlement with a nomadic tribe, and marriage to the daughter of the nomadic leader reflect some aspects of the Egyptian stories of Sinuhe. Moses’ stay with Reuel also recalls Jacob’s stay with Laban.

42 See Exod 18:3, where the second son is named in reference to God’s deliverance.
recalls the earlier sojourning and displacement of the ancestors and leads to the telling of events presently occurring to the Israelites in Egypt.43

3. 4. God “sees” and “hears”

The narrative tells us that a “long time” (Exodus 2:23) has passed and the Pharaoh has died, but the situation has not improved for the Israelites. They gave voice to their suffering when they “groaned under their slavery, and cried out.44 Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and took notice of them” (Exod 2: 23-25). This is an important passage that connects past revelations about God’s special concern for the oppression and suffering of displaced persons with present events in the narrative concerning the Israelites’ oppression in Egypt. In the Hagar stories, God “sees” Hagar’s oppression and “hears” the cries of her child, and he responds to their suffering with rescue and a promise.45 In the Exodus narrative, the Israelites are oppressed and “cry out” and God “took notice of them.” Both accounts employ similar descriptions of God who “sees” and “hears” oppression and suffering, takes notice, and then responds with rescue and a promise. We do not yet know the specifics of the rescue of Israel, but the promise is linked to the memory of the

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43 Myers, Exodus, 46. Myers points out that the name of Moses’ son “provides a link with the ancestor stories, symbolizes the status of his people, indicates the way his parents met, and anticipates how the entire people will depart from Egypt.”

44 Dozeman, Commentary on Exodus, 92. Dozeman says that “groaning” is the sound of the oppressed (See: Judg 2:18), and “cried out” refers to supplication, not merely an outcry (See: Judg 3:9; 1 Sam 7:9; Ps 107:13; Jer 11:11-12; Jon 1:5). He asserts that Israel’s cry lacks an object, which may signify their desperation, and that “the absence of an object to Israel’s cry underscores the anguish of their situation and most likely their lack of knowledge about God.”

45 In both Gen 16:1-16 and 21:8-21, God rescues Hagar in the wilderness and promises to make a great nation from her offspring.
covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The passage is significant in its repetition of prior motifs of displacement and oppression, and the theme of God’s concern and response. It also brings God into the central narrative by making him an active character with dialogue that reveals his inner thoughts. Previously in Exodus, we knew of God indirectly as a deity who instilled “the fear of God” in the midwives, but now we will come to know God directly through his words and actions.

3. 4. 1. God Responds to Israel’s Cries

Following this brief but significant reminder of Israel’s situation in Egypt, the narrative returns to Moses who was “keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God” (Exod 3:1). This again foreshadows Moses’ future role as the “shepherd” who will lead the Israelites into the wilderness to encounter God’s revelation on the holy mountain. As Moses tends to the sheep, he encounters a strange apparition on the mountain when “the angel of YHWH appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed” (Exod 3:2). As Moses approaches the strange phenomenon to investigate, God calls from out of the bush.

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46 For ancestral covenants see: Gen 15; 17; 26:2-5; 28:10-15.
47 Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 317. Alter says that God is now the subject of a string of significant verbs: heard, remembered, looked upon, and took notice. The combined meaning would have the sense of God “took it to heart.”
48 Moses’ father-in-law is named Jethro in this passage, and God’s holy mountain is named Horeb (E and D sources).
49 For references to Israelites as shepherds see: Gen 46:32-34; 47:3-4. For references to shepherds as leaders of the people see: Num 27:17; 2 Sam 5: 2; 7:8; Ezek 34:1-10.
50 The Angel of YHWH has already appeared in Gen 16:7-14 and 22:11-18. When the angel speaks to Hagar and Abraham in these passages, it becomes evident that God is present and speaking through the messenger. Fire, as one of the mediums of the divine presence (theophany), is also evident in an earlier account (Gen 15:17).
“Moses, Moses!” and Moses replies, “Here I am” (Exod 3:4). In the Exodus narrative, the first time that we hear God speak is in the call to Moses and the warning to remove his sandals because Moses is standing on “holy ground” (Exod 3:5). Initially, Moses was tending Jethro’s flocks in the wilderness of Midian, but now he has transcended that earthly setting and walks in sacred space. The voice is identified as the God of the ancestors, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod 3:6). Outside of a comment to himself concerning the curious nature of the burning bush and his one response to the call of his name, Moses has been without dialogue up until this point, and when he learns that he has encountered God, he hides his face out of fear. This passage implies that it is dangerous to look at the face of God, but it is important for God to look at us.

In Exodus 2:23-25, the narrator reminded us of God’s special concern for the oppressed Israelites and God’s covenant promises to the ancestors, but now we have a first-person account when God states, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their

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51 This divine call and human response is a paradigm of the prophetic formula of call and response that we see in 1 Sam 3:4. The call and response is also represented in the story of the testing of Abraham when the angel of the Lord calls “Abraham, Abraham!” and he responds, “Here I am” (Gen 22:11). In that instance, the call stops Abraham from completing the sacrifice of his son at the moment that he is about to kill him.

52 Meyers, Exodus, 52-53. According to Meyers, mountains in the wilderness are places where deities abide and, as religions developed, temples became conceptualized as the deity’s holy mountain. In Genesis, some other sacred spaces associated with theophany are: the spring in the wilderness of Shur (Gen 16:7); the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18:1); Bethel (Gen 28:10-17); and Peniel (Gen 32:24-30).

53 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 319. Moses’ gesture of “hiding his face” reflects the biblical belief that a person cannot look upon the face of God and live. Hagar expresses surprise that she has “seen God and remained alive” (Gen 16:13), but seeing an “angel of the Lord” (or a theophany) does not always seem to be fatal and may bestow a special status on a person. See: Gen 32:30; Exod 24:11; 33:11; Judg 6:22-23; 13:22-23.

54 Compare/contrast that Moses “hid his face” from the deity out of fear with God “looked upon” the suffering of the people out of compassion. On the contrary, “hid his face” is a phrase used for God turning away from human affairs (Deut 31:17-18; Isa 8:17; Ezek 39:23; Ps 44:24).
sufferings” (Exod 3:7). The narrator repeats the earlier theme of God “seeing” the misery of the people and “hearing” their cries, but now includes that God “knows their sufferings. To “know” suggests a personal, intimate relationship with another, and when the other is suffering, empathy and compassion compel a response. After relating the cause of concern, God states how he will respond to Israel’s suffering saying, “I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (Exod 3:8).

“I have come down” recalls God’s descent to observe the towers of Babylon (Gen 11:5) and to investigate the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:21), but here the “coming down” is related to rescue and deliverance, as well as punishment for the unrighteous. God will rescue Israel and “bring them up” out of the place of oppression to the land promised to Abraham many generations ago.

3. 4. 2. God Commissions Moses

The narrative again repeats the theme of God “seeing” and “hearing” the cries of oppression (Exod 3:9) and then explains Moses’ role in God’s response to Israel’s suffering. God commissions Moses, “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the

55 In the biblical literature, “to know” (yāda’) infers a personal and intimate relationship. It can imply sexual relationship (Gen 4:1, 17, 25) or it can suggest an intimacy linked to empathy and compassion for the other (Exod 23:9). In the prophetic literature, Israel is often described as needing to “know God” again (Jer 31:34; Ezek 37:6; Hos 2:20).

56 Meyers, Exodus, 54. The “land flowing with milk and honey” is another name for the land of Israel. Also See: Exod 13:5; 33:3; Lev 20:24; Num 13:27; Deut 6:3. Meyers points out that the utopian description of pastoral and agricultural abundance is an idealization of a land with “difficult topography and chronic water shortages.” Also, the land is already occupied, and the inhabitation by Israel will necessitate the displacement or extermination of these people (Exod 23:23-30).

57 God’s “coming down” is also related to his descent on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:11, 20).
Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exod 3:10). “My people, the Israelites” discloses a development in the relationship between God and humankind. In Genesis, God called Abraham to leave his country and family to become a sojourner, and then formed a covenant relationship with Abraham and his offspring that promised many descendants and progeny. The ancestor narratives centered on individuals and their families. In Exodus, the relationship between God and humankind is broadened to include an entire nation, and that which distinguishes the Israelites and brings them to God’s attention is not necessarily their moral character, but rather seems to be their suffering and oppression. When God notices the suffering of the Israelites, God remembers the covenant with the ancestors, and promises to liberate them from bondage through the chosen mediator, Moses.

When Moses raises concerns relating his lack of credibility, God assures him, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (Exod 3:12). Moses reveals some trepidation at this commission, and continues to question the deity. When Moses raises questions concerning the identity of the deity that is speaking to him, God reveals the name YHWH and says, “I Am Who I Am...Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I Am has sent me to you...YHWH, the God of your ancestors,  

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58 Up until this point in the narrative, we have not learned too much about the moral character of the Israelites outside of the ability to employ deception to outwit the ruling powers (Exod 1:15-2:9) and an inclination to turn on one another (Exod 2:13-14).

59 “Signs” becomes a key term in Exodus; they demonstrate God’s power and authenticate God’s representative, Moses. The mountain will become significant as a “sign” in the culmination of the wilderness experience.

60 Questioning God is not uncommon in the biblical literature. God’s justice is questioned by Abraham (Gen 18) and Job. Moses’ concerns and reluctance will be echoed by later prophets as well. See: Judg 6:15; Isa 6:5; Jer 1:6. In Moses’ case, his concerns may also include the fact that he is considered an outlaw and exile in Egypt.
the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you” (Exod 3:14-15). The deity identifies himself as the same God that has been in relationship with Israel’s sojourner ancestors, and the name YHWH implies that the deity acts in freedom and is unencumbered by human expectations. YHWH, as a name for God, is also evident in the ancestor narratives, but from the narrator’s omniscient point of view. This is the first time that God reveals the name in the first person.

God forewarns Moses, “the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go” (Exod 3:19-20). When the Israelites finally come out of Egypt, they will not leave empty-handed, “each woman shall ask a neighbor and any woman living in the neighbor’s house for jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians” (Exod 3:22).

As Moses continues to show reluctance to accept the mission, relating fears that the people will not believe him and bringing up problems with his speech, God maintains

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61 In a sense, God reveals the name, without truly revealing it. In a later passage, God says, “I am YHWH. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name ‘YHWH’ I did not make myself known to them” (Exod 6:3). See: Gen 17:1; 35:11; 48:3. Although Abraham calls on Elohim and El Shaddai, this is the first time that the deity has revealed a “name” when a human being has inquired. When Jacob asks, God only says, “Why do you ask my name?” (Gen 32:29). In a later narrative, Manoah asks the name of the angel of YHWH and receives the response, “Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful” (Judg 13:18). In the Hagar narrative, Hagar names the deity “El-roi” (Gen 16:13).

62 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 321. The name YHWH is from the root “to be” and can also be translated “I will be whatever I will be.” It implies God’s freedom and oftentimes changeability. For example: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exod 33:19).

63 This foreshadows the “signs” of the ten plagues and also recalls Gen 12:17.

64 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 324. Alter points out women are named here because they “constitute the porous boundary between adjacent ethnic communities: borrowers of the proverbial cup of sugar, sharers of gossip and women’s lore.” The passage may be seen as an act of exploitation or the plunder may be perceived as just compensation for Israel’s exploitation by the Egyptians. It may also reflect later Israelite law where a slave should not leave empty-handed (Deut 15:13). Other examples of ancestors who attained wealth in situations of endangerment or exploitation: Abraham in Egypt (Gen 12:16); Abraham in Gerar (Gen 20: 14-16); Isaac in Gerar (Gen 26:12-14); Jacob in Haran (Gen 30:43).
the promise to work signs and wonders through Moses to convince the people. God assures Moses, “I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak” (Exod 4:12). When Moses implores, “please send someone else” (Exod 4:13), God becomes angry with him and appoints Moses’ brother, Aaron, to act as his spokesperson, decreeing that “he shall serve as a mouth to you, and you shall serve as God for him” (Exod 4:16). When comparing the call of Moses with Abraham, the patriarch disclosed no reluctance to leave his home country and follow God’s directives while Moses shows considerable hesitation in accepting God’s calling. God reveals impatience, and even anger, at Moses’ trepidation but acts by offering Moses support for his perceived flaws. Despite his reluctance, Moses, a sojourner, will be YHWH’s prophet and the stage is set for Moses’ return journey to Egypt.

3.5. Moses Returns to Egypt

After Moses returns to his father-in-law’s household, God again speaks to him, “Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead” (Exod 4:19). In the earlier dialogues between Moses and God, the reluctance of the prophet was linked to his credibility and lack of eloquence. This passage implies that Moses’ hesitation may also be related to the same concern that led to his sojourn in Midian, the fear for his life.

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65 Moses’ ordinary shepherd’s staff will become a symbol of God’s miraculous power: transforming into a snake (Exod 4:3); turning the water of the Nile into blood (Exod 7:20); dividing the Red Sea (Exod 14:16); performing miracles in the wilderness (Exod 17:1-13).

66 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 328. Alter points out that although Aaron, Moses’ brother, has not been mentioned before, some of the following narratives imply a close relationship between the brothers. This passage foreshadows both the role of the prophets who “speak for God” and that of the Levites, descendants of Aaron, who were also transmitters of divine instruction. For example, in Deut 33:10.

67 The imperative to “go back” to the land of oppression recalls Hagar being sent back to the oppression of Sarah by the Angel of YHWH.
God informs Moses that the Pharaoh’s heart will be hardened against the signs and wonders that he will perform, and that Moses must warn him, “Thus says YHWH: Israel is my firstborn son...Let my son go that he may worship me. But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son” (Exod 4:22-23). The relationship between YHWH and Israel has developed from “my people” to “my firstborn son,” implying the growth of a more personal and intimate connection.68

Moses asks Jethro for permission to leave and after receiving his father-in-law’s blessing, he “took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt” (Exod 4:20). This recalls Jacob’s leaving Laban at the conclusion of his sojourn in Haran, but unlike the earlier account, there is no animosity between Moses and his father-in-law. Jethro tells Moses to “go in peace” (Exod 4:18). Going back to Egypt presents a situation of danger and uncertainty for Moses.69 He left Egypt as a fugitive whose life was endangered, and the return brings the possibility of death for Moses. Even before he arrives in Egypt, Moses will encounter danger on the journey, but from a bewildering source.

3. 5. 1. Peril on the Journey

One of the most dangerous situations for sojourners is on the road from one place to another. These perils include the lack of food, water, or shelter and the threat of

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68 Meyers, *Exodus*, 62. This is the first time the term “firstborn son” is used for Israel’s relationship with God. It anticipates the tragic death of Egypt’s firstborn (Exod 12:29) and the Israelite dedication of the firstborn to God (Exod 13:1-2). The term also invokes the parent/child relationship that serves as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. See: Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1.

69 This recalls Jacob’s uncertainty and fears concerning Esau upon his return journey from Haran (Gen 32:3-21).
hostile forces that the sojourner may encounter on the journey.\(^{70}\) While Moses and his family were on the way to Egypt, “at a place where they spent the night, YHWH met him and tried to kill him” (Exod 4:24).\(^ {71}\) On the return journey to Egypt, “he” experiences an unmotivated assault by YHWH. The ambiguity of the pronouns makes it unclear whether Moses or his son is the intended victim.\(^ {72}\) The mention of the Pharaoh’s first-born son in the passage immediately before this episode indicates the possibility that Gershom, Moses’ first-born son, may be the intended victim rather than Moses. In either interpretation, whether Moses or his son is the intended victim, the danger is inherently present for the sojourner.

No explanation is given in the narrative as to why YHWH is seeking to kill the male character, but once again the rescue comes through a woman.\(^ {73}\) Moses’ wife, Zipporah, “took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ feet with it, and said, ‘Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!’” So he let him alone” (Exod 4:25-26).\(^ {74}\) R. Alter writes that this story is “the most enigmatic episode in all of Exodus” and its mysteries will unlikely ever be resolved, yet it “plays a pivotal role in the larger

\(^{70}\) Another example of peril on the journey is the narrative about the Levite and his concubine (Judg 19).

\(^{71}\) Contrast this with YHWH’s assurances to Moses in Exod 4:19.

\(^{72}\) Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 155. Dozeman posits that it is impossible to determine who is being assaulted because the account lacks proper names other than the names of the assailant, YHWH, and the rescuer, Zipporah.

\(^{73}\) In earlier episodes, the male infants of the Hebrews were rescued by the Midwives; Moses was rescued through the efforts of his mother, sister, and the pharaoh’s daughter.

\(^{74}\) O’Donnell Setel, “Exodus,” 35. Zipporah, as a priest’s daughter may have been acquainted with blood ritual procedures or she herself may have had a priestly status. According to O’Donnell Setel, there is no other evidence, either in the biblical literature or other ANE texts that women performed acts of blood sacrifice. Yet, this particular text implies that she performed a circumcision. Also see: Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 155. Dozeman comments that, the knife is “flint,” used for circumcisions (Jos 5:2-3), and the term “bridegroom of blood” probably indicates a marriage. He asserts that “the story functioned at one time as an etiology for infant circumcision. As a cultic legend, the story tells of a transfer of circumcision from the religious practice of the Midianites to the Israelites through Zipporah.”
narrative.” In earlier narratives, YHWH has been presented as a deity with compassion who seeks to rescue the oppressed, but YHWH can also be dangerous and unpredictable. The peril on the road to Egypt reveals the complexity of Israel’s deity and may foreshadow the deathly danger of the Passover event. Other than this short story concerning the peril on the road to Egypt, Moses’ Midianite family members are not significant characters in later Exodus narratives. The narrative shifts its focus to Moses’ Israelite family and the situation in Egypt.

3. 5. 2. Moses and Aaron assemble the Elders of Israel

Before Moses arrives in Egypt, he encounters his brother Aaron in the wilderness at the mountain of YHWH. The dangerous encounter with YHWH, who tried to kill Moses (or his son), contrasts with the meeting with Aaron, who kissed him when they met. This recalls the meeting between Jacob, who is returning from his father-in-law Laban, and Esau, who greets his brother with a welcoming kiss (Gen 33:4). Unlike the Jacob/Esau narrative, Moses does not fear his brother but he does fear for his life in returning to Egypt.

When Moses and Aaron assembled the elders of Israel, “Aaron spoke all the words that YHWH had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the

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75 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 330-331. Alter writes that YHWH is not appearing as a theophany in a burning bush but as a “silent stranger” who encounters Moses like the mysterious stranger who encountered Jacob on his return journey from Haran. The circumcision ceremony may reflect an archaic belief in circumcision as a means to ward off the hostility of a dangerous deity with the mother performing the circumcision rather than the father as in Gen 17. The story may also reflect rites of passage or initiation where one undergoes a danger or trial before beginning a new phase of life.

76 For example, in Exod 12:1-30, YHWH will pass over Egypt and only those households who have engaged in the ritual blood-letting will have the firstborn protected against the destructive divine power.

77 Zipporah and the two sons are briefly mentioned in Exod 18:2-3.

78 Also see, Gen 45:14-15 where Joseph greets his estranged brothers with kisses.
people. The people believed; and when they heard that YHWH had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped” (Exod 4:30-31). The theme of “seeing and hearing” is significant on two levels, the divine and the human. YHWH has heard and seen the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt and has responded by sending Moses to liberate them. The people have heard of God’s concern and they have seen the signs of God’s power, and they respond by believing and worshipping YHWH. Whereas YHWH was motivated by compassion to rescue the Israelites, the people are motivated to belief and worship by hearing of YHWH’s concern and by seeing the miraculous “signs.”

3. 5. 3. Who is YHWH?

After meeting with the elders of Israel, Moses and Aaron went before the Pharaoh and proclaimed, “Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness’” (Exod 5:1). This is the first time that God’s name is announced in Egypt, and the Pharaoh learns that YHWH is the God of Israel. The demand “let my people go” becomes the imperative for liberation that Moses repeats to the Pharaoh again and again. The reason given to the Pharaoh for Israel’s release is that they must go to the wilderness to celebrate a festival to YHWH.

The Pharaoh’s response is, “Who is YHWH, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know YHWH, and I will not let Israel go” (Exod 5:2). To “know YHWH”

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79 Israel’s need to “see” in order to believe becomes an important theme in the wilderness account.
80 This implies that YHWH is the national God of Israel vs. national gods of other nations. God is also called, “the God of the Hebrews” (Exod 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3).
81 The wilderness is a place of trial and testing, but it is also a place where one encounters divine beings. In order to worship YHWH, the Israelites will need to leave Egypt.
and to “heed YHWH” are developing themes in the biblical literature. To know and heed YHWH means to know and keep his ways. In the ancestor narratives, Abraham served as the mediator who would “charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice” (Gen 18:19). In Genesis, righteousness and justice were linked to hospitality for the stranger, and inhospitality resulted in punishment. Thus far, in Exodus, YHWH has not yet revealed the specific expectations for acting with righteousness and justice, but the initial step seems to involve liberation from the bondage of Egypt.

In the Exodus narrative, Moses acts as YHWH’s mediator, speaking as a voice of liberation from oppression and as a voice of warning against injustice. When the Pharaoh refuses to release the Israelites from labor to worship their God, Moses warns that God will “fall upon us with pestilence or sword” (Exod 5:3). According to the Pharaoh, the value of the Israelites lies in their labor, and he reacts to Moses’ warning by making matters worse for them, accusing the people of laziness and increasing their workload so that “they will labor and pay no attention to deceptive words” (Exod 5:9). The Israelites were forced to gather their own straw to produce bricks for building, and when they did not produce the required quantity of bricks, the Israelite supervisors were beaten by the Egyptian taskmasters. The Israelite supervisors cried out to the Pharaoh, “Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people” (Exod 5:16). There is a

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82 For references of “to know” God in Exodus see: 5:2; 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:2; 11:7; 14:4, 18; 16:6, 12; 18:11; 23:9; 29:46; 31:13; 33:13.
83 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 334. Alter writes that some scholars emend “us” with “you” but he resists this translation. Moses and Aaron may be concerned that YHWH will punish Israel if they do not worship God in the pilgrimage festival. In addition, they are playing on Pharaoh’s self-interest since dead slaves would be useless to him. This warning recalls YHWH’s earlier prediction to Moses (Exod 3:19-20).
84 Ibid., 335. The taskmasters were the Egyptian oppressors (see: 3:7; 5:10, 13, 14), and the supervisors were fellow Israelites.
growing link between oppression, injustice, and the meaning of sin. In accusing the Pharaoh of injustice, the Israelite supervisors identify themselves as his servants and his people. Their loyalties seem to be with the Egyptian king rather than with Moses.

After they left the Pharaoh, the supervisors encountered Moses and Aaron and turned the blame for their oppression onto them by saying, “YHWH look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us” (Exod 5:21). This is the second time that Israelites connect “judgment” with Moses and complain against him (Exod 2:14). Moses, in turn, complains to God, “O YHWH, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people” (Exod 5:22-23). The Israelites lay the blame for their troubles on Moses and he, in turn, places the blame and responsibility on God by asserting “you mistreated” and “you have done nothing.”

Moses has spoken to the Pharaoh in YHWH’s name, but he has not listened; now YHWH assures Moses, “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh” (Exod 6:1). The motifs of “listening” and “seeing” are central to the plague narratives that follow. When one does not “listen” to the words of YHWH, one will “see” the consequences.

3. 5. 4. YHWH brings Israel out of Egypt

God recalls the covenant with Israel’s ancestors who “resided as gērîm” (Exod 6:2) in the land of Canaan and reaffirms the promise to liberate the Israelites from their oppression. Moses is told to tell the people, “I am YHWH, and I will free you from the
burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians” (Exod 6:6-7). Israel will come “to know” YHWH through his mighty deeds of liberation, but also through the “knowing” of intimate relationship. But, the Israelites would not listen to Moses because of “their broken spirit and cruel slavery” (Exod 6:9), and this seems to fulfill the Pharaoh’s purposes in increasing their workload. The Israelites are not the only ones who would not listen to Moses. The greatest challenge will come from the Egyptian ruler.

Before Moses and Aaron come before the Pharaoh, God says, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt” (Exod 7:3). The Pharaoh’s “hardened heart” implies stubbornness or willfulness, and in this passage God seems to purposely harden his heart. God continues, “The Egyptians shall know that I am YHWH, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them” (Exod 7:5). Here the purposes for hardening the Pharaoh’s heart are made clear, so that YHWH can be known through his acts of wonder and power.

The first “wonder” performed by Moses and Aaron is transforming the staff into a snake, but this act fails to impress the Pharaoh and “he would not listen” (Exod 7:13).  

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86 The relationship between YHWH and Israel is expressed in the language of adoption or matrimony, implying the intimate nature of the relationship. For other examples of these types of relationship between God and Israel see: Lev 26:12; Deut 14:1–2; 2 Sam 7:14; Isa 54:5–7; Jer 2:2; 3:19; 31:33; Hos 2:19–20. The language of adoption in Exod 6:6–7 is also similar to that used by Ruth when she clings to Naomi (Ruth 1:16).

87 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 345. Alter points out that “hardness of heart” implies stubbornness, a lack of empathy, arrogance, or inflexibility. The aim of YHWH “hardening the heart” of the Pharaoh is so that he can demonstrate his power and might through the “signs and wonders.” Compare a “hardened” heart with an open, “circumcised” heart (Deut 10:6; 30:6).

88 The Pharaoh’s magicians were able to perform the same act of transformation, but Aaron’s staff swallowed theirs.
The following dialogues between Moses and the Pharaoh consist of pleas for the release of Israel by Moses and the Pharaoh’s refusal to listen due to a hardened heart. At some points, the Pharaoh seems to show some remorse and a slight change of heart, but ultimately he continues in his stubbornness. The consequences of Pharaoh’s “not listening” result in YHWH’s punishments to Egypt in the form of plagues that decimate the environment and the Egyptian population. After the eighth plague of locusts, “nothing green was left, no tree, no plant in the field, in the land of Egypt” (Exod 10:15). The irony is that Israel originally sojourned to Egypt due to a famine in the land of Canaan, but now the place of sojourning is unable to sustain life for the Egyptians. Canaan was the land of scarcity and Egypt was the land of abundance, and now Canaan is the land “flowing with milk and honey” that will promise new life for Israel.

Both humans and animals are punished for the Pharaoh’s stubbornness, but the Israelites are spared as God says, “I will make a distinction between my people and your people” (Exod 8:23). This sense of distinction is especially evident in the ninth and tenth plagues, the darkness over Egypt and the death of the firstborn. A “darkness that can be felt” (Exod 10:21) came over Egypt and people “could not move from where they were; but all the Israelites had light where they lived” (Exod 10:22-23). The Egyptians,

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89 See: Exod 7:3-4, 13, 16, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 20, 35; 10:1-2; 20, 27-29; 11:9-10). In Exod 4:21 and 9:12, God claims to “harden” the Pharaoh’s heart.
90 The Pharaoh admits, “I have sinned” (Exod 9:27; 10:16), but then his heart becomes hardened again (Exod 9:35; 10:20).
91 A brief outline of the plagues includes: water turned to blood (7:14-25); frogs (8:1-15); gnats (8:16-19); flies (8:20-32); pestilence on livestock (9:1-7); boils on humans and animals (9:8-12); thunder and hail (9:13-35); locusts (10:1-20); darkness (10:21-29); death of the firstborn (11:1-12:32).
92 In the event of the fourth plague of flies and those thereafter, the Israelites are distinguished from the Egyptians because they are “set apart in the land of Goshen” (Exod 8:22-23; Also see: Exod 9:4, 26; 10:23; 11:7). In the case of the seventh plague of thunder and hail, there are some officials of the Pharaoh who “feared the word of the Lord and hurried their slaves and livestock off to a secure place” (Exod 9:20). In Exod 1:9, the Pharaoh makes the distinction between “his people” and the Israelites, and now YHWH is doing the same.
the oppressors in the narrative, are now experiencing the oppression of darkness and are unable to move from place to place, whereas the Israelites, the slaves, are in the light and have the freedom of movement. After the ninth plague, the Pharaoh appears ready to relent, but “YHWH hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he was unwilling to let them go” (Exod 10:27). There is one more act of “wonder” that YHWH must perform before the Israelites are released from their bondage.

Despite Moses and the Israelites conflicts with Pharaoh, “YHWH gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover, Moses himself was a man of great importance in the land of Egypt, in the sight of the Pharaoh’s officials and in the sight of the people” (Exod 11:3). This passage implies Moses and the Israelites had good relations with some of the Egyptians. The problem seems to be primarily with the Pharaoh, but because of his stubbornness all Egyptians will be punished. YHWH tells Moses that “I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterward he will let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you away” (Exod 11:1).

Considering that Pharaoh was unrelenting despite the destruction and ravage of the first nine plagues, the pronouncement “he will drive you away” sounds ominous and foreboding. The narrative relates that YHWH “will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die” (Exod 11:4-5). A “loud cry” (Exod 11:6) will sound in Egypt, but Israel will once again be distinct and undisturbed (Exod 11:7).

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93 The light may symbolize freedom, but could also be connected to a later symbol for Israel as a “light to the nations” (Isa 49:6).
94 In order to fulfill the prediction of an earlier passage (Exod 3:22), Moses is told to tell every Israelite man and woman to ask his/her neighbor for objects of silver and gold (Exod 11:2).
95 YHWH “will go out” denotes Exodus. The firstborn includes the firstborn of the Pharaoh, the slave, and even the livestock.
96 The “loud cry” in Egypt is a turnaround of the “cry” of Israel” (Exod 3:7).
Moses and Aaron give the Israelites specific directives for the Passover event including spreading the blood of a newly slaughtered lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their house so that YHWH “will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you” (Exod 12:13).\(^{97}\) The Passover meal must be eaten hurriedly with “your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand” (Exod 12:11). This implies the nomadic existence of the sojourner, ready to leave at a moment’s notice. The event will be celebrated in remembrance throughout Israel’s generations as the “festival of unleavened bread” (Exod 12:17).\(^{98}\)

One of the directives states, “For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether an alien (gēr) or a native of the land” (Exod 12:19). This is the first law concerning a gēr in the biblical literature.\(^{99}\) Other Passover laws/provisions concerning strangers/foreigners include: “No foreigner (nēkār) shall eat of it, but any slave who has been purchased may eat of it after he has been circumcised” (Exod 12:43-44); “If an alien (gēr) who resides with you wants to celebrate the Passover to the Lord, all his males shall be circumcised; then he may draw near to celebrate it; he shall be regarded as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it; there shall be one law for the native and for the alien (gēr) who resides among you” (Exod 12:48-49).

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\(^{97}\) Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 274. Exodus 12:23 says that YHWH will pass through “to strike down the Egyptians” but “will not allow the destroyer” to enter the houses of the Israelites. In this passage, YHWH seems distinct from another destroying power.

\(^{98}\) In Exodus 12:34, the Israelites “took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders.” The implication is that they were in a hurry and on the move.

\(^{99}\) The gēr is the circumcised alien residing in Israel, who is enjoined to observe most laws (12:48-49) and is protected from abuse (Exod 22:20-22). The idea of “settlements” implies that these laws are a later insertion since they refer to Israel’s later circumstances as a settled population.
After the death of all the firstborn in Egypt, the Pharaoh and the Egyptians urged the Israelites to make a hasty departure; but before they leave the land of their bondage, the Israelites plundered the Egyptians.100 They “journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed crowd also went with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds” (Exod 12:37-39).101 This recalls Abraham’s being driven out of Egypt, but leaving with great wealth and flocks. Despite the despoiling of the Egyptians, the Israelites depart from Egypt without adequate provisions of food. This will prove a significant challenge as they continue on the journey, when they must trust in God to provide for them.

The plague narratives essentially address the question: Who is YHWH? The vindication of YHWH’s name is the main theme of these narratives, and the Pharaoh comes to know the power and might of Israel’s God through the affliction of the plagues. Despite the “signs and wonders” performed by Moses in the name of YHWH, the Pharaoh did not listen and his heart remained hardened, and the narrative revealed that those who do not listen to YHWH experience the consequences of severe punishment. Through the afflictions brought upon the Egyptians by YHWH, the Israelites have been brought out of bondage, but their trials and testing are only beginning.

3. 6. Into the Wilderness

YHWH promised to lead the Israelites to a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:7); but when Israel leaves Egypt, God did not lead them by the nearer and more

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100 As predicted in Exod 3:21-22; 11:2-3.
101 Meyers, Exodus, 100. The numbers are exaggerated to assert the growth of the population in Egypt. The “mixed crowd” may refer to those who intermarried with Israelites (See: Num 11:4; Lev 24:10) or may designate non-Israelites, reflecting the diversity of peoples that constituted early Israel.
direct route to Canaan; instead God “led them by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea” (Exod 13:18). YHWH led them “in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and night” (Exod 13:21). There is a sense of danger as the Israelites begin the journey with the possibility of attack by their enemies and the threat of an unknown environment in the wilderness. The Israelites will come to see that YHWH has power over both the enemy and the environment.

3. 6. 1. Crossing the Sea

The Pharaoh makes a final appearance in a scene that once again pits the earthly king against YHWH. In a plan to bait the Pharaoh, YHWH instructs Moses to tell the Israelites to “turn back” (Exod 14:2) and camp by the sea. The Pharaoh presumes that the people are “wandering aimlessly in the land” (Exod 14:3), and “when the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed towards the people” (Exod 14:5). After the tenth plague, the Egyptians urged the Israelites to leave but now they question themselves over allowing their laborers to leave. Once again, “YHWH hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (Exod 14:8) and he pursued the Israelites with his army.

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102 The narrative says that God was concerned “if the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt” (Exod 13:17). But in the next passage, it states that “the Israelites went up out of Egypt prepared for battle” (Exod 13:18). The implication is that God might not believe that they ready for battle yet.

103 The pillar of cloud and fire recalls the “smoking fire pot and flaming torch” that appeared in the covenant ceremony between God and Abraham (Gen 15). The appearance of the theophany in Gen 15 follows the prediction of the oppression of Abraham’s descendants in Egypt.
As the Egyptians drew near to the sea, the Israelites “looked back” (Exod 14:10) and became fearful. They cried out to YHWH and to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us…For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness” (Exod 14:11-12). Israel’s complaints will become a recurring theme in the wilderness narrative. They are depicted as a people with weak faith and weak constitution. They would rather return to the bondage of slavery than face the uncertainty of life in the wilderness. YHWH addresses Moses, “Tell the Israelites to go forward” (Exod 14:15). There is no turning back to the life as they knew it. There is only the “going forward.”

Moses responds to Israel’s complaints by offering words of encouragement and hope, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that YHWH will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. YHWH will fight for you, and you have only to keep still” (Exod 13-14). As a final act of punishment against the pursuing Egyptians and to “gain glory over Pharaoh and all his army” (Exod 14:17), God performs another miracle through Moses and his staff.

Following the instructions of YHWH, Moses parts the sea with his staff, allowing the Israelites to cross over on dry ground and then brings the waters back together again to drown the Egyptians when they pursued them. YHWH fought for Israel, saving them from their Egyptian oppressors, and after seeing God’s great acts “the people feared YHWH and believed in YHWH and his servant Moses” (Exod 14:31). Israel must “see”

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105 The drowning of the Egyptians implies poetic justice for Pharaoh’s drowning of the infants.
in order to believe in YHWH and to trust Moses. As the journey continues, their weak faith will prove a challenge to both Moses and God.

3.6.2. The Song of the Sea: Who is YHWH?

When the Pharaoh asked, “Who is YHWH, that I should heed him and let Israel go?” (Exod 5:2), God responded to his arrogance with plagues that decimated the land of Egypt. In the final defeat of the Egyptians by the sea, YHWH is revealed as a “warrior” (Exod 15:3) who “shattered the enemy” (Exod 15:6) and “overthrew the adversaries” (Exod 15:7). The complexity of YHWH’s character is revealed through the concepts of both strength and love in the passage, “In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode” (Exod 15:13). “Steadfast love” (ḥesed) indicates covenant language as well as personal devotion and loyalty. “Redeemed” connotes the ransom of indentured kin (Lev 25:47-49). YHWH’s guidance to the “holy abode” implies the pastoral language of a shepherd guiding his flock to a place of refuge. As a response to the question of the identity of YHWH, the poetry answers, I am what I am and I will be what I will be.

Other peoples heard of YHWH’s power and might and “they trembled” (Exod 15:14), becoming “still as stone” (Exod 15:16) until “the people that YHWH acquired passed by” (Exod 15:16). The “other peoples” are named as Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, and Canaanites. YHWH’s people are distinguished from these other

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106 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 398. The representation of YHWH as a warrior draws on Ugaritic and Canaanite imagery and myth. The Canaanite storm god Baal, like YHWH, is male and a warrior who is linked with imagery of water, cloud, and storm.

107 Their “terror and dread” here is contradicted in succeeding narratives when these people stand in opposition to the Israelites. For example: the Edomites (Num 20:14-21); the Canaanites (Num 21:1); the Amorites (Num 21:21-23); the Moabites and Midianites (Num 22:2-7).
peoples. The people that YHWH “acquired” were a mixed crowd of Israelites and other displaced persons that are led further into the wilderness.

3. 6. 3. Israel Complains and YHWH Responds

Moses ordered the people to set out from the Red Sea and he led them into the wilderness of Shur. They journeyed for three days without finding water, and when they finally came upon water in Marah, they could not drink it because it was bitter. The people complained against Moses, a key theme in the wilderness account, and Moses, in turn, “cried out to YHWH” (Exod 15:25). YHWH responds by making the water sweet, but then “made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test” (Exod 15:25). YHWH reveals that his help and protection come with certain responsibilities by saying, “If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought to the Egyptians; for I am YHWH who heals you” (Exod 15:26). The motif of “listening” is linked to obeying God’s commandments and thus “doing what is right.” God, then, reminds the Israelites of the plagues sent to the Egyptians, the consequences of “not listening.”

As the journey continues, the “whole congregation of the Israelites…came to the wilderness of Sin” (Exod 16:1). They have been on the journey for a month and “the whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the

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108 This is the same place that Hagar fled when Sarah abused her, and this is where she experienced the theophany at the well, between the Negev and Egypt.
109 Marah means “bitter.” Also see this reference to “bitter” in Ruth: 1:20
110 Israel’s complaints will become a dominant theme as they wander in the wilderness. For examples see: Exod 16:2-3; 17:2-3; Num 11:4-6; 14:2-3; 16:13-14; 20:2-5; 21:4-5; Deut 1:27-28.
111 God is testing the Israelites, but later Israel will test God. For example, in Exod 17:2
wilderness” (Exod 16:2). The significance of “whole congregation” in these passages implies that all of them partake in the journey and all of them complain. The third complaint since the departure from Egypt addresses the lack of food.¹¹² The people murmur, “If only we had died by the hand of YHWH in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Exod 16:3). Israel once again looks back to Egypt as a place where, despite their oppression, meat and bread were a certainty. In the wilderness, there is only uncertainty in relation to their survival.

YHWH again responds to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not” (Exod 16:4).¹¹³ To remind the people that God has heard their complaint and responded, Moses says “In the evening you shall know that it was YHWH who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of YHWH…when YHWH gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because YHWH has heard the complaining that you utter against him” (Exod 16:6-8).¹¹⁴ Israel will know and see that God has heard their complaints and responded. The Israelites called the bread manna and they “ate the manna forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan” (Exod 16:35).¹¹⁵

¹¹² In the first complaint, there was fear of the approaching Egyptian army (Exod 14:11) and in the second, they complained about a lack of water (Exod 15:24).
¹¹³ Also see, Exod 16:28. Some specific instructions in Exod 16 are against hoarding for the next day and stipulations relating to the Sabbath.
¹¹⁴ In Exod 16:13-26, God provides quail in the evening and manna in the morning.
¹¹⁵ Jos 5:6 says that the wandering in the wilderness lasted forty years so that the entire first generation of Israelites would die in the wilderness, never entering the Promised Land.
From the wilderness of Sin, the Israelites journeyed to Rephidim where a shortage of drinking water leads to a quarrel with Moses who, in turn, accuses the people of “testing YHWH” (Exod 17:2). In their fourth complaint, the Israelites again look back to their time in Egypt saying, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (Exod 17:3). Moses again cried out to YHWH and he responded, “I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink” (Exod 17:6). The Israelites repeatedly complain, and YHWH continuously responds to their needs. Not only does God provide food and water in the wilderness, but he also provides protection from Israel’s enemies.

3. 6. 4. The Battle with Amelek and the Meeting with Jethro

While Israel camped at Rephidim, they were attacked by Amelek. The narrative does not give a reason for the attack, but perhaps it is related to a conflict over water rights. Moses sent Joshua out to fight with Amelek while he stood at the top of the hill with the staff of YHWH in his hand. As the battle ensued, “whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amelek prevailed” (Exod 17:11). When his hands grew weary, Aaron and Hur held up his hands on either side and “Joshua defeated Amelek and his people with the sword” (Exod 17:13). After the battle, God declares “YHWH will have war with Amelek from generation to generation” (Exod 17:16).

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116 For example, see Gen 26:15-22 regarding Isaac’s dispute over a well.
117 Joshua, Moses’ young assistant and field commander, is introduced here. He will eventually become Moses’ successor (Num 27).
In a scene reminiscent of Abraham’s battle with the four eastern kings, Moses is depicted as a military leader who prevails over the enemy, and in this account, as in the earlier narrative, a meeting with a priest follows the battle. In Abraham’s story, he met with the priest Melchizedek, and here Moses meets with the Midianite priest, Jethro, who also happens to be his father-in-law. Jethro “heard of all that God had done for Moses and for his people Israel” (Exod 18:1).

The meeting between the prophet and the priest reintroduces Moses’ family who are now living with Jethro, evident in the passage, “after Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro took her back, along with her two sons. The name of one was Gershom (for he said, “I have been an alien in a foreign land”), and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, “The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh”)” (Exod 18:2-4). The names of Moses’ two sons describe the situation of the Israelites as strangers in a foreign land and God’s response to their situation. There is no explanation why Zipporah was sent away. The language “Moses sent away” and “Jethro took her back” may imply a divorce, but this is uncertain.

Jethro came into the wilderness “where Moses was encamped at the mountain of God, bringing Moses’ sons and wife to him” (Exod 18:5). When Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, “he bowed down and kissed him” (Exod 18:7). The meeting does not mention Zipporah and the two sons and there is no further reference to Moses’ family.

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118 The Amelekites were an Edomite tribe (Gen 36:12) who were enemies of Israel. For other references to Amelekites see: Deut 25:17-19; 1 Sam 15:2-3; 2 Sam 1:1-10; Esth 3:1.
119 Other examples of prophets whose children’s names relate to their prophetic mission are Isaiah (Isa 8:3-4) and Hosea (Hos 1:2-9).
120 Dozeman, Commentary on Exodus, 402. Dozeman points out that the language can mean divorce (Deut 24:10), but he does not believe divorce fits this context. He sees the mention of the sons, in relation to Moses’ prophetic mission, as more relevant.
121 This sign of respect recalls Jacob’s meeting with Esau (Gen 33:4-7).
after this passage in Exodus. After Moses gave his father-in-law an account of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt by the hand of YHWH, “Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses’ father-in-law in the presence of God” (Exod 18:12) Moses’ meeting with the priest, Jethro, recalls Abraham’s encounter with the priest, Melchizedek. In both instances, the meeting took place after a battle, and both encounters culminated in the sharing of a meal and a blessing.

During their meeting, Jethro counsels Moses in his role as a judge to represent the people before God and “teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do” (Exod 18:20). In order to ease his burden, Moses should choose righteous men from among the Israelites “who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain” (Exod 18:21). They would judge minor cases and disputes while Moses would decide the important matters. Like Abraham, Moses is called to teach “the way of YHWH” but other righteous persons will help him to bear his task. After meeting with Moses and offering his advice, Jethro “went off to his own country” (Exod 18:27).

122 In Exodus 18:6, Jethro says that he is coming with “your wife and her two sons” instead of “your two sons.” Unlike Genesis, Exodus seems to place less importance on individual families and instead concerns a “whole congregation.” Perhaps Moses’ prophetic mission does not allow for a family life, but a “Kushite wife” is mentioned in Numbers 12:1.
123 Meyers, Exodus, 137. Meyers points out that it is interesting that Jethro, a Midianite, is the first one to bless God and make the offerings after the Israelites departure from Egypt since that was their primary excuse to leave. She asserts that “his primacy in what is to become a well-ordered set of sacrificial practices, along with a glimpse of his daughter’s ritual competency in the circumcision episode, lends credence to the possibility of a Midianite role in the origins of Israelite religion.”
124 Jethro’s country, Midian, will become an enemy of Israel in later narratives. See: Num 31:1-12; Judg 6:3, 33; 7:12.
Abraham/Melchizedek meeting where the encounter with a priest is followed by a covenant narrative.\textsuperscript{125}

3. 7. The Revelation at Sinai

After Jethro left Moses, the Israelites journeyed from Rephidim into the wilderness of Sinai, and “they camped in front of the mountain” (Exod 19:2).\textsuperscript{126} When Moses “went up to God” (Exod 19:3), YHWH called to him, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod 19:3-6). The mention of “house of Jacob” is a reminder of the sojourning of the ancestors. “I bore you on eagles’ wings” suggests YHWH’s majesty and power.\textsuperscript{127} When YHWH states, “the whole earth is mine,” it infers that we are all strangers and sojourners on this earth.\textsuperscript{128} YHWH could have chosen anyone to be his “holy nation,” but he chose the descendants of sojourners.

The motifs of “seeing” and “hearing” are integral to the relationship between YHWH and Israel. Israel has “seen” YHWH’s great works that led to their liberation from slavery and oppression of Egypt. Now the people “hear” that to be designated as

\textsuperscript{125} In the Abraham narrative, the encounter with Melchizedek is followed by the “cutting” covenant where God appears as a flaming torch (Gen 15), and in this account, the meeting with Jethro is followed by the Sinai theophany and covenant.

\textsuperscript{126} The mountain is the “mountain of God” (Horeb/Sinai). Israel remained encamped at Sinai until the “second year, second month, twentieth day” (Num 10:11-12).

\textsuperscript{127} Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 423. Alter suggests that “the metaphorical implication is that the Hebrews themselves are helpless fledglings, unable to fly on their own. Also see: Deut 32:11; Ruth 2:12.

\textsuperscript{128} Also see: Lev 25:23; Deut 10:14-15.
YHWH’s people and his “treasured possession” means to obey the voice of YHWH and to keep his commandments. When the people were told of God’s commands, they answered as one, “Everything that YHWH has spoken we will do” (Exod 19:8). They make a commitment to YHWH as “one people.”

YHWH tells Moses, “I am going to come down to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after” (Exod 19:9). Before God will come down upon Mount Sinai, the people must be consecrated by Moses. On the third day of the consecration, “there was thunder and lightning, as well as thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled” (Exod 19:16). Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God at the foot of the mountain, and YHWH “descended on it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently” (Exod 19:18). Moses is told to warn the people to keep their distance and to “set limits around the mountain and keep it holy” (Exod 19:23) or YHWH “will break out against them” (Exod 19:24). There is an increasing sense of boundaries that are being set: holy/profane; righteous/wicked; Israel/Others. When one breaks the boundaries, God will “break out”

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129 The “voice of YHWH” will be the voice of the prophets and the commandment will be the Decalogue connected to the Sinai covenant. The later downfall of Israel will be blamed on the people’s “not listening” to the Sinai covenant.

130 The “consecration” sets boundaries between holy/profane and includes rituals of purification and the avoidance of defilement such as: the washing of clothes; setting “limits” or boundaries such as not touching the holy mountain; and not engaging in the sexual act. (Exod 19:10-15). God’s people must be a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6) as they prepare for the divine encounter.

131 There is a connection here to the theophany that appears during the covenant ceremony in Genesis 15. God’s appearance becomes generally associated with elements of nature until Elijah’s revelation on Mount Horeb where YHWH was not in the wind, earthquake, or fire but in a “sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:11-12). Sometimes translated as a “still small voice,” the presence of God is not identified with natural elements but rather as something that speaks to the innermost part of a person, the “heart.”
against them through punishment. The “boundaries” are made more clear in the covenant that YHWH establishes with “his people” on Mount Sinai.

3. 7. 1. The Sinai Covenant

YHWH has liberated the Israelites from the slavery and oppression of Egypt and chosen them to be his “holy nation,” but with their freedom and selection come certain obligations and responsibilities that are framed in the Sinai covenant.\(^\text{132}\) Beginning with expectations concerning Israel’s relationship with God, the covenant asserts that no other gods or idols may we worshipped because YHWH is “a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of their parents…but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod 20: 5-6)\(^\text{133}\) YHWH can be jealous and punishing, but he shows loyalty and love (ḥesed) to those who are faithful to his commandments. Along with honoring God’s name, Israel is told to “remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy” (Exod 20:8). The day of rest from all labor includes not only the individual male Israelite, but also “your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident (gēr) in your towns” (Exod 20:10). Not only the Israelite, but the Stranger in their midst, as well as their servants and animals, are included in the commandment to rest one day in the week.

Along with commandments concerning God, the Decalogue includes laws concerning family and neighbor beginning with the imperative to “honor your father and

\(^\text{132}\) These are the rules and obligations that the prophets hold Israel accountable for but the people continuously fall short of their responsibilities and commitments. See: Jer 7:9; 29:23; Ezek 18:5-18; 22:6-12; Hos 4:2.

\(^\text{133}\) God’s vicarious punishment will be denied in Jer 31:29-30 and Ezek 18; Isa writes about vicarious atonement (Isa 53:4).
mother” (Exod 20:12). Statutes against murder, adultery, stealing, false witness, and coveting that which belongs to the neighbor are specific laws that Israel is meant to follow so that neighbor does not harm neighbor. There are more laws concerning the neighbor than there are concerning God.

As God revealed the Ten Commandments to Moses in the theophany of thunder, lightning, and smoke, the Israelites stood at a distance and were afraid. They said to Moses, “You speak to us and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die” (Exod 20:19). This implies that the people will listen to Moses as God’s prophet, but they fear direct contact with God. Ironically, their earlier complaining and later disobedience reveals that they do not truly fear God. Moses assures them, as he did before the Red Sea, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin” (Exod 20:20).

3. 7. 2. The Book of the Covenant

The Sinai Covenant includes the “book of the covenant” (Exod 24:7), laws concerning ritual practices, civil and criminal statutes, and laws pertaining to social justice. The law codes begin with YHWH saying, “You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven” (Exod 20:22), a repetition of the themes “seeing” and “hearing.” The laws that this dissertation is particularly interested in are those pertaining to Strangers: the sojourners; displaced persons, including slaves; or foreigners; therefore,

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134 Next to God, one’s father and mother carry the greatest importance (Proverbs 1:8). God is called “father” in some instances and the metaphor for the covenant relationship is sometimes described as one between parent and child (Deut 32:16-21; Isa 1:2; Mal 1:6).
135 The “neighbor” refers to other Israelites.
136 Dozemar, Commentary on Exodus, 497. The “book of the covenant” is contained in Exod 20:22-23:33. Regarded as the oldest legislation in the Bible, perhaps premonarchical, it has parallels in Mesopotamian law code. Subsequent biblical laws repeat and revise these laws.
I will not go into depth on ritual practices unless they pertain to the aforementioned peoples.

**Laws concerning Slaves:** When the tribes of Jacob originally came to Egypt, they entered as sojourners and were treated well by the Pharaoh in the time of Joseph. Over many generations, they came to be viewed as a negative, foreign presence in the land and they became oppressed and enslaved as forced labor for the Pharaoh. When they finally went out of Egypt, they left as liberated slaves who were led by YHWH, through Moses, to establish a “holy nation” that knew and followed the “way of YHWH.”

Liberation from slavery is a main concern of the Exodus narrative. Although the Israelites were themselves liberated slaves, the law codes reveal that the institution of slavery did not cease to exist in Israel, with debt slavery as one of the most common forms of slavery. One of the ordinances pertaining to debt slavery states, “When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt” (Exod 21:2). Female slaves do not have the same rights of release as males do in these laws but they are offered some protection. “If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt unfairly with her” (Exod 21:8). She may not be sold to foreigners or a clan other than her own, and

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137 Meyers, *Exodus*, 35-36. Meyers points out that the slavery mentioned in the Hebrew Bible is not the same as the race-based slavery linked to eighteenth and nineteenth century American history. In the ancient world, forced labor could be organized by the state or exist as a feature of individual households. Prisoners of war or foreigners could be placed in work companies to carry out building projects. Servitude might also be the result of temporary indenture of an indebted person or a member of that person’s family.

138 The seventh year release of debt slaves is also in Lev 25:40, 49; Deut 15:12.

139 Exodus 21:7 states, “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do.” Later laws afford more protection for the female (Deut 15:12)

140 The designation of a woman as a “slave” sometimes implies that she has been purchased as a concubine, such as Hagar (See: Gen 21:10-13). In this section, if she is designated for the son, “he shall deal with her as a daughter; If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or
redemption is the duty of her closest kin. Slave owners have the right to discipline their slaves, but not to the point of death, and punishment that results in physical impairment requires some compensation to the injured slave. Although slavery exists as an institution, the just treatment of slaves is taken into consideration in the covenant code.

*Laws concerning the Stranger and the Poor:* Israel was liberated by YHWH from the Egyptian Pharaoh’s oppression and injustice for the purpose of establishing a more just society. The Decalogue contains guidelines for Israelites to establish right relationship with God and the neighbor, their fellow Israelites. The book of the covenant also contains laws pertaining to right relationship with fellow Israelites, but there is also a special concern for the Stranger and the poor among the statutes. One of the laws states, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien (gēr), for you were aliens (gērîm) in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans” (Exod 22:21-24). This is an important passage that is meant to evoke compassion in the Israelites as they are told to recall their own experience of displacement and it shows YHWH’s special concern for the displaced and dispossessed poor in Israelite society, the sojourner, the widow, and the orphan. When they “cry out” YHWH will hear and

marital rights of the first wife. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out without debt, without payment of money” (Exod 21:9-11).

141 Laws concerning the punishment of slaves include: “When a slave owner strikes a male of female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner’s property” (Exod 21:20-21); “When a slave owner strikes the eye of a male or female slave, destroying it, the owner shall let the slave go, a free person, to compensate for the eye. If the owner knocks out a tooth of a male or female slave, the slave shall be let go, a free person, to compensate for the tooth” (Exod 21:26-27).

142 The formula “widow, orphan, and stranger” is used by the Deuteronomist. The phrase “wrong or oppress” (Exod 22:21) recalls Israel’s treatment in Egypt of “abuse” (Exod 1:11-12) and “oppression” (Exod 3:9). Protection of the widows and orphans is a duty of ancient Near Eastern kings and is contained
respond by enacting severe judgment and punishment if these persons are not given special consideration. The severe form of “poetic justice” is meant to remind Israel of Egypt’s punishment when they did not “listen” and to underscore the idea that YHWH has established them to be a more just nation. In order to show the significance of protection of the resident alien in Israelite society, the law is repeated and again attempts to invoke compassion through recollection, “You shall not oppress a resident alien (gēr); you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens (gērîm) in the land of Egypt” (Exod 23:9).

The special concern for the poor is also evident in the law that follows, “If you lend money to my people, the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not extract interest from them. If you take your neighbor’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor’s only clothing to use as cover…and if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate” (Exod 22:25-27). “My people, the poor among you” is interpreted as referring to fellow Israelites since this section also contains references to “your neighbor” which implies fellow Israelites. But, it could also be interpreted that it is the “poor,” the widows, orphans, and strangers who are YHWH’s “people.” It also leads to the questions: Who is the neighbor? Does the understanding of the neighbor go beyond the fellow Israelite to include the Stranger?

Concern and care for the poor is also included in the laws concerning the Sabbatical year and the Sabbath. The Israelites are allowed to sow and gather on the land

in their law codes, but concern for the protection of “resident aliens” is unique to Israelite law. For YHWH’s special concern for the “widow, orphan, and stranger” see: Deut 10:18; 24:17; Ps 68:5; Isa 1:17; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Zech 7:10.
for six years, “but in the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat” (Exod 23:11). This relates to the bread given to the Israelites in the wilderness when they were instructed to take only what they needed so that all were provided for. The Sabbath laws not only provide food for all members of the community but also ensure rest to all on the seventh day, “so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien (gēr) may be refreshed” (Exod 22:12). The Sabbath laws link the Sabbath with a form of social justice that provides food and rest for all.

The Ten Commandments concern right relationship with God and the neighbor, fellow Israelites. The book of the covenant expands the laws beyond the neighbor to include the Stranger, the resident alien (gēr) in their midst. Amongst the laws, there is a special concern for the displaced and disadvantaged: the widow, orphan, and Stranger. Israel’s own experience of displacement, slavery, and oppression is recalled to instill compassion in the people for those who are disadvantaged. Israel was liberated for the purpose of establishing a more just society, but with their freedom come certain responsibilities contained in the Decalogue and law codes: to be a “holy nation” who walks in the way of YHWH, practicing justice and righteousness.

The covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel is presented through the analogy of Ancient Near Eastern treaties whereby an overlord (YHWH) imposes certain expectations on a vassal (Israel). These treaties concluded with curses that will befall the vassal if he disobeys. At the conclusion of the Book of the Covenant, YHWH tells Moses that an angel will be sent to guard and guide Israel to the promised land, but he

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143 Also see: Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19; Ruth 2:2, 15.
144 Blessings and curses conclude legislation in Lev 26; Deut 7:12-26; 28.
also warns, “Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgressions; for my name is in him” (Exod 23:20-21).145 If Israel listens, YHWH says, “I will be an enemy to your enemies, and a foe to your foes” (Exod 23:22). The angel will bring the Israelites to the land of the Canaanites where their ancestors resided as aliens (gērîm). Abraham was told that his descendants would be given this land and in the following passage, YHWH elaborates on the method, “when I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces” (Exod 23:23-24).146 Destruction of Canaanite religion and displacement of the Canaanite people is pronounced by YHWH who says, “little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased and possess the land…for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you” (Exod 23:30-33). YHWH is once again the warrior, driving out the inhabitants of Canaan, and the reasoning is that distinction from other peoples and their gods maintains the “holiness” of Israel and that relationship with foreign peoples leads to apostasy. The character of YHWH becomes increasingly “jealous” and the displaced become those who displace others.

145 For other references to the angel see: Exod 14:19; Josh 5:13-15; Judg 2:1-5. For the “name” as a concretization of the deity see: Deut 12: 5, 11; Ps 20: 1; 54:1.
146 This describes the practice of ḥērem carried out by Joshua in the conquest of Canaan.
3. 7. 3. Rebellion and Punishment

Moses wrote down the words of the covenant and he “read it in the hearing of the people; and they said ‘All that YHWH has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient’” (Exod 24:7). The narrative says, “Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel went up, and saw the God of Israel…they beheld God and they ate and drank” (Exod 24:9-11). In this account, God gives Moses the “tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment” (Exod 24:12) while the “glory of YHWH was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel” (Exod 24:17). Moses stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights while YHWH instructed him in how to construct a mobile dwelling, or tabernacle, for Israel’s deity and to establish its priesthood. The mobile tabernacle suggests that God, like the Israelites, is also a sojourner and does not have a permanent dwelling on this earth. YHWH tells Moses, “I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God” (Exod 29:45), but they, in turn, must “listen” and obey God’s commandments and instructions. But while Moses is on the mountain, the people are already showing their faithless and rebellious nature.

When Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain, the people lost faith in YHWH and in Moses. They coerced Aaron, “make gods for us, who shall go

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147 Moses’ reading of the covenant is accompanied by a blood sacrifice and ritual (Exod 24:4-8). For other readings of the covenant see: Deut 31:9-13; 2 Kings 23:1-3; Neh 8:1-8.
148 God’s upper body and face is not directly “seen.” The text says, “under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness” (Exod 24:10).
149 These Cultic instructions are contained in Exodus 25:1- 31:17; 35:1-40:33. This includes instructions for: offerings for “a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them” (Exod 25:1-9); the ark of the covenant and mercy seat “where I will deliver to you all my commands” (Exod 25:); 10-22); a table for the Bread of the Presence and a lampstand (Exod 25:23-40); the tabernacle proper with the “most holy place” containing the ark of the covenant (Exod 26:1-37); an altar for burnt offerings and a court for the tabernacle (Exod 27:1-21); priestly vestments, ordination of priests, and cultic practices (Exod 28:1-31:17).
before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Exod 32:1). Aaron succumbs to the people’s demands and fashions an image of a calf formed from the Israelites’ gold jewelry. He built an altar before the image and the people “offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink; and rose up to revel” (Exod 32:6). This is the beginning of the apostasy that will come to define Israel’s sins and turning away from God.

In the narrative, God’s awareness of the turn of events is evident in YHWH’s imperative to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them” (Exod 32:7-8). YHWH disavows the Israelites, saying “your people, whom you brought out.” They have turned against YHWH, now he will turn against them with swift and harsh punishment. YHWH says, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation” (Exod 32:9-10).

YHWH has “seen,” not their suffering and oppression, but their insolence and disobedience. The reference to the Israelites as “stiff-necked” recalls the Pharaoh’s hard-heartedness. But, YHWH will spare Moses and make of him a “great nation,” recalling the promise to Abraham.

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150 Moses has been on the mountain forty days and nights, indicating a lengthy amount of time. “This man” seems to show disrespect for their leader.

151 Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 494. Alter points out that Aaron tries to placate the people and still preserve a sense of loyalty to YHWH by justifying the notion of the Golden Calf as a throne for YHWH and that the festival should be in his honor.
Moses pleads for the Israelites, “YHWH, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand…Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants” (Exod 32:11-13). Moses turns the responsibility onto God and reminds YHWH of “your people who you brought out of Egypt.” He implores YHWH to “turn from your wrath” in comparison to the people who “turned aside from the way.” Moses is successful in his pleas and “YHWH changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (Exod 32:14), but the prophet’s own temper is not so easily subdued.

When Moses went down the mountain with the tablets of the covenant, he saw the golden calf with the Israelites dancing around it and his “anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain” (Exod 32:19).

First, Moses questions how Aaron could have let this happen and then he enacts severe punishment on the rebellious Israelites. Moses said, “Who is on YHWH’s side? Come to me!” (Exod 32:26), and then he ordered the sons of Levi to execute the punishment by the sword “and about three thousand of the people fell on that day” (Exod 32:28). Punishment for apostasy is harsh as brother kills brother, and neighbor kills neighbor.

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152 YHWH is beseeched to remember the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, here called Israel to remind the people of their namesake.
153 Moses’ temper has already been evident in the instance of killing the Egyptian taskmaster. The covenant is renewed and the tablets are replaced in Exodus 34:1-28.
154 When Moses loses his temper, his brother attempts to calm Moses’ anger using the same language used by Moses to YHWH, “do not let the anger of my lord burn hot” (Exod 32:22). When Moses questions how Aaron could have allowed this to happen, Aaron’s reasoning is not entirely convincing, “You know the people, that they are bent on evil. They said to me, ‘Make us gods, who shall go before us’…so they gave me gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” (Exod 32:22-24).
155 The passage says that the sons of Levi were commanded to take up their swords and “kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor” (Exod 32:27). In executing this command, they “have ordained themselves for the service of YHWH, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves” (Exod 32:29).
Moses reprimanded those Israelites that remained alive, “You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go to YHWH; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin” (Exod 32:30).

When Moses pleads to YHWH for forgiveness of the people’s sin, God tells him to return and lead the remaining people as they continue on the journey; but he warns, “nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin” (Exod 32:34). All choices and actions have consequences.

YHWH promises to “send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites…but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people” (Exod 33:2-3). God is still angry, but he has not entirely deserted “his people.” Moses pitched the tent of meeting outside the camp and there “YHWH used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exod 33:11). In one of their conversations, Moses implores God, “If I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you…Consider too that this nation is your people” (Exod 33:13). The prophet again reminds YHWH that he has chosen the Israelites as “his people.” Moses continues, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct from every people on the face of the earth” (Exod 33:15-16). Moses implores for YHWH’s continued presence as

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156 In Exodus, “YHWH sent a plague on the people” (Exod 32:35). In Numbers 14, the first generation was not allowed to cross over into the Promised Land.

157 When the people heard of YHWH’s anger, “they mourned, and no one put on ornaments” (Exod 33:4).

158 “Face to face” is figurative language that implies intimate contact. In Exodus 33: 20-23, YHWH says “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live…stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” In Exodus 34:29-35, Moses’ face shone when he spoke with God on Mount Sinai and he begins to wear a veil when the other Israelites are afraid to come near him.
a sign of his special relationship with Israel. God responds, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, YHWH; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exod 33:19). This is reflective of the name and nature of YHWH: I am what I am, and I will be what I will be.159 When the covenant between YHWH and Israel is renewed, the people are warned not to make covenants with the Canaanites, not to worship their gods, and not to marry their daughters (Exod 34:12-16).

As Exodus concludes, the cloud of YHWH’s presence “covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle” (Exod 40:34). When the cloud covered the tabernacle, the Israelites stayed in place; when the cloud was lifted, they would set out on another stage of the journey. Their past oppression and suffering in Egypt was behind them, but the Promised Land was still not in their sight.

3. 8. Conclusion: Neither Here nor There

At the beginning of Exodus, the Israelites were Strangers in a strange land. Their suffering and oppression in Egypt drew the attention of a deity who “sees” and “hears” suffering and responds. In some respects, God is also a Stranger at the beginning of the narrative since Moses must ask his identity and the Pharaoh seems to never have heard of this God. Identified as YHWH, the deity chooses Moses to liberate the Israelites from their bondage and lead them to the land promised to their ancestors. But, the journey from slavery to freedom involves a sojourn in the wilderness, a place of trials and testing. As the Israelites journey in the wilderness, they are neither here nor there, between the

159 Exodus 34: 6-7 offers a prayer to YHWH who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
bondage of Egypt and the liberation of the Promised Land. They keep looking back when they should be looking forward.

Exodus serves as a paradigm of liberation and redemption, but also recalls earlier accounts of God’s concern for the Stranger and God’s saving power when he/she is endangered. YHWH’s rescue of the oppressed Israelites recalls God’s special concern for Abraham and Sarah as they sojourned in Egypt, as well as his attentiveness to the displaced slave woman, Hagar. The accounts employ similar descriptions of God who “sees” and “hears” oppression and suffering, takes notice, and then responds with rescue and a promise.

The Exodus narratives recall some of the themes and motifs contained in Genesis: the Stranger in a strange land; the experience of displacement; and God’s special concern for the Stranger. It reiterates the motifs of the Stranger and displacement to create a form of self-identity that develops from a family of sojourners to a nation wandering in the wilderness, on the verge of the Promised land. The theme of God’s special concern for the Stranger develops into a moral imperative for the Israelites to also cultivate a special concern for the Stranger, out of their own experience of displacement. In the Genesis accounts, God forged covenants with individuals, but in Exodus, a nation is addressed as a covenant partner. Israel’s central narrative, the Exodus, is a story of liberation from oppression, testing in the wilderness, and the formation of a people in a covenant relationship with YHWH. The land of promise looms on the horizon, but the people have not yet arrived.
CHAPTER 4

THE STRANGER IN ISRAELITE LAW:
LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, AND DEUTERONOMY

4. 1. Introduction

The conclusion of Exodus looked forward to Israel’s continuing journey in the wilderness, accompanied by the presence of the “glory of YHWH” (Exod 34:1-38).1 As the Israelites sojourn in the wilderness of Sinai, they undergo the hardships and dangers experienced by all sojourners, a sense of uncertainty and vulnerability in an often hostile environment. Along with their concern for primary physical needs such as food, water, and shelter, the sojourners must be alert for enemies that threaten their security and survival. In the concluding books of the Torah, Israel’s deepest concerns are forming an identity as the people of YHWH and maintaining their integrity as a holy nation when conflicts develop both outside and within the community.

The final three books of the Torah, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, consist mainly of laws that define the structure and ethics of Israelite society; however, the laws are set within a narrative context that includes settings and characters, along with the repetition of themes and motifs. In this chapter, as in previous chapters, I will

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1 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 535. The “glory of YHWH” is the pillar of cloud/fire that led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the wilderness (Exod 13:17-22). At the conclusion of Exodus, the cloud covers the tent of meeting when the Israelites are to remain stationary and lifts when they are meant to be on the move. Alter writes that, in the final chapter of Exodus, the cloud and fire have been given “a constructed, cultic focal point, the Tabernacle that henceforth will be God’s dwelling place in the midst of the people.” But, he asserts that the concluding words of Exodus, “in all their journeyings” (Exod 40:38), point not to the cultic regulations of Leviticus which follow Exodus, but to the Book of Numbers with its narratives of wandering in the Wilderness. I would argue that Leviticus acts as a significant bridge between the narratives concerning the first generation of Israelites in Exodus and their offspring in Numbers by providing specific cultic guidelines for the Israelites to follow as they continue their journey of formation as a “holy nation” (Exod 19:6).
examine the motif of the Stranger as the gēr, nokrī, and zār and I will consider how each
category of the Stranger stands in relationship to the people of YHWH and whether, or
not, God continues to have a special concern for the Stranger in these concluding books.

4. 2. The Stranger in Leviticus: Israel is camped at Mount Sinai

Leviticus, the third book of the Torah, is positioned in the center of the Torah
collection and begins with YHWH’s call to Moses from the tent of meeting.² Sometimes
called the tabernacle, the tent of meeting was a portable dwelling place for YHWH as the
divine presence accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness; it was
also where YHWH would regularly meet with Moses. The narrative implies that God has
taken on the characteristic of a sojourner, living in a tent and moving from place to place
with the Israelites.

The book is comprised of two Priestly traditions, the Priestly Source (P) in
chapters 1-16 and the Holiness Source (H) in chapters 17-27.³ The interweaving of law
with narrative in Leviticus provides a literary framework that establishes boundaries of
holy/profane, clean/unclean, and insider/outsider.⁴ The setting is the Israelite

² Ibid., 539-547. Leviticus is traditionally called wayiqra’, “and He, YHWH, called.” Positioned
in the center of the Torah collection, it describes the establishment and shaping of the institutions that
defined Israel’s national and religious identity, the law, the priesthood, the forms of Temple worship, and
the tribal foundation of its society. According to Alter, scholarly consensus affirms that the Priestly writers
assembled the Torah after the fall of Judea and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 BCE. By
placing these cultic texts in a central position, the final redactors asserted their primary significance as a
guide for reestablishing national and religious identity after the exile.
³ Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004),
175. Milgrom says that both sources are concerned with “holiness” but he maintains that there are verbal
and ideological differences between these two sources. Whereas P is primarily concerned with the
priesthood and ritual impurity in connection to the sanctuary, H expands the domain of the sacred to the
entire land and its population.
Priestly redactors of the Torah purposely interwove law and history because the “law itself takes on
narrative qualities” and they “use literary techniques for nonliterary ends.” The theme of displacement,
encampment at Mount Sinai where YHWH speaks to Moses from the tent of meeting,
telling him to “speak to the people of Israel” (Lev 1:2). Chapters 1 through 9 define the
central cultic institution and rituals of the “people of Israel” by proscribing laws
concerning offerings and sacrifices and establishing the rites of consecration and
inauguration of the priesthood. These laws describe acceptable offerings as unblemished
animals, choice grains, or first fruits. Although the lay donor of the offering is an active
participant in the ritual, the priest effectively acts as the mediator between the donor and
God, establishing a boundary between the earthly and heavenly realms, or the profane
and the holy.

In chapter 10, the consequence of disobedience of the cultic laws is demonstrated
in a short narrative concerning Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron. Aaron’s sons offered
“unholy (zārāh) fire before YHWH, such as he had not commanded them” (Lev 10:1)
and, as punishment, “fire came out from the presence of YHWH and consumed them”
(Lev 10:2). In order to avert further contamination of the sanctuary, Moses summoned
two kinsmen, Mishael and Elzaphan, to remove the bodies “away from the front of the
sanctuary to a place outside the camp” (Lev 10:4). The narrative demonstrates the

evident in both the Genesis and Exodus narratives, is connected to being holy or “set apart” in Leviticus.
The people’s displacement, or separation, from the unholy serves as a moral imperative to mirror YHWH’s
holiness and separateness.

5 In chapter 8, Moses is told to “assemble the whole congregation at the entrance of the tent of
meeting” (Lev 8:3) to witness the rites of ordination establishing the sons of Aaron as the legitimate
priesthood. At the conclusion of the priestly inauguration, both Moses and Aaron blessed the assembly and
the glory of YHWH appeared to all the people as a fire that consumed the sacrificial offering (Lev 9:23-
24).

6 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 579. Alter translates “unholy” fire as “alien” fire indicating
unauthorized coals. The phrase “which he had not enjoined upon them” (Lev 10:1) implies that the
brothers went against what was prescribed as legitimate ritual. In Aaron’s sacrifice preceding this one (Lev
9:24), fire also comes out from YHWH but there the offering is consumed, whereas here the priests are
consumed.

7 Contact with the dead, as well as mourning rituals, are forbidden to high priests (Lev 21:10-12).
Since the two kinsmen are Levites, they are tasked with the removal of the dead priests; here, they removed
the bodies with their tunics, avoiding direct physical contact. Any contact with a corpse causes defilement
seriousness of maintaining the proper cultic rituals and the severity of punishment when the prescribed boundaries are crossed. YHWH instructs Aaron to “distinguish between the holy and the common, and between clean and unclean; and to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that YHWH has spoken to them through Moses” (Lev 10:10-11). In the following chapters of Leviticus, laws concerning the holy sanctuary are interwoven with statutes concerning the earthly realm as boundaries are established that differentiate between holy/profane, permitted/forbidden, and insiders/outsiders.  

Chapters 11 through 15 include laws concerning permitted and forbidden foods, unclean animals, and defilement related to the human body. These laws do not mention the gēr, nokrî, or zār, therefore the ordinances create boundaries between clean and unclean fellow Israelites. For example, a person with a leprous disease adopts the manner of mourning by wearing torn clothing and disheveled hair, becoming an outsider by residing alone outside of the camp for the length of the disease (Lev 13:45-46). The person with the disease is not allowed back into the community until the priest has conducted an examination, declared the person cured, and performed rites of purification (Lev 14:2-9). The purity laws establish boundaries of clean/unclean that make fellow Israelites outsiders, separated from the community when those boundaries are crossed. This set of laws concludes with the ordinance to “keep the people of Israel separate from resulting in an individual’s estrangement from the community (Num 5:2-3). Viewed as contagious, the unclean persons must undergo ritual purification before returning to the assembly (Num 21:11-22).  

8 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 541-542. Alter writes that the unifying theme among the variety of laws in Leviticus is the establishment of boundaries, reflective of the creation myth in Genesis 1.

9 See: Lev 11:1-23 for clean/unclean foods; Lev 11:24-47 for animals that should not be eaten or touched; Lev 12:1-8 for purification after childbirth; Lev 13:1-14:57 for laws concerning leprosy; and Lev 15:1-33 for laws concerning various bodily discharges.

10 Milgrom, Leviticus, 127-129. Milgrom interprets leprosy in the Bible as “scale disease,” a skin condition that produces scales and whose appearance, rather than the disease itself, makes it unclean. Also see: Num 5:2-3; 12:10-15; Deut 24:8. In Num 12:10-15, Miriam’s skin became “leprous” as a punishment for speaking out against Moses.
their uncleanness; so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling the tabernacle that is in their midst” (Lev 15:31).11 According to cultic tradition, the boundaries between the holy and the profane are to be strictly maintained; when “uncleanness” occurs in the earthly realm, those boundaries are crossed polluting YHWH’s holy sanctuary as well.12 In the following chapters of Leviticus, the concept of boundaries determining clean/unclean and insiders/outiders is broadened to consider Israel’s relationship with the gēr, nokrî, and zār.

4. 2. 1. The gēr in Leviticus

Chapters 16 through 19 contain specifications for the Day of Atonement, laws concerning blood, sexual prohibitions, and ritual and moral holiness.13 This section includes the first reference to the gēr in Leviticus and, in the remaining chapters, the gēr will be considered alongside the Israelite in a number of laws, punishments, and provisions.14 In her study on the alien in Israelite law, van Houten treats the laws in

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11 In this passage, from the P source, the Israelites are commanded to separate themselves from uncleanness; whereas in a later passage, from the H source, YHWH says, “I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine” (Lev 20:24-26).
12 See: Lev 4 for purification offerings to remove impurity inflicted upon the sanctuary and Lev 16 for atonement for the impurities of the sanctuary and the iniquities of the people. For the P source, any ritual or moral violation in the community also pollutes the holy sanctuary and requires ritual atonement; in the H source, violations pollute the whole land and lead to the expulsion of the people.
13 See: Lev 16 for laws concerning the Day of Atonement, the annual purification ceremony that eliminates impurities in the sanctuary and removes the iniquities of the people; Lev 17:1-9 for laws concerning the slaughtering of animals; Lev 17:10-16 for laws prohibiting the ingestion of blood; Lev 18 for laws concerning sexual relations; and Lev 19 for ritual and ethical demands for holiness.
14 Milgrom, Leviticus, 175. The unanticipated inclusion of the gēr in chapters 17 through 25 is attributed to H, the source that links the holiness of all of the inhabitants of the land with the holiness of the land itself. Milgrom ascribes this source to a priestly school that developed at the end of the eight century BCE, and asserts that “its goal was revolutionary: the creation of an egalitarian society” that gives both native and resident alien access to the holy.
Leviticus as the final development of the status of the gēr in biblical legislation. In Leviticus, they are granted civil equality with the native Israelite as well as some privileges and responsibilities in connection to cultic practices. In Kidd’s study on alterity in the Hebrew Scriptures, he argues that the laws concerning the gēr in Leviticus are not intended to give them full inclusion in the Jewish community but are a means to preserve the holiness of the land by assuring that all of its inhabitants followed a standard of holiness.

4. 2. 2. Laws concerning the gēr

The development of laws is connected to conservative justice that looks to conserve the established order and good of society, as well as reformative justice that attempts to remove imperfections in the law and redistribute rights and resources so as to make the social order more fair. Justice in the Bible is linked to the concepts of mišpāṭ and šēdāqāh. Weinfeld writes that mišpāṭ and šēdāqāh, meaning justice and righteousness, is considered a divine ideal that is lived out in the social realm. Walking in the way of justice and righteousness entails establishing social equity by improving the

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15 Christiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, 117. Van Houten posits that, although the formation of Priestly legislation spanned many centuries, the final consolidation and editing of Leviticus occurred during the Persian period as a creative response to the crisis of exile and the experience of restoration when the returnees were reunited with those who had remained in Judah.

16 Ibid., 118. Van Houten writes that, although the P legislation creates boundaries to ensure the survival of Israel’s distinct identity, the laws also make it possible for an outsider (gēr) to become an insider.

17 José Ramirez Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Israel*, 68-71. Kidd argues that the gēr in Leviticus refers specifically to non-Jews living amongst the Jewish community during the Persian period. The reference to the gēr as a proselyte is a later development in Jewish tradition.


19 Ibid., 11. Raphael interprets mišpāṭ as a legal term coming from the same root as “judge” and connoting what a true judge ought to decide, and šēdāqāh as an ethical term meaning righteousness or uprightness.
status of the marginalized in society through a series of laws.\textsuperscript{20} It is worth noting that following Abraham’s acts of hospitality towards the Strangers in the Genesis 18 narrative, the words, šēdāqāh and mišpāṭ, are used in describing the way of YHWH that Abraham is to teach his offspring.\textsuperscript{21} Although the combination of mišpāṭ and šēdāqāh occurs primarily in the Deuteronomic and prophetic literature, the concepts of justice and righteousness underlie all the biblical laws.\textsuperscript{22}

In the Ancient Near East, as in all societies, laws set boundaries, offered protection, and attempted to create a more just society. According to van Houten, a concern for the widow, orphan, and poor were part of a statement made by a king to demonstrate the establishment of justice in his kingdom, but these concerns were not regulated by laws.\textsuperscript{23} Biblical laws are unique from their Ancient Near Eastern counterparts due to the special concern for the poor and, in particular, the consideration of the Stranger (gēr) in the legislation.\textsuperscript{24} In surveying the laws concerning the gēr in Leviticus, the first inclusions are in connection to cultic practice. Milgrom asserts that,


\textsuperscript{21} In Gen 15:6, Abraham’s faith in God’s promise of land and progeny is linked to the patriarch’s “righteousness.” Gen 18 concerns both righteousness and justice, beginning with Abraham’s hospitality towards the Strangers who approached his camp and culminating in a discussion between Abraham and YHWH concerning the justice of God’s punishment. The narrative implies that the way of “righteousness and justice” includes a special concern for the Stranger and a sense of mercy in connection with justice.

\textsuperscript{22} Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets: An Introduction (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 193-201. Heschel writes that, according to the prophets, the primary way of serving God is through love, justice, and righteousness. He writes that “there are few thoughts as deeply ingrained in the mind of biblical man as the thought of God’s justice and righteousness.” Heschel sees justice as a mode of action and righteousness as a quality of a person.

\textsuperscript{23} Van Houten, The Alien in Israelite Law, 35.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 23-42. Van Houten examines other Ancient Near Eastern law codes and finds some similarities to biblical law, such as the lex talionis and stipulations for treaties. In considering the inclusion of the alien in the Mesopotamian law codes, she finds that there is only one mention of the alien and it is not concerned with protecting the alien, but rather the family that he left behind. She finds no laws dealing with the legal status of the alien or any mention of his protection amongst the “poor” widow and orphan.
according to cultic laws, the resident alien is bound by prohibitive commandments but not by performative ones.\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{Concerning the Day of Atonement:} “In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves, and shall do no work, neither the citizen (‘ezrāḥ) nor the alien (gēr) who resides among you” (Lev 16:29). Van Houten points out the Priestly writer’s preference for the term ‘ezrāḥ; she interprets the word as “native of the land,” linking it to the Priestly concern with the holiness of the land and its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{26} Since the gēr inhabits the land along with the native-born, he is expected to fulfill some cultic requirements which are also expected of the ‘ezrāḥ.

\textit{Concerning the slaughter of animals:} “Anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens (gērîm) who reside among them who offers burnt offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, to sacrifice it to YHWH, shall be cut off from the people” (Lev 17:8-9).\textsuperscript{27}

\textit{Concerning blood prohibitions:} “If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens (gērîm) who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut off that person from the people…And anyone of the people

\textsuperscript{25} Milgrom, Leviticus, 185-187. According to Milgrom, by the third century BCE, Jewish tradition would see the gēr as a convert or proselyte, but Leviticus does not consider religious conversion. The gēr is not required to convert to the Israelite religion, but must respect the customs while residing in the land.

\textsuperscript{26} Van Houten, The Alien in Israelite Law, 139. Van Houten writes that ‘ezrāḥ is not a common term in the Hebrew Scriptures, appearing primarily in the Priestly legislation, and she notes that it is completely absent from Deuteronomic law and the Covenant Code.

\textsuperscript{27} Lev 17:1-7 decrees that Israelites may not simply slaughter domestic animals (ox, sheep, and goats) for their food, but must bring the animals to the tent of meeting to first offer them as a sacrifice of well-being, after which they may partake of their share. This legislation also presupposes a central sanctuary where legitimate sacrifice is practiced. Offerings that are not made in front of the tent of meeting will be considered as offerings to the “goat-demons” (Lev 17:7), an idolatry punishable by death. If resident aliens wish to have meat, they need not bring their animals to the central sanctuary, but they are forbidden to worship other gods while residing in the land.
of Israel, or of the aliens (gērîm) who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or
bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth” (Lev 17:10-13).28

Concerning dietary defilement: “All persons, citizens or aliens (gērîm), who eat
what dies of itself or what has been torn by wild animals, shall wash their clothes, and
bathe themselves in water, and be unclean until the evening; then they shall be clean”
(Lev 17:15).29

Concerning sexual relations: “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and
commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien (gēr) who resides
among you; for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these
abominations, and the land became defiled” (Lev 18:26-27).30 The Holiness source
asserts the connection between the sanctity of both the people and the land; therefore,
both the Israelites and the gērîm who sojourn there are responsible for maintaining the
land’s holiness.

Concerning acceptable offerings: “When anyone of the house of Israel or of the
aliens (gērîm) residing in Israel presents an offering, whether in payment of a vow or as a
freewill offering that is offered to YHWH as a burnt offering, to be acceptable in your
behalf it shall be a male without blemish, of the cattle, sheep, or goats” (Lev 22:18-19).31

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28 Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 191. The life-force is considered to be in the blood and, therefore, the
blood is sacred (Lev 17:14).
29 Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 619. Eating animals that have not been ritually slaughtered, but
that have died of themselves or were killed by other animals, is not strictly forbidden but results in
impurity. Both the native and resident alien must bathe themselves and launder their garments after eating
this type of animal.
30 Ibid., 620. Lev 18 begins by criticizing the morality of the Egyptians and Canaanites and
contrasts their laws with the laws of YHWH. The biblical laws prohibit sexual practices associated with
these cultures, such as promiscuity, incest, adultery, and non-procreative intercourse. Alter suggests that
sexual depravity was a means of stigmatizing the “cultural other” so that the Israelites would separate
themselves from these peoples.
31 Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 272. The defects that disqualify animals from the altar, such as blindness,
injury, discharge, or crushed testicles resemble those that disqualify priests in Lev 21:16-23. Milgrom
writes that “the common denominator is that they are notable to the observer.”
Concerning applicability to all residents of Israel: “You shall have one law for the alien (gēr) and for the citizen; for I am YHWH your God” (Lev 24:22). Milgrom writes that the “egalitarian treatment” of the resident alien stems from the theology of the H source. All those who reside in Israel, both native and alien are responsible for the holiness of the land. It follows that if there is one law for both the Israelite and the gēr, there will also be a provision for punishments concerning the gēr.

4. 2. 3. Punishment concerning the gēr

Penalties for sacrifice to Molech: “Any of the people of Israel, or of the aliens (gēr) who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone them to death” (Lev 20:2). This capital crime involves the acts of both idolatry and murder which defiles the land and endangers all of its inhabitants. Van Houten points out that this law which requires equal justice for the alien is consistent with the land theology of the Priestly laws.

Penalties for blasphemy: “One who blasphemes the name of YHWH shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens (gērîm) as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the Name, shall be put to death” (Lev 24:16).

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32 Ibid., 293-295. Lev 24:15-22 lists blasphemy and a number of civil laws in connection with lex talionis and extends the legislation to the Stranger residing in Israel. Distinctions are eliminated, not only between the greatest and the least in society, but also between the Israelite and the alien in the land.

33 The cult of Molech is mentioned in Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; and Jer 32:35. The human sacrifices to Molech were offered in the valley of Hinnom, outside of Jerusalem. The prohibition against child sacrifice to Molech is situated within the sexual prohibitions in Lev 18:6-23 and Lev 20:1-21, possibly because idolatry was likened to adultery (Hos 3:1).

34 Van Houten, The Alien in Israelite Law, 143.

35 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 651. Alter writes that this law, which seems to hold the mere invoking of the name of YHWH as a sin, later led to a ban of pronouncing the Tetragrammaton except by the high priest on the Day of Atonement.
writes that “law is inextricably bound to narrative.”

This decree is included in a narrative about the blasphemy and stoning of a man whose mother was an Israelite and whose father was an Egyptian, illustrating that the law applies to all residents (Lev 24:1-23).

4. 2. 4. Provisions concerning the gēr

Levitical laws connected to justice and social concerns legislate a moral obligation to relieve the needs of the underprivileged through a fair redistribution of resources. Reflecting the biblical ideals of justice and righteousness, these laws illustrate right relationship with God and neighbor. Leviticus includes the gēr along with the poor in its social provisions.

Provisions for food: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien (gēr); I am YHWH your God” (Lev 19:9-10). This decree is included within a set of laws that examine ritual and moral holiness. To be “holy” means emulating YHWH’s attributes of justice and righteousness, and striving to

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36 Milgrim, Leviticus, 291.
37 The counterpart to the resident alien (gēr) during the time of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness would be the non-Israelite accompanying the Israelites, perhaps a member of the “mixed crowd” (Exod 12:38) that left Egypt. Since the blasphemer’s father is an Egyptian, patrilineal descent would consider him Egyptian as well. In the narrative, blasphemy involves more than speaking in contempt of God; it also includes saying the Name, the Tetragrammaton, aloud in the imprecation.
38 Raphael, Concepts of Justice, 15.
39 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 626. The gleaning laws were social decrees meant to ensure that the needy, which included the gēr, would not go hungry. Since this is an agricultural economy, Alter likens these laws to a type of “poor tax.” Also see: Lev 23:22; Deut 24:19-20; and Ruth 2:2.
40 Milgrom, Leviticus, 214. Milgrom asserts the centrality of chapter 19 in the Levitical teachings, calling it a new “Decalogue.”
fulfill the ethical commands of YHWH. “Holiness” pertains to every aspect of Israelite life: worship, commerce, family life, relationship with the neighbor, and a special concern for the poor and marginalized.

*Provision to treat dependent kin as gērîm:* “If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens (gērîm and tōšābîm)” (Lev 25:35). The law implies that the dependent kin has become landless and should be offered hospitality and protection. Building on the decree to support misfortunate kin like resident aliens, the law states, “Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them” (Lev 25:36). This law stipulates that assistance should not come with the intent to profit from the misfortunes of another.

*Provision to redeem kin from gērîm:* “If resident aliens (gērîm) among you prosper, and any if your kin fall into difficulty with one of them and sell themselves to an alien (gēr), or to a branch of the alien’s family, after they have sold themselves they shall have the right of redemption” (Lev 25:47-48). The gērîm who dwell and prosper in the land are also compelled to comply with the law requiring the release of Israelite debtors

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41 Ibid., 176.
42 This law is included in four cases of worsening impoverishment: selling one’s land (Lev 25:25-28), dependence upon a kinsman for support (Lev 25:35-38), becoming a hired laborer for another Israelite (Lev 25:39-43), and selling oneself into debt slavery to a resident alien (Lev 25:47-55).
43 In connection to loans and interest, Deut 23:20 states, “You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite...On loans to a foreigner (nokrî) you may charge interest.” In the deuteronomical law, a distinction is made between interest-free loans of assistance to fellow Israelites and commercial loans made to foreigners. The lending law in Leviticus infers that the resident alien (gēr) is on a par with a kinsman.
44 Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 659. According to Alter, Israelites forced to sell themselves into indentured servitude to a non-Israelite have the right of redemption, whereas an alien may become a permanent slave. Although the gēr is compelled to follow Israelite law, the mention of “the branch of an alien’s family” indicates that the gēr does not eventually become an Israelite through assimilation. He may dwell and prosper in the land, but continues to hold the legal status of a non-Israelite.
when the Jubilee year arrives (Lev 25:54). The aforementioned passages contain provisions concerning the practice of social justice. There is one passage in Leviticus concerning the gēr that commands the practice of love.

4.2.5. Love the gēr

Command to love the gēr: “When an alien (gēr) resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien (gēr) who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien (gēr) as yourself, for you were aliens (gērîm) in the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:33-34). Lev 19:18 commands the Israelites to “love your neighbor as yourself,” but the law of love for the Stranger goes beyond the fellow Israelite. According to Milgrom, love can essentially be commanded because “the verb ‘love’ signifies not only an emotion or attitude but also deeds” such as providing hospitality and protection. Along with love, the Israelites are commanded to cultivate empathy for the Stranger through their own experience as strangers.

Israelites as gērîm and tôšābîm: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants (gērîm and tôšābîm)” (Lev 25:23). Although the land was promised to Abraham and his descendants, the true owner of the

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45 Milgrom, Leviticus, 307-308. The Year of Jubilee calls for liberty, the return of one’s ancestral lands, and redemption from debt and slavery (Lev 25:8-12). According to Milgrom, the seven-year land Sabbatical ritual was widely and regularly observed, but there is little evidence that the fifty-year Jubilee was ever observed. The Bible only hints that Jubilee law was enacted.

46 Also see: Deut 10:19 for the command to love the stranger (gēr). Exod 22:21 and 23:9 say that the Israelites shall not oppress a resident alien, but the laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy go further by commanding love.

47 Milgrom, Leviticus, 234.

48 Ramirez Kidd, Alterity and Identity in Israel, 99-100. Kidd says that the word pair gērîm and tôšābîm is a typical formula of P’s theology with tôšāb appearing only in the priestly literature. Kid asserts that the concept of YHWH as sole owner of the land is found throughout the Torah, but the idea of the Israelites as gērîm and tôšābîm has no pre-exilic parallel which points to Lev 25:23 as a late text.
land is YHWH. The passage implies that, ultimately, even the status of the native Israelite is as a sojourner in the eyes of God. In order to remain as residents, they must maintain their personal holiness and, thereby, preserve the sacredness of the land.

Although the Israelites themselves are depicted as sojourners (gērîm) in the Genesis and Exodus narratives, the law codes of Leviticus indicate that they are beginning to establish themselves in relation to other sojourners. A distinction is made between a person who is a native-born Israelite (‘ezrāḥ) and a non-Israelite resident alien (gēr). Despite this distinction, there is “one law for the alien (gēr) and for the citizen (‘ezrāḥ)” (Lev 24:22). For the Holiness source, since all the land is holy, all who reside on it must maintain holiness in their everyday lives as well. Not only Israelites, but also the resident aliens who sojourn in the land, must abide by the ritual and ethical statutes so that the land will not be polluted by idolatry and injustice. Violations ultimately lead to the expulsion of the land’s inhabitants (Lev 18:24-30).49 The central placement of Leviticus in the Torah implies the significance of this book for the final redactor whose theology asserted that we are all but strangers and sojourners (gērîm and tōšābîm) on this earth.

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49 This passage says, “The inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled” (Lev 18:27), presupposing that the other residents of the land, the Canaanites, have been dispossessed of the land because of their practices.
4.2.6. The tôšāb in Leviticus

Concerning the tôšāb as a hired or resident laborer: “No bound or hired servant ( tôšāb and šākîr) of the priest shall eat of the sacred donations” (Lev 22:10). Van Houten compares Lev 22:10-13 which determines who may eat the priest’s food with Exod 12:43-49 which regulates who may participate in the Passover meal. In the Exodus legislation, the foreigner ( bēn-nēkār) and the bound or hired worker ( tôšāb and šākîr) are not permitted to partake of the meal while slaves are allowed to partake if they have been circumcised. Van Houten does not mention that the circumcised gēr is also allowed to partake (Exod 12:47). In Leviticus, the consumed portions of the sacrificial offerings are restricted to priests and their immediate family, including persons that have been purchased into the household. Along with the zār, the bound or hired servant ( tôšāb and šākîr) are not included in the priest’s meal. In this passage, van Houten interprets zār as “foreigner” while the NRSV and NJPS translate it as “layperson.”

“You may eat what the land yields during its Sabbath, you, your male and female slaves, and your hired and bound laborers (šĕkîrĕkā and tôšābĕkā) who live with you” (Lev 25:6). Unlike Exod 23:10-11, where the land’s gleaning in the Sabbatical year

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50 Van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, 125-127. Van Houten points out that the word tôšāb occurs only in: Gen 23:4; Exod 12:45; Lev 22:10; 25:6, 23, 35, 40, 45, 47; Num 35:15; 1 Kgs17:1; 1 Chron 29:15; Ps 39:13. She asserts that while the terms gēr and tôšāb are often used interchangeably in the Priestly source, the meaning of gēr will later develop into a proselyte who is equal to an Israelite while the meaning of tôšāb as a temporary resident, unequal in status to a native, does not change over time.

51 Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 640. Alter points out that the phrase tôšāb and šākîr is a word pair meaning resident hired worker and does not refer to two entities.

52 Van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, 126-127. Van Houten posits that the need for this type of legislation surfaces because “the foreigner, slave, temporary resident and hired worker are members of the household.” If they lived and ate apart from the Israelite household, there would be no need for these laws.

53 Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 312. This passage seemingly contradicts Lev 25:5 where the Israelites are commanded to neither reap the aftergrowth of the harvest nor to gather the grapes of the unpruned vines so that the land might rest every seventh year. Milgrom explains that the landowner is not free to harvest as in normal years, when he can store and sell the harvest. Here the landowner and his household may only take what they themselves can eat to satisfy their immediate hunger.
provides food for the poor and the wild animals, here it provides food for the entire Israelite household. Provisions for the poor are made in Lev 19:9-10. Milgrom considers this passage as a “corrective” to the Exodus legislation which he sees as utopian and disregarding of the landowner. The Leviticus passage is particularly concerned with the landowner and all who live on his property, “family, slaves, and hirelings, provided that they live with and under the authority of the landowner.” According to Milgrom, since the gēr is not a part of the landowner’s household, he is classified with the poor in Lev 19:10 and 23:22.55

“If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as a hired or bound laborer (šākîr and tôšāb)” (Lev 25:39-40). Milgrim includes this passage in a collection of Levitical laws concerning destitution and redemption. When a debtor has lost his landholdings and still cannot repay a loan, he and his family enter the household of the creditor. As a hired laborer, the debtor receives wages which enable him to pay off his debt and allows for the remission of those debts in the Jubilee year.56 The law stipulates that the debtor, a fellow Israelite, may not be treated as a slave, but it does not necessarily eradicate slavery in Israel.

Concerning the acquisition of slaves: “As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens (tōšābîm) residing with you,

54 Ibid., 312-313.
55 Ibid., 313. Milgrim points out that since both the gēr and the poor were outsiders to the Israelite household, their support depended on individual generosity rather than on patriarchal obligation.
56 Ibid., 302. Milgrim writes that “if inherited land is alienated, the nearest kinsman is required to buy it back; if he fails, the land automatically returns to the owner at the Jubilee; simultaneously his debt is cancelled, and he begins his life anew.”
and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property” (Lev 25:44-45). Israelites may only take strangers, not other Israelites, as slaves since all Israelites are already the possession of YHWH (Lev 25:42).57

Van Houten interprets gēr as “alien,” tôšāb as “temporary resident,” and šākîr as “hired worker” and suggests that the Priestly redactor used them interchangeably, especially in Lev 25.58 In examining the Levitical passages concerning the tôšāb, I find the meaning to be somewhat more nuanced, especially when it is paired with another word. When tôšāb is paired with šākîr, the word pair is related to hired labor, whereas when the word pair tôšābîm and gērîm appear together, it connotes a resident alien or sojourner.

4. 2. 7. The nokrî in Leviticus

Unlike the gēr, the nokrî is not a resident alien, but a “foreigner.” There is only one mention of the nokrî in Leviticus.

Concerning unacceptable offerings: “Nor shall you accept any such animals from a foreigner (nokrî) to offer as food to your God; since they are mutilated, with a blemish on them, they shall not be accepted on your behalf” (Lev 22:25). In this passage, animals that are blemished or mutilated are unacceptable for sacrifice, whether they come from the house of Israel, the resident alien, or the foreigner. Since the resident alien has a different relation to the Israelite cult than the foreigner, the gēr is allowed to make

57 Ibid., 303-306. Milgrim points out that slavery was widespread in the Ancient Near East, including in Israel, with the defaulting debtor supplying the basic source of slavery. Although the H source attempted to abolish the enslavement of fellow Israelites, this may have been more of a utopian ideal rather than fact.
58 Van Houten, The Alien in Israelite Law, 125-130.
offerings along with the Israelite, while the nokrî is only mentioned as a possible source of provision for the offering.\textsuperscript{59}

4. 2. 8. The zār in Leviticus

The word zār can mean strange, foreign, completely different, or forbidden. In Leviticus, the term is linked to the priestly boundaries of holy/unholy and priest/layperson, thereby taking on a primarily cultic meaning.

Concerning holy in contrast to unholy: “Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censor, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; they offered unholy (zārāh) fire before the Lord” (Lev 10:1). As mentioned earlier, the narrative about Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, is meant to illustrate a strict distinction between what is acceptable and unacceptable, or holy and unholy.\textsuperscript{60}

Concerning lay persons in contrast to priests: “No lay person (zār) shall eat of the sacred donations” (Lev 22:10); “If a priest’s daughter marries a layman (zār), she shall not eat of the offerings of the sacred donations” (Lev 22:12). Dramosch considers the theme of separation as a form of holiness.\textsuperscript{61} The Israelites are told to separate themselves from foreigners, but even the lay Israelites are considered foreigners when compared to the priestly cult.

In conclusion, the gēr in Leviticus is a resident alien who is landless but is given legal equality with the citizen. Since the gēr is settled in YHWH’s land, he is entitled to

\textsuperscript{59}Milgrom, Leviticus, 273.

\textsuperscript{60}Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 579-580. Alter writes that the adjective zārāh can mean “alien, strange, or unfit” indicating a person or substance that is not fit to be in the presence of the holy sanctuary. When the “alien” fire comes before the divine presence, God’s sacred fire consumes the unholy fire.

\textsuperscript{61}Dramosch, “Leviticus,” 74.
God’s protection but must keep the land holy by following the commandments concerning the *gēr*. In Leviticus, the only references to the *nokrî* and *zār* are linked to cultic concerns. The *nokrî* is not allowed to provide a blemished animal for an Israelite’s offering while the use of *zār* in these passages is not as an understanding of foreign persons, but as a distinction between holy/profane and priest/layperson.

There is a growing sense of separation in Leviticus, such as separation from uncleanness (Lev 15:31) and separation from other peoples (Lev 20:26). Separation is linked to holiness, holiness of the people and of the land. The H source concludes with the promise of divine blessing and the threat of divine punishment in connection to obedience/disobedience (Lev 26). Rewards include prosperity, peace, and security with God dwelling in the midst of the people of Israel. Punishment brings famine, war, and displacement with God’s hostility leveled against the people. “The land will be deserted by them, and enjoy its sabbatical years by lying desolate without them, while they make amends for their iniquity” (Lev 26:43)\(^2\) The gift of the land comes with responsibilities; observance of proper cultic ritual and the practice of moral ethics are central. Since all the land belongs to YHWH, all of its inhabitants are considered as Strangers and Sojourners there.

4. 3. The Stranger in Numbers: *Israel is in on the Move*

The fourth book of the Torah, Numbers, relates Israel’s ongoing journey in the wilderness as the people slowly progress towards, not only a Promised Land, but towards

\(^2\) Rather than cultic offerings, the people’s remorse and God’s remembrance of the land and the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob restore the land to holiness. This foreshadows later prophetic teachings concerning the significance of internal repentance over sacrificial offerings. See: Isa 1:12-17; Jer 7:1-7; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8.
a new identity as free men and women liberated and guided by YHWH. Numbers relates Israel’s oftentimes difficult relationship with YHWH and with one another, and their growing awareness of “separateness” from other nations.

In Leviticus, Israel was encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai receiving ritual and moral directives from YHWH, through Moses, that would lead to holiness and new life. In Numbers, the tribes are on the move and challenged to follow this way of holiness despite difficult trials on their journey. The narrative spans forty years of wandering in the wilderness, beginning with the Israelites’ march from Sinai into the desert and ending with the people encamped on the plains of Moab, poised to enter the land of Canaan.

In examining the motif of the Stranger in the book of Numbers, I will once again consider the concepts of displacement and insiders/outsiders, both in connection to fellow Israelites and foreign peoples. I will also survey the references to the gēr, nokrî, and zār in Numbers in order to see Israel’s developing perception of these peoples as the Israelites form their own unique identity as a people set apart from other nations (Num 23:9).

4.3.1. Insiders/Outsiders among Fellow Israelites

Numbers, like Leviticus, is concerned with defining boundaries of outsiders/insiders. The book begins with a census of the wilderness community prior to

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63 Jacob Milgrom, Numbers (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), xi-xxi. Milgrom points out that the book of “Numbers” is called Bēmidbar (“in the wilderness”) in the Hebrew Scriptures. He posits that the primary literary sources in Numbers are Priestly and Epic (J and E), although he also sees some borrowing from the D source.

64 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 676. Alter writes that Num 1-10 involves preparing for the journey while Num 11-36 depicts Israel on the move. He asserts that the “text associates movement with trouble.” As soon as the journey begins, we hear about a “rabble” (Num 11:4) that complain over their physical discomforts and look back to a more secure life in the land of Egypt.
the march through the desert, with the primary aim of the census as a military
conscription of all males over the age of twenty (Num 1:3). This is the rebellious first
generation of the Exodus who, outside of Joshua and Caleb, will never see the Promised
Land (Num 14:20-24). The census in Numbers 26 lists the new generation who will
complete the journey and settle in the land promised to Abraham. A differentiation is
made between the outsider who is rebellious and the insider who remains faithful to
YHWH.65

Within the camp, a hierarchy is established creating boundaries between the
Priestly cult and laypersons. Ackerman describes “concentric circles of holiness” with
the Tabernacle and Moses at the center, and with the priests followed by the Levites
representing the circles radiating from the center.66 Any layperson (zār) who approaches
the Tabernacle is threatened with death (Num 3:9).67 Some other references to cultic
concerns in relation to establishing boundaries are: persons with a skin condition, bodily
discharge, or contact with a corpse are separated from the camp (Num 5:1-4);68 the
Nazarites separate themselves from others through their religious vows (Num 6:1-21).69

65 Milgrom, Numbers, 219. Milgrom calls the members of the first census the “generation of the
Exodus” and those of the second census the “generation of the Conquest.” He contrasts the faithlessness of
the first generation with the fidelity and courage of the new generation, who is seen as more worthy to enter
the Promised Land. The two lists bracket the wilderness journey, with the first census focused on
preparations for the journey and the second concerned with dividing the land after the conquest.
66 James S. Ackerman, “Numbers,” in The Literary Guide to the Bible (ed. Robert Alter and Frank
priests and Levites served as protective boundaries between the Presence and the Israelites, so that the
people would not be consumed by God’s holiness.
67 Milgrom, Numbers, 17. Milgrom translates zār as “outsider,” but I prefer “layperson” since the
passage is distinguishing between those within the Priestly cult and the Israelite who is outside of the cult.
68 Ibid., 33. Milgrom points out that since the camp is holy, it must not be contaminated by
persons who are rendered unclean by these afflictions and impurities. “Outside” the camp differs from
“inside” in the respect that the person “outside” is out of the contamination range of the sanctuary.
69 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 710-711. Alter writes that the Nazarite man or woman was “set
apart” to perform special religious acts that included: abstention from all products of the grape, abstention
from haircutting, and avoidance of contact with a corpse. He describes these acts as “extraordinary” in
comparison with other laypersons.
and the Levites are separated from other Israelites to serve at the Tent of Meeting (Num 8:14-15). These cultic boundaries are created before the Israelites set off on their journey into the wilderness.

When the camp begins to move, the narrative centers on the theme of rebellion as determining the boundaries of insiders/outsiders among the Israelites. The journey begins with the people’s complaints, YHWH’s anger, and Moses’ intercession on behalf of the people (Num 11:1-3). YHWH has provided manna for their food, but a “rabble” among the Israelites incites complaint about the quality of YHWH’s food in comparison to the sumptuous feasts in Egypt (Num 11:4-6). When Moses’ spies return from Canaan with reports of its powerful inhabitants, the Israelites become demoralized and call for a return to Egypt (Num 14:1-4). It is only through Moses’ intercession that YHWH does not kill all of the Israelites for their faithlessness and rebellion (Num 14:13-23). Since the rebellious Exodus generation continue to look back to Egypt as a place of security and provision, they will remain outsiders to the covenant promises and will never

70 Milgrom, Numbers, 62-63. Milgrom says that the hand laying ceremony performed by the people and the elevation offering performed by Aaron (Num 8:10-11) transfer the Levites from the ranks of the Israelites to the property of YHWH.

71 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 676-677. Alter posits that the repetition of Israel’s rebellion in both Exodus and Numbers resembles a type-scene, but instead of the same scene with different characters, the scene involves the same characters, Israel, Moses, and God. Alter describes the scheme of the recurring scene as: the people’s murmuring, God’s wrath and punishment, and Moses’ intercession, with the repetition serving to intensify the theme of rebellion.

72 Milgrom, Numbers, 83. Milgrom interprets the rabble as the “riffraff” in their midst. He says that this refers to the non-Israelites, or “mixed multitude,” who joined them when they left Egypt and who now are inciting complaint.

73 The spies report that the land of Canaan is “flowing with milk and honey” but its inhabitants are too powerful for the Israelites to overcome (Num 13:25-33). Caleb is the only member of the spies who disagrees, arguing for the occupation.
see the Promised Land. The insiders who will see the fulfillment of YHWH’s promises are the faithful new generation, including Joshua and Caleb.

Two other examples of rebellion that make insiders into outsiders are Aaron and Miriam’s challenge to Moses’ authority (Num 12:1-16) and the revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num 16). In the first account, both Miriam and Aaron assert, “Has YHWH spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (Num 12:2). As punishment for speaking against Moses, Miriam’s skin became “leprous” and she was separated from the rest of the camp for seven days. In the second narrative, the men confront Moses and Aaron saying, “You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and YHWH is among them. So why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of YHWH?”

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74 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 677. Alter writes that the rebellious generation “cannot free itself from the slave mentality it brought with it from Egypt.”

75 The reasoning for the differentiation between the outsiders and insiders is given in Num 14:22-24, “None of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it. But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it.”

76 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 741. Miriam and Aaron’s protest begins with their reference to Moses’ Cushite wife. Alter questions whether this wife is Zipporah or a second wife that Moses has taken from Nubia or Ethiopia. In either case, they are pointing out that the wife comes from a different ethnic-national group and that her foreignness somehow lowers Moses’ worthiness as a prophetic leader.

77 Katherine Doob Sakenfield, “Numbers,” in Women’s Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 52. Sakenfield points out that it is interesting that Miriam is the only one punished since she is given a positive depiction in other narratives (Ex 2:4-8; 15:20-21) and the prophet Micah would later remember her as a leader together with Moses and Aaron (Mic 6:4). Sakenfield speculates that Aaron was not punished with the skin disease because of his role as the high priest and the connection to impurity in contracting this disease; she posits this as a “narrative impossibility.” Also, according to Sakenfield, having Aaron cast out from the camp would upset the balance of leadership between prophet and priest that has been established thus far. It is of interest to mention that in Num 11:26-30 when Eldad and Medad’s prophesying is questioned by Joshua, Moses replies, “Would that all YHWH’s people were prophets, and that YHWH would put his spirit on them.”

78 Milgrom, Numbers, 129-131. Milgrom points out that four separate rebellions are contained in the narrative: the Levites against Aaron; Dathan and Abiram against Moses; the tribal chieftains against Aaron; and the entire community against Moses and Aaron. The chief antagonist, the Levite Korah, is associated with all the groups. The rebels’ challenge to the exclusive holiness of the priestly class recalls that all of Israel is a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6).
widespread. The entire households of the rebels were swallowed up by the earth and when other Israelites protest the punishment, YHWH sends a plague on them.\textsuperscript{79} In both narratives, when the authority of the legitimate prophet or priest is challenged, the rebels suffer YHWH’s anger and punishment and become outsiders, either by displacement or death. As the Israelites journey through the wilderness for forty years, more boundaries will be established, especially in connection to peoples viewed as strange or foreign. I will examine these new developments by, once again, surveying the passages concerning the gēr, nokrī, and zār.

4. 3. 2. The gēr in Numbers

*Concerning Passover:* “Any alien (gēr) residing among you who wishes to keep the Passover to YHWH shall do so according to the statute…you shall have one statute for both the resident alien (gēr) and the native” (Num 9:14).\textsuperscript{80}

*Concerning offerings:* “An alien (gēr) who lives with you, or takes up permanent residence among you, and wishes to offer an offering by fire…shall do as you do…You and the alien (gēr) who resides with you shall have the same law and the same ordinance” (Num 15:14-16).\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{79} The punishment of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram is explained as a “reminder to the Israelites that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, shall approach to offer incense before YHWH” (Num 16:40)

\textsuperscript{80} Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 726-27. Alter says this law reflects an Ancient Near Eastern practice of allowing resident aliens to adopt the local cult in the time of their sojourning. No formal conversion is implied, although a similar law in Exodus 12:43-49 requires circumcision before the gēr can participate in the Passover. Alter believes the stipulation is implied here by “according to the statute of the Passover.”

\textsuperscript{81} Milgrom, *Numbers*, 120. Milgrom asserts that the gēr, in this passage, specifies “a man of another tribe or district who, coming to sojourn in a place where he was not strengthened by his own kin, put himself under the protection of a clan or powerful chief.” He says that the one who is “among you” refers to the nokrī, a foreigner who sojourns or visits and may offer sacrifice provided they follow the cultic laws. I would agree that the term gēr can sometimes mean an Israelite from another tribe, but I would
Concerning atonement for unintentional sins: “All the congregation of the Israelites shall be forgiven, as well as the aliens (גֶּרֶם) residing among them, because the whole people was involved in the error” (Num 15:26). 82

Concerning intentional sins: “For both the native among the Israelites and the alien (גֶּר) residing among them, you shall have the same law for anyone who acts in error...whoever acts high-handedly, whether native or alien (גֶּר), affronts YHWH, and shall be cut off from among the people” (Num 15:29-30). 83

Concerning purification with the ashes of the Red Heifer: “This shall be a perpetual statute for the Israelite and for the alien (גֶּר) residing among them” (Num 19:10). This legislation concerns the ashes of the Red Heifer that were used to purify a person who had been contaminated by a corpse. 84 The גֶּר is included because personal defilement of any person dwelling in the land, whether native or resident alien, defiles the sanctuary.

In examining the laws mentioning the גֶּר in Numbers, it is evident that they are primarily concerned with cultic observances, although there is one law that relates to cities of refuge. “These six cities shall serve as refuge for the Israelites, for the resident alien or transient alien (גֶּר and תֹּשָּׁב) among them, so that anyone who kills a person argues against Milgrom’s interpretation concerning the nokrî since the terms that are employed in this passage are גֶּר and תֹּשָּׁבִים. The nokrî is not permitted to participate in cultic ritual. 82

Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 758. This law refers to inadvertent wrongdoing where the person is either not aware of the law or is not conscious of what he/she is doing. Wrongful acts by individuals incur guilt on the whole community which then requires atonement and expiation by the priest. 83

Ibid., 758. Alter writes that “with a high hand” suggests bold rebellion, the legal antithesis to the inadvertent wrongdoing.

Ibid., 778-780. Alter says that the color red may be associated with the significance of blood in the purification ritual that follows the heifer’s slaughter. The blood is sprinkled toward the Tent of Meeting because the slaughter and ritual take place outside of the camp. The ashes of the cow are made sacred through the offering and must be kept ritually clean outside of the camp to be used for purification when needed.
without intent may flee there” (Num 35:15). Cities of refuge were necessary to protect a person, who had unintentionally killed someone, from blood vengeance before a trial could be held.\textsuperscript{85} Fleeing from blood vengeance is also one of the reasons that a person became a gēr.\textsuperscript{86} Since the nokrî is not mentioned in Numbers, I will continue my survey with the zār.

4. 3. 3. The zār in Numbers

Concerning lay persons as outsiders: “When the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up; any outsider (zār) who comes near shall be put to death” (Num 1:51);\textsuperscript{87} “You shall make a register of Aaron and his descendants; it is they who shall attend to the priesthood, and any outsider (zār) who comes near shall be put to death” (Num 3:10);\textsuperscript{88} “Those who were to camp in front of the tabernacle…were Moses and Aaron and Aaron’s sons, having charge of the rites of the sanctuary…any outsider (zār) who came near was to be put to death” (Num 3:38); “Eleazar the priest took the bronze censors…a reminder to the Israelites that no outsider (zār), who is not of the descendants of Aaron, shall approach to offer incense before the Lord” (Num 16:39-40);\textsuperscript{89} “They are

\textsuperscript{85} Milgrom, \textit{Numbers}, 291. According to Milgrom, the establishment of refuge cities was necessitated by the practice of blood vengeance in the Ancient Near East where the blood of the victim was typically avenged by the nearest kinsman. With this law, some protection is afforded to the accused so that the verdict of deliberate or involuntary manslaughter can be made by the judicial system not by the bereaved kin.


\textsuperscript{87} Alter, \textit{The Five Books of Moses}, 687. In a cultic context, the zār refers to a layperson who is not a member of the priestly cult.

\textsuperscript{88} Milgrom, \textit{The Five Books of Moses}, 17. Not only laypersons, but even the Levites, could be viewed as outsiders in connection to the cult. Milgrom writes that whereas the Levites are “dedicated,” the priests are “sanctified.” Only the priest, and never the Levites, are authorized to have access to the sacred areas and objects.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 140. This law follows the narrative concerning the revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram who asserted that all of the congregation of Israel were holy, not only the descendants of Aaron. Milgrom says that where zār typically refers to a layperson in the cultic legislation, here it may also signify a “disqualified priest.”
attached to you in order to perform the duties of the tent of meeting...No outsider (zār) shall approach you” (Num 18:4); “I give your priesthood as a gift; any outsider (zār) who approaches shall be put to death” (Num 18:7).90

Concerning the “ unholy”: “Nadab and Abihu died before the Lord when they offered unholy (zārāh) fire before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai” (Num 3:4).91 In conclusion, the laws mentioning the gēr and zār in Numbers are primarily concerned with cultic matters. Similar to Leviticus, the zār in Numbers concerns the contrast between holy/profane and priests/laypersons. There is no mention of the nokrî in Numbers.

4. 3. 4. The Stranger as Foreign Nations

As the Israelites sojourn in the wilderness, they become increasingly involved with foreign nations. In Numbers, these foreign peoples are not labeled as gēr, nokrî, or zār, but are linked with their country of origin. Some examples in the narratives are:

Moses attempts to form an alliance with his Midianite father-in-law (Num 10:29-32);92 The Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, and Canaanites are described by the Israelite spies as being bigger and stronger than the Israelites (Num 13:28-33);93

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90 Ibid., 147. According to Milgrom, the custody of the Tabernacle was divided between the Levites on the outside, the priest on the inside, and both at the entrance. The layperson was admitted with his offering to the entrance of the Tabernacle courtyard. Both the Levites and the laypersons were expected to keep within their prescribed boundaries or face dire consequences.

91 Also see: Num 26:61 and Lev 10:1-2 for another account of this narrative.

92 Milgrom, Numbers, 78. The father-in-law is called Hobab, Jethro, and Reuel in different accounts which leads to the conclusion that the narratives may draw on a variety of ancient traditions about an alliance and kinship between Moses and the Kenite clan of the Midianites. Milgrom asserts that Midian refers to a confederation of people, one of which is the Kenites, a clan of smiths and priests who settled among the tribe of Judah (Judg 1:16). According to Milgrom, since Moses’ father-in-law was a worshipper of YHWH (Exod 18:10-12), it raises the possibility that Moses learned of the deity from him during his sojourn in Midian. When Moses invites his father-in-law to accompany them, Hobab chooses to return to his own homeland, but then agrees to offer the Israelites guidance through the desert.

93 Ibid., 105. These peoples represent some of the traditional enemies of Israel. According to Milgrom, the Amalekites were a nomadic tribe who were probably the dominant nation in the region of the Negev and Sinai Peninsula. Sources of water and pasture land were likely a point of contention between
Amalekites and Canaanites were YHWH’s punishment for Israel’s rebellion (Num 14:43-45).<sup>94</sup>

As the Israelites draw closer to the Promised Land, the conflicts with foreign peoples intensify. For example: the Edomites refuse passage to Israel (Num 20:14-21);<sup>95</sup> Israel comes into conflict with a Canaanite king (Num 21:1-3);<sup>96</sup> the Amorite kings Sihon and Og are defeated by the Israelites (Num 21:21-35);<sup>97</sup> the elders of Moab and Midian pay Balaam to curse Israel (Num 22-24);<sup>98</sup> the Israelite’s worship of Baal of Peor is...
linked to the women of Moab (Num 25:1-5); an Israelite man brings a Midianite woman into his family and both of them are executed (Num 25:6-15); YHWH commands the Israelites to “harass the Midianites” (Num 25:16-18); War against Midian (Num 31); the Israelites are commanded to “drive out the inhabitants of Canaan” (Num 31);

99 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 817-818. Alter asserts that, although there is no obvious link between this narrative and the tale of Balaam which precedes it, the themes of Israel’s blessing in the story of Balaam and Israel’s apostasy in the Baal of Peor narrative reflects “the editorial decision…to represent Israel dialectically.” Israel is depicted as both a holy nation in a special relationship with YHWH, and as a people who are vulnerable to the beliefs of the surrounding peoples. According to Alter, the irony in these two accounts is that Balaam’s oracle declared Israel as “a people set apart” but in the following narrative, we see how interconnected the Israelites are with their pagan neighbors “both sexually and cultically.” In the Baal of Peor narrative, the temptation comes, specifically, from the women of Moab.

100 Ibid., 818-820. In punishment for the apostasy of Baal of Peor, YHWH commands Moses to impale the leaders of the people, but Moses asks only for the guilty individuals to be executed. (Num 25:4-5). Before the order is carried out, an Israelite man “brought a Midianite woman into his family, in the sight of Moses and the whole congregation of the Israelites” (Num 25:6), resulting in the execution of the couple at the hand of Phineas, the grandson of Aaron. Alter points out that the story began with Moabite women, not Midianites, but that the two peoples are linked in the Balaam tale as well. He writes that the information concerning the slain man and woman, at the end of the narrative, reveals their status as “a Simeonite prince cohabitating with a Midianite princess” which serves as a dangerous model of “religious and sexual amalgamation.” The narrative also recalls YHWH’s command to execute the leaders of the people in connection to Baal of Peor. It is of interest to note that Moses, who is married to a Midianite woman, remains silent in this narrative. Alter asserts that Israel’s attitude towards neighboring peoples reflected both “xenophobia, a fear of being drawn off its own spiritual path by its neighbors, and an openness to alliance and interchange with the surrounding peoples.”

101 Following the apostasy and punishment, YHWH commands Moses to “harass the Midianites and defeat them” (Num 25:17) which essentially amounts to a call for war against Midian. Prior to this declaration, the actions of Phineas draw praise from YHWH and he grants him a “covenant of peace” (Num 25:12) and the promise of “perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites” (Num 25:13). There is irony in the concept of the “covenant of peace” since the “peace” is granted to a man that enacted a violent execution and the covenant is made by a God whose commands concerning foreign peoples also become increasingly violent.

102 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 843. YHWH’s command leads to a holy war (ḥērem) to “execute YHWH’s vengeance on Midian” (Num 1:3). Initially, the Israelite army killed all the males of Midian, and they took the women and children captive, along with the spoils and booty (Num 31:7-12). When Moses saw that the captives were allowed to live, he ordered the Israelites to “kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves” (Num 31:17-18). Alter stresses that the command to massacre women and children comes from Moses and not from YHWH, and that attempts to “explain” it lead to what he calls “strained apologetics.” Alter points out that the practice of massacring conquered peoples was widespread in the Ancient Near East, and that in this narrative “the biblical outlook sadly failed to transcend its historical context.” Moses’ orders also seem to conflict with his own marriage to a Midianite woman. Alter ascribes the disparity to either two conflicting traditions in the texts, or to the editor’s intention to depict Moses as “impelled to demonstrate his unswerving dedication to protecting Israel from alien seduction” after the incident of Baal of Peor.
In looking at these narratives concerning Israel’s relationship to foreign peoples, there is evidence of growing enmity between Israel and foreign peoples, with Israel’s antagonism escalating the nearer that they approach the Promised Land. As the wandering in the wilderness nears its end, YHWH calls for war against Midian and orders the displacement of the Canaanites.

4. 4. The Stranger in Deuteronomy: Israel is on the edge of the Promised Land

The setting of the Book of Deuteronomy is the plains of Moab, with Israel on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Moses is speaking to the Israelites in order to “expound the law” (Deut 1:5) and to encourage them to move forward. He recalls the covenant with the ancestors, the revelation at Horeb/Sinai, and the people’s rebellion and punishment in the wilderness (Deut 1-3). Moses’ historical review concludes with an

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103 Ibid., 855. The Israelites are camped on the plains of Moab and given Moses’ final instructions to “drive out all the inhabitants of the land...destroy all their figured stones, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all their high places...if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides; they shall trouble you in the land where you are settling. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them” (Num 33:52-56). According to Alter, the act of eliminating the entire Canaanite population was never implemented, instead the command is “retrojected onto a purportedly historical narrative” as the theological ideal of a later generation.

104 Bernard M. Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” in The Jewish Study Bible (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 356-361. Deuteronomy, the “second law,” is called dēḇārīm, the “book of words,” in the Hebrew Bible. Levinson dates the earliest form of Deuteronomy to scribes linked to Jerusalem’s royal court in the seventh century BCE, but points out that there are “layers of tradition” in the final form of Deuteronomy representing Israel’s pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic experience. In its final form, Priestly editors joined it to the newly established Torah/Pentateuch to serve as its conclusion. Levinson asserts that Deuteronomy provides the foundation of Judaism and that “interpretation is directly and indirectly a theme in Deuteronomy” as the book poses a tension between tradition and the needs of a new generation.

105 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 880. Alter asserts that the verb bē’ēr, meaning “to expound” or “to explain” provides the primary rationale for Deuteronomy. The teaching that has already been represented in the earlier accounts requires further explanation. He writes that “the act of expounding or explaining...announces the intellectualist theme, in all likelihood drawing on Hebrew Wisdom traditions and setting off this book from the preceding four.”

106 Ibid., 872. Alter points out that, since the first generation of the Exodus would never see the Promised Land, most of Moses’ audience would not yet have been born at the time of the Exodus event. In making the new generation direct participants in past events, a sense of collective identity and moral responsibility is formed.
exhortation to “hear the statutes and ordinances” (Deut 4:1) because “you have seen for yourselves what YHWH did” (Deut 4:3). In past narratives, “seeing” and “hearing” are linked to YHWH’s response to displacement and suffering, and now Israel’s “seeing” and “hearing” correspond to witnessing YHWH’s saving acts and obeying the covenant statutes.

Moses’ first address in Deuteronomy 1-5 recalls the past, while the rest of the book looks forward to the future and the establishment of a society that walks in the “way of YHWH” by loving YHWH with all of one’s “heart, soul, and might” (Deut 6:4-5) As Israel is developing their identity as YHWH’s people, they are also defining the parameters of their relationships with strangers. The Stranger in Deuteronomy, as in Leviticus and Numbers, will be considered as the gēr, nokrî, and zār, but the Stranger will also be encountered in the foreign nations that either surround or occupy the Promised Land.

4.4.1 The gēr in Deuteronomy

Concerning Justice: “Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien (gēr)” (Deut 1:16), “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether

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107 Ibid., 897-899. According to Alter, the imperative šēma’, “hear,” is a signature term in Deuteronomy meaning “listen, absorb, understand, and obey.” The Deuteronomist insists that Israel “hear” YHWH, but in keeping with the biblical laws against cult images, asserts that Israel only “sees” YHWH through his acts in history.

108 Ibid., 912. Alter says that “love” as well “heart, soul, and might” are themes of special concern to the Deuteronomist. Love is linked to covenant love (ḥesed). The “heart” is not only associated with emotions, but is seen as the “seat of understanding” in the Bible. The “soul” or “being” is the “essential self” and “might” refers to all of one’s strength.

109 Ramirez Kidd, Alterity and Identity in Israel, 112-113. All those who are seen as “members of your community,” including the resident alien, must be given equal access to justice. Ramirez Kidd compares the role of the Stranger in other Ancient Near Eastern literature with the Hebrew Bible and
other Israelites or aliens (gērîm) who reside in your land in one of your towns…otherwise they might cry to YHWH against you, and you would incur guilt” (Deut 24:14);\textsuperscript{110} “You shall not deprive a resident alien (gēr) or an orphan, of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge” (Deut 24:17);\textsuperscript{111} “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back for it; it shall be left for the alien (gēr), the orphan, and the widow…When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien (gēr), the orphan, and the widow…When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien (gēr), the orphan, and the widow” (Deut 24:19-21);\textsuperscript{112} “Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien (gēr), the orphan, and the widow of justice” (Deut 27:19).

Concerning the Sabbath and Festivals: “You shall not do any work, you or your sons or daughters, or your male or female slaves…or the resident alien (gēr) in your towns” (Deut 5:14); “You shall keep the festival of weeks to YHWH your God…Rejoice

\textsuperscript{110} Van Houten, The Alien in Israelite Law, 93-94. This law protects the hired laborer, whether he is an Israelite or resident alien. The employer must pay the wages on a daily basis or the worker will “cry to YHWH.” Van Houten says that these types of social laws “further Deuteronomy’s goal of creating an economic system which supports those on the fringes, those who have no land of their own.” She argues that the law recognizes ethnic distinction, but “treats socioeconomic status as more important than ethnic identity.”

\textsuperscript{111} Ramirez, Kidd, Alterity and Identity in Israel, 35-36. According to Ramirez Kidd, the triad “stranger, orphan, widow” is a Deuteronomic formula which names persons who are seen as dependents in Israelite society. He writes that the gēr in this triad is “part of that group of helpless and marginalized people of the late pre-exilic Israel for whose material well-being the deuteronomistic code was concerned.” Although other Ancient Near Eastern literature names the pair “widow and orphan” as the needy in society, Deuteronomy is unique in adding the Stranger to this formula.

\textsuperscript{112} Van Houten, The Alien in Israelite Law, 97-98. These laws give the alien, orphan, and widow the right to the gleanings of the harvest. Van Houten points out that although the alien and the Israelite are granted equal rights before the law (Deut 1:16), the gleaning laws make it clear that they do not have the same social standing. The alien cannot enforce the gleaning laws, but is dependent on the Israelite to conform to them.

\textsuperscript{113} This curse, included in a set of twelve imprecations, is part of a ceremony that links entry into the Promised Land with obedience to YHWH’s commandments.
before YHWH, your God, you and your sons and daughters, your male and female
slaves…as well as the stranger (gēr), the orphan, and the widow who is among you”
(Deut 16:10-11); “You shall keep the festival of booths for seven days, when you have
gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine press…Rejoice during
your festival, you and your sons and daughters, your male and female slaves…the
strangers (gērîm), the orphans, and widows in your towns” (Deut 16:13-14).\textsuperscript{114}

*Concerning Dietary Laws:* “You may not eat anything that dies of itself; you may
give it to the aliens (gērîm) residing in your towns for them to eat, or you may sell it to a
foreigner (nokrî)” (Deut 14:21).\textsuperscript{115}

*Concerning Tithes:* “Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your
produce for that year…the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with
you, as well as the resident aliens (gērîm), the orphans and the widows in your towns, do
not neglect them” (Deut 14:28-29); “You, together with the Levites and the aliens (gērîm)
who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that YHWH your God has
given to you and your house…When you have finished paying all the tithe of your
produce…giving it to the Levites, the aliens (gērîm), the orphans, and the widows, so that
they may eat their fill within your towns” (Deut 26:11-13).\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{114} Van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, 90-92. These laws are also concerned with justice
since all members of the community, Israelites, strangers, orphans, and widows are included in the days of
rest and celebration. Van Houten says that, although the aliens are included in these feasts, they are not
included in the Passover regulations (Deut 16:1-8). She asserts that the Passover observance in
Deuteronomy is intended only for those who share the common history of the Exodus, not aliens. The
Sabbath, along with the festivals of Booths and Weeks, celebrate creation and the abundant gifts of
YHWH, and therefore include all members of society.

\textsuperscript{115} Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 952. This law refers to an animal that has died of natural
causes rather than being ritually slaughtered. Alter writes that, since the resident alien is viewed as
economically disadvantaged, he is an object of charity and may be “given” the carcass, while the foreigner
is assumed to have the economic resources to pay for the animal.

\textsuperscript{116} Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” 398. The yearly tithe requires the Israelites to set aside a tenth of
their crops and livestock for the central sanctuary. Every third year, the tithe is shifted from the sanctuary
to address the needs of the disadvantaged and landless in the community, which includes the Levites.
**Warnings against Israel’s disobedience:** “Aliens (gērîm) residing among you shall ascend above you higher and higher, while you shall descend lower and lower. They shall lend to you but you shall not lend to them; they shall be the head and you shall be the tail” (Deut 28:43).

**Concerning the Assembly of Israel:** “You shall not abhor any of the Edomites, for they are your kin. You shall not abhor any of the Egyptians, because you were an alien (gēr) residing in their land. The children of the third generation that are born to them may be admitted to the assembly of YHWH” (Deut 23:7-8). The mention of Egyptians as included in the assembly is unusual considering the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt. Edomites, who are kin, are included in the assembly, while Ammonites and Moabites, who are also kin, are excluded.

**Concerning Covenant renewal:** “You stand assembled today, all of you, before YHWH your God, the leaders of your tribes, your elders, your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens (gērîm) who are in your camp…to enter into the covenant of YHWH your God…in order that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God” (Deut 29:10-13); “Assemble the people, men, women, and children, as well as the aliens (gērîm) residing in your towns” (Deut 31:12).

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117 Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 1016. This is included in a series of curses against Israel if they do not obey the commandments. Alter says that this passage may seem puzzling since the resident aliens are not seen as hostile in other biblical texts. He writes that “there is a hint of an idea that an occupying force, having abrogated Israelite national sovereignty, will grant special privilege and power to the aliens residing in the land.”

118 Ramirez Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Israel*, 87. Ramirez Kidd posits that the law is concerned with individual Egyptians living as immigrants in Israel, not with Egypt as a nation. He writes that the law may also reflect friendly relationships between Israel and Egypt at the time of its institution.

119 Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 992. Since the Edomites were also hostile towards the Israelites in the wilderness, the exclusion of the Ammonites and Moabites is linked to their purported incestuous origins. Other peoples who are excluded are men with genital impairment and people who are born of an illicit union.

120 The law is to be read to the assembly every seventh year during the festival of booths.
These passages imply that YHWH’s people include aliens as well as Israelites. This social inclusiveness is in contrast to the foreign nations who are forbidden to enter the covenant community, the Canaanites, Ammonites, and Moabites.

*Love the gēr:* “For YHWH your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the stranger (gēr), giving him food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger (gēr), for you were strangers (gērîm) in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:17-19). Ramirez Kidd points out that the imperative to “love” is unusual in the Hebrew Bible, “with the two commands to love the gēr matched only by the commands to love YHWH.” It is interesting to note that while Leviticus commands love for both the gēr (Lev 19:34) and fellow Israelite (Lev 19:18), Deuteronomy mentions only the gēr.

In conclusion, the laws regarding the gēr in Deuteronomy are concerned with justice, both social and cultic, with the gēr given equal treatment under the law. Although the gēr is given rights equal to that of a native, he is still placed in a category with other marginalized peoples, the orphan and widow, and therefore, dependent on the good will of the Israelite. The gēr is included in the covenant renewal ceremony as a member of the people of YHWH, and Israel is commanded to “love the gēr” because of their own experience as Strangers in a strange land.

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121 Ramirez Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Israel*, 81-84. Ramirez Kidd says that the statement that “YHWH loves the gēr” is also unusual. He notes that YHWH loves the ancestors, justice, righteousness, and holiness, and if we consider that the gēr is alien to Israel, the mention of YHWH’s love for the gēr is exceptional. Ramirez Kidd asserts a post-exilic dating for this text, saying “it was a new awareness of being themselves gērîm which created a new sensitivity to the non-Jewish gēr.”
4. 4. 2. The nokrî in Deuteronomy

Concerning foreign gods: “This people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign (nēkār) gods in their midst, the gods of the land into which they are going” (Deut 31:16); “The Lord alone guided him; no foreign (nēkār) god was with him” (Deut 32:12).122

Concerning Sabbatical remission: “Every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor…Of a foreigner (nokrî) you may exact it” (Deut 15:2-3).123

Concerning interest on loans: “On loans to a foreigner (nokrî) you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest” (Deut 23:20).124

Concerning kings of Israel: “One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner (nokrî) over you, who is not of your own community” (Deut 17:15).125

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122 Tivka Frymer-Kensky, “Deuteronomy,” in Women’s Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 58. Frymer-Kensky points out that prostitution or whoring (zānāh) is a metaphor for Israel’s apostasy when they are unfaithful to their covenant partner YHWH. Foreign gods, like foreign women, are a threat to Israel’s identity as YHWH’s holy nation.

123 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 954. The remission of debt distinguishes between the fellow Israelite, who is designated as neighbor or brother, and the foreigner (nokrî). The law is meant to eliminate debt slavery only among fellow Israelites. Alter compares this law with the agricultural context of the Sabbath year in Exod 23:10-11 where the Israelites are told to let the land lie fallow. He posits that the passage in Deuteronomy is directed to an urban, business-oriented environment with the focus of the law on monetary debts.

124 Ibid., 994. This law, similar to Deut 15:2-3, shows preference for the fellow Israelite concerning monetary matters. Alter writes that the prohibition against interest charged to another Israelite has roots in an agrarian culture in which loans are a form of temporary charity to one’s kin. He suggests that, in Deuteronomy, the foreigner is required to pay interest because “the paradigmatic case would be foreign merchants traveling among the Israelites for business purposes.”

125 Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” 405. Levinson asserts that “Deuteronomy’s conception of kingship entails an extraordinary restriction of royal authority.” In other ANE cultures, the king proclaimed the law, whereas in Israel, the king was subject to the law of the covenant. Israel’s monarch must be one of YHWH’s covenant people, not a foreigner who might introduce apostasy in the nation. According to Levinson, the offenses and warnings of “not keeping many horses, not going back to Egypt, not having many wives, and not amassing silver and gold to excess” (Deut 17:16-17), presuppose the reign of Solomon with his many material excesses and foreign alliances.
Warnings against covenant disobedience: “The next generation, your children who rise up after you, as well as the foreigner (nokrî) who comes from a distant country, will see the devastation of that land and the afflictions with which YHWH has afflicted it” (Deut 29:22).  

In conclusion, the meaning of nokrî as “foreigner” and nēkār as “foreign” in Deuteronomy is linked to the threat of apostasy. In matters concerning charity, the foreigner is not given the same consideration as the fellow Israelite, but they, along with a later generation of Israelites, are included as witnesses to Israel’s punishment when they disobey YHWH’s covenant teachings.

4. 4. 3. The zār in Deuteronomy

Concerning Levirate marriage: “When brothers reside together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger (zār)” (Deut 25:5). According to Levinson, the “stranger” refers to someone outside of the clan, not a person from another nation. Marrying outside of the clan would diminish their collective landholdings, and affect the equitable distribution among the twelve tribes.  

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126 These warnings conclude the covenant ceremony in Moab where Moses addresses the Israelites who are about to enter the Promised Land. He recalls the covenant promises to the ancestors, the Exodus, and the wilderness experience, and he warns this generation that YHWH’s covenant promises comes with the responsibility to obey YHWH’s teachings. Since they are a covenant community, the transgressions of one individual will affect the entire nation. Instead of serving as a model of justice, righteousness, and holiness for other nations, Israel’s punishment and devastation will provide a cautionary tale for later generations and foreign nations.

127 Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” 422. Levirate marriage was instituted to protect the legacy of a married Israelite male who had died without offspring. The brother serves as a proxy for the deceased, and the son that he begets with the widow receives the name and inheritance of the dead brother.
Concerning foreign gods: “They made him jealous with strange (zārīm) gods” (Deut 32:16). In agreement with Leviticus and Numbers, the use of the term zārīm is linked to cultic matters, but here it refers to foreign gods, whereas in Leviticus and Numbers, the term is employed for comparison between priest/layperson (zār) or holy/unholy (zārīm). In all references, the concept of the strange or foreign has negative connotations attached to its meaning.

4.4.4. The Stranger as Foreign Nations

Deuteronomy, like Numbers, sees foreign nations as strangers to be avoided or annihilated. In his opening address, Moses recalls encounters with foreign nations who met the Israelites with hostility, rather than hospitality, as they journeyed through the wilderness (Deut 2-3). When Israel enters the Promised Land, they are commanded to utterly destroy its occupants, showing no mercy, and they are warned not to make covenants or intermarry with foreigners (Deut 7:1-6).

Israel will dispossess the nations that YHWH is handing over to them, not as a reward for Israel’s righteousness, but as a means for YHWH to cleanse the land of the

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128 This is contained in the “Song of Moses” (Deut 31:30-32:47) where the prophet reflects on the history of Israel. The passage refers to Israel’s apostasy with strange (zārīm) gods, similar to the idea of foreign (nēkār) gods in Num 31:16; 32:12.

129 This includes the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Canaanite kings Sihon and Og. As the Israelite’s journey progresses, their encounters with other nations begin with a failed negotiation with Edom that escalates into holy war with the other foreign nations.

130 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 916. Alter suggests that the historical reality for the writer of Deuteronomy, in the late seventh and sixth centuries BCE, would be of Israel as a small nation surrounded by more powerful nations. He argues that the accounts of total destruction (ḥērem) are likely elaborated accounts of Israel’s power over foreign nations since no archaeological evidence exists that the program to annihilate these nations was ever carried out. The prohibition of foreign covenants and intermarriage with foreigners was to preserve Israelite identity and cultic purity.
wickedness of those nations (Deut 9:1-5). Concerning the rules of warfare against foreign nations, Deuteronomy distinguishes between far towns, where Israel may initiate a peace agreement, and Canaanite towns, where they are commanded to utterly annihilate the inhabitants (Deut 20).

YHWH’s assembly includes “the leaders, elders, and officials of the tribes, all the men of Israel, the Israelite children and women, the aliens (gērîm) in the camp, those who cut wood and draw water” (Deut 29:10-11). Those persons excluded from the assembly are “one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off…those born of an illicit union…Ammonites and Moabites, even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of YHWH, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam…to curse you” (Deut 23:1-6). Generally, foreign nations receive a negative depiction in Deuteronomy, but there seems to a particular animosity towards Moabites and Ammonites.

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131 YHWH recounts Israel’s rebelliousness since the Exodus event, calling them a “stubborn” or “stiff-necked people.” (Deut 9:6). The “wickedness” of the nations is linked to foreign idolatry and its threat to the cult of YHWH (Num 33:51-56).

132 Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” 411-413. Levinson points out that the rules laid out in Deuteronomy for waging holy war represent an “idealization, formulated half a millennium after the settlement, at a time when the Canaanites would already long have assimilated into the Israelite population.” He argues that the stipulations linking peace negotiations and the taking of captives with “far towns” also concern Canaanites, but rather than the idealized practice of hērem, it more closely reflects the actual events of the settlement. I would agree, but I have also seen greater enmity between Israel and those closest to them, either geographically or through kinship, in the narratives.

133 Kenton L. Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel, 256. The origins of the Ammonites and Moabites is linked to incest (Gen 19:30-38), but in this passage they are also accused of inhospitality and attempting to curse Israel. Sparks dates these passages to the early post-exilic period when the exiles returned to their ancestral lands and found that they had been displaced by neighboring foreigners. He writes that “the Ammonite/Moabite exception was necessitated precisely because the exiles were faced with two conflicting circumstances: on the one hand, a legal tradition that looked favorably upon assimilating foreigners; and on the other hand, a situation in which foreigners, Ammonites and Moabites, were a threat to the future of the community.”
4. 5. Conclusion

As the motif of the Stranger and the theme of God’s special concern for the Stranger were developed in the ancestral narratives and Exodus account, they took on a complexity of meaning that encompassed: the formation of a religious and national identity rooted in displacement; the institution of a moral code that included an imperative for Israel to cultivate a special concern for the Stranger in their midst; and Israel’s developing awareness and understanding of God’s character, concerns, and expectations.

In Genesis and Exodus, the Stranger was the gēr, a person displaced from his/her kin or country of origin. Some examples of characters that represented the Stranger were: Abraham, Hagar, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and the Israelites in Egypt. In these narratives, God revealed a special concern for the Stranger by responding to their oppression and suffering, and he commanded that Israel respond similarly to strangers because of their own experience of displacement. In the final books of the Torah collection, Israeliite law is interwoven with narrative to show the evolving identity of the “mixed crowd” (Exod 12:38) that left Egypt in the process of their formation as a “priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6).

In the final three books of the Torah, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the Stranger is the gēr, nokrî, and zār, as well as foreign peoples that the Israelites encounter on their journey to the Promised Land. The gēr is the only category of the Stranger that

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134 Some other references to diverse ethnicity amongst the liberated Israelites: Lev 24:10 mentions “a man whose mother was an Israelite and whose father was an Egyptian” and Num 12:1 refers to “the Cushite woman” that Moses married. In both instances, conflict is connected to the references of foreigners. The man who is the product of a mixed marriage is stoned to death for blasphemy and Moses’ Cushite wife becomes an excuse for a conflict that develops between Moses and his siblings, Miriam and Aaron, over leadership.
continuously receives inclusion and protection among the Israelites, while the nokrî, and zār are typically seen in a negative light, both in a social and cultic context. In the final three books of the Torah, the theme of boundaries is prominent in laws and narratives that separate insiders from outsiders and holy from profane. In some texts, the boundaries of insider/outsider are drawn between fellow Israelites, but typically the Israelites are depicted as insiders to YHWH’s covenant promises while strangers who are nokrîm or zārîm are outsiders. The distinctions become more pronounced as the Israelites progressively separate themselves from other nations, and Israel’s antagonism towards foreign peoples and elements escalates the nearer they draw to the Promised Land.

As in the earlier narratives, YHWH still has a special concern for the gērîm, expressing love for them, including them in the covenant community, and commanding a similar response of love for the gērîm from Israel. On the contrary, foreign peoples who are not named as gērîm, but as nokrîm, zārîm, or foreign nations are to be avoided, displaced, and even eliminated entirely. In contrast to the love command, YHWH commands Israel to have no pity on foreign nations.

The final book in the Torah contains a reminder of Israel’s beginnings and an exhortation concerning their future: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien (gēr), few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us…we cried to YHWH, the God of our ancestors; YHWH heard our voice and saw our affliction…YHWH brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand…he brought us into this place and gave us this land” (Deut 26:5-9). 135 “You have obtained YHWH’s agreement:

135 This chapter includes responsibilities that come with the gift of the land, such as offering a thanksgiving of the first fruit to God and tithes for the Levites, aliens, orphans, and widows.
to be your God; and for you to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him” (Deut 26:17).136

In the next chapter, I will look at a text whose main protagonist serves as an exemplar of someone who walks in the way of YHWH. Ironically, this person is not an Israelite but a Moabite woman named Ruth.

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136 The “way of YHWH” was mentioned in connection to Abraham’s righteousness and justice being taught to later generations (Gen 18:19). In Deuteronomy, the “way of YHWH” is clearly laid out in the teachings of the Torah. To walk in the “way of YHWH” leads to “life and prosperity” while turning away from that path leads to “death and adversity” (Deut 30:15).
CHAPTER 5

THE STRANGER IN THE WRITINGS:
THE BOOK OF RUTH

5. 1. Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I examined the motif of the Stranger in the Torah as well as God’s relationship to the Stranger. In the ancestor narratives and Exodus, the Stranger was the gēr, a person displaced from his/her kin or country of origin, primarily represented by Abraham and his Israelite descendants.\(^1\) In these foundational narratives, God revealed a special concern for the Stranger by responding to his/her conflict, suffering, and oppression through a covenant relationship that promised honor and blessings and the hope for a better future.

In the final three books of the Torah, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the motif of the Stranger becomes more complex as the understanding of stranger includes the gēr, nokrî, and zār, as well as foreign peoples that the Israelites encounter on their journey to the Promised Land. The gēr is the only category of the Stranger that is protected under Israelite law and permitted inclusion into the community. The nokrî, and zār are typically seen in a negative light, both in a social and cultic context, and the theme of boundaries is prominent in laws and narratives that separate insiders from outsiders and holy from profane. Typically, the Israelites are depicted as insiders to YHWH’s covenant promises while strangers who are nokrîm or zārîm are foreign outsiders who might lead the Israelites to apostasy. Similar to the ancestor narratives and the Exodus, YHWH still has a special concern for the gērîm in the law codes, expressing

\(^1\) Hagar, the Egyptian, was an exception that I noted of a displaced person who was not Israelite.
love for them, including them in the covenant community, and commanding a similar response of love for the *gērîm* from Israel. On the contrary, foreign peoples who are not named as *gērîm*, but as *nokrîm*, *zārîm*, or foreign nations, such as Moabites and Ammonites, are outsiders who the Israelites should avoid in social interactions and who cannot be included in the covenant community.

The Torah is the foundation of the Hebrew Bible, serving as instruction in the “way of YHWH…doing justice and righteousness” (Gen 18:19) with Abraham acting as a model and teacher of this way in the ancestor narratives. In this chapter, I will look at the Book of Ruth, a text contained in the Writings of the Hebrew Scriptures. Similar to Abraham, the protagonist serves as an exemplar of a person who walks in the way of YHWH. Ironically, this person is not an Israeli but a Moabite woman named Ruth. Although the dating of the Book of Ruth is disputed, I will argue for its significance in the post-exilic period when the returnees were re-establishing themselves under the shadow of foreign powers. In the struggle to maintain a unique identity among foreign influences, ethnic and religious sentiments at times created harsh boundaries defining the

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2 Jacob Neusner, *Torah: From Scroll to Symbol in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 1-10. In his study on the development of Judaism, Neusner looks at how the Torah scrolls, the first five books, developed into the “Torah” as an encompassing symbol of a way of life and a worldview. The Torah, or Pentateuch, is often called the “law of Moses” with attention focused on the law codes, but “instruction” or “teaching” would be more accurate in that it teaches a way of life in accordance with right relationship with God and one’s neighbor. In this understanding of the Torah, the ancestor narratives also present important instructions in this way of life.

3 Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 108-110. The Writings, containing the most diverse collection of canonical literature, bookend the Torah. The Writings, canonized in 90 CE, include late historical works, psalms and other poetry, short stories, wisdom literature, and an apocalyptic text. Most of the Writings are post-exilic and many of the texts reflect the domestic conflicts within Judaism during that time, as well as the shadow and threat of foreign influences. Gottwald asserts that “the different views of the scope of the Writings reflected serious partisan splits within Palestinian Judaism that deepened in the period between the Maccabean Wars, beginning in 167 BCE, and ending with the War against Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem in 66-70 CE.”

4 Ibid., 421-422. Gottwald points out that all Jews, whether restored to Judah or dispersed abroad, were subject to the political power of the empires that successively ruled them with the sole exception during the period of the Hasmonean dynasty from 140 to 63 BCE.
insiders, who should be included in the covenant community, and outsiders, who should be rejected.

5. 1. 2. *Foreigners among Israelites: Two Perspectives in the Post-Exilic Period*

Modern scholarship sees the exilic and post-exilic periods as a critical turning point in the development of Jewish ethnic and religious identity. K. L. Sparks points out that Israelite ethnic sentiments and the emphasis on boundaries intensified during the Babylonian exile because of the threat of assimilation into foreign cultures and the potential loss of the ethnic homeland. D. L. Smith-Christopher writes that, although there is minimal evidence of everyday Jewish life during the period of the Babylonian exile, the biblical texts of the post-exilic period provide a glimpse into the development of “a strong sense of identity that is separate from those traditions and cultures that surround them, and the necessity to maintain those social boundaries.” In examining some of the post-exilic texts, there is evidence of more than one point of view concerning ethnic and religious boundaries. M. Weinfeld sees the development of “two opposing worldviews, a universalistic one aspiring to draw Gentiles to Judaism and convert them and a particularistic one which desired to draw a sharp line of demarcation between Israel and the rest of the world’s nations.” I will examine these two perspectives concerning foreigners in the post-exilic texts of Ezra/Nehemiah and Third Isaiah.

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5 Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel*, 314-315. Sparks writes that this development is evident in Ezekiel and the Holiness Code’s emphasis on ritual purity and the keeping of the Sabbath and feastdays as marks of corporate identity. In connection to the land, the right to possession entailed participation in the exile and documentable proof of ancestral property rights.

6 Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002, 137-138. Smith-Christopher writes that issues concerning community formation were tied to the social and political situation of colonized peoples living under the various empires during the Second Temple period.

7 Moshe Weinfeld, “Universalistic and Particularistic Trends during the Exile and Restoration” in *Normative and Sectarian Judaism in the Second Temple Period* (Library of Second Temple Studies 54;
The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are valuable sources for looking at the social and religious developments during the early post-exilic period, from 539 to 430 BCE. Named after two significant leaders of the restoration period, Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor, the narratives give the reader insights into the reestablishment of Jewish identity and religion, the development and centrality of the Torah, and the boundaries that defined insiders and outsiders after the exiles’ return to Judah.

In 539 BCE Cyrus of Persia, having conquered the Babylonian Empire, gave permission for the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1). Although sacrifice resumed immediately upon the return, the rebuilding of the temple progressed slowly and was not completed until 515 BCE (Ezra 3-6). The Persian emperor, Artaxerxes I, commissioned Ezra to establish Mosaic Law as the...
official legislation in Judah, and the first reading of the Torah occurred during the Festival of Booths in 458 BCE (Ezra 7; Neh 8).\textsuperscript{11} Nehemiah, a Jewish official in the court of Artaxerxes, was appointed governor of Judea in 445 and tasked with rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem (Neh 2-6).\textsuperscript{12} Taken together, Ezra and Nehemiah narrate the restoration of the Temple cult, the centrality of the Torah for the returnees, and the law’s demands for separation from foreigners.

The Book of Ezra concludes with the denunciation of Israelites who have not separated themselves from “the people of the lands with their abominations, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites” (Ezra 9:1).\textsuperscript{13} The primary concern is that through intermarriage “the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the land” (Ezra 9:2), and the ones who seem to be most culpable are the Israelite religious leaders themselves, the

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 436-437. Ezra is described as “a scribe skilled in the law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6) who is commissioned “to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand” (Ezra 7:14). Gottwald writes that Ezra’s introduction of a lawbook for Judah was an important movement towards the canonization of the Torah, but he also points out that it is impossible to determine the exact contents of the lawbook that was read during the assembly described in Nehemiah 8. What is clear, according to Gottwald, is that between 459 and 398 BCE “the combined political authority of the Persians and the religious authority of the exilic Jewish reformers succeeded in establishing a body of traditional legal materials as the binding law of the province of Judah.” The Persians were guaranteed orderly colonial government and the Jewish reformers were assured of a strictly defined restoration community.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 432-434. Gottwald says that in 445 BCE, due to reports of abuses in political administration and cultic observances, Nehemiah was sent to Judah to restore order and stability and to fortify the walls of Jerusalem. He encountered hostility from “Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab” (Neh 2:19), neighboring foreign peoples who threatened the political status and religious reforms of Judah. Along with outside threats to stability, Nehemiah faced internal division as well. A shortage of food led to the large-scale impoverishment and debt slavery of the small landholders under a wealthy class of returnees who took advantage of the situation by imposing interest on their own people.

\textsuperscript{13} Weinfeld, “Universalistic and Particularistic Trends,” 261. The list of foreign nations is from a list of peoples that were ancient adversaries of Israel during and prior to the First Temple period, and from whom intermarriage was either discouraged or prohibited (Deut 7:1-4; 23:3-6). Weinfeld says that the original intent was for Israel’s separation from the religions of Canaan and the neighboring nations, but that the “isolationist camp” of Ezra/Nehemiah later interpreted this as separation from all Gentiles.
priests and Levites. Ezra responds to this crisis with mourning and a prayer of repentance for both the past sins of the ancestors and the present iniquities of the remnant of Israelites. A list of Israelite men who married foreign women (nākritôt nāšîm) follows along with a decree ordering them to separate themselves from their foreign wives. The Book of Ezra ends by telling us that “all those who had married foreign women sent them away with their children” (Ezra 10:44).

In Nehemiah 9:2, “those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners (bēnê nēkār).” After Nehemiah rebuilds and dedicates the wall surrounding Jerusalem, the returnees are reminded that “no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God” (Neh 13:1) and Nehemiah then “cleansed them of everything foreign (nēkār)” (Neh 13:30). Intermarriage between Jewish men and foreign women seems to have continued despite Ezra’s earlier insistence on divorce. Nehemiah, like Ezra, condemns marriage with “foreign women” (nākritôt nāšîm), admonishing “Jews...

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14 Smith-Christopher, A Biblical Theology of Exile, 149-150. According to Smith-Christopher, the Hebrew word bādal, meaning “to separate/divide,” is typically used in the Levitical law codes in the context of juxtaposing pure/impure and holy/profane. During the post-exilic period, Ezra/Nehemiah employed the term in connection to separation from foreigners and the people of the land. Israel is seen as a “holy seed” that must be protected from foreign pollution. Smith-Christopher contrasts this with Isa 56:3 where foreigners who accept YHWH will not be separated from the community. “Holy seed,” a phrase from Isa 6:13 concerning the remnant that survives after destruction, also recalls the promises of offspring made to Abraham (Gen 12:7; 13:14-16; 17:1-8).

15 Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “Ezra-Nehemiah” in Women’s Bible Commentary (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 124. Eskenazi writes that the foreign women belonging to the people of the land are often identified with the Samaritans or other foreigners, but she argues that they may have also been Judahites who had not been members of the exilic community. The term “foreign women/wives” (nākritôt nāšîm) appears in Ezra 10:2, 10, 11, 14, 17, 18, and 44. Multiple repetitions of this term in one chapter points to the seriousness of these so-called foreign influences.

16 Ibid., 124-125. To “send away…according to the law” (Ezra 10:3) means to divorce. The law sanctions divorce in the case of a husband finding his wife “unclean” (Deut 24:1-4); in this instance, the uncleanness may be connected to foreignness. Eskenazi says that the divorce decree was linked to both religious purity and protection of land rights. A marriage partner who was not part of the returned community could, once the Jewish spouse died, rejoin her own ethnic community and remove the land from Jewish holdings. Those Israelite men who did not obey the decree would have their property forfeited and would be excommunicated from the community (Ezra 10:8).
who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; and half of their children spoke
the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah” (Neh 13:23-
24). Unlike Ezra, he takes a more moderate approach by forbidding intermarriage in
the future but taking no action against existing marriages. The terms gēr and zār do not
appear in Ezra and Nehemiah; the strangers are foreigners (bēnê nēkār), who are non-
Jewish neighbors of the returnees or the foreign women (nākrîôt nāšîm) who have
married Jewish men.

According to Eskenazi, in looking at sociological studies of displaced peoples,
“boundaries against the outside world become more rigid in an attempt to protect a fragile
sense of communal identity.” Ezra/Nehemiah reflects this concern for group identity in
the exhortations to separate the returnees from outsiders and the prohibition against
marriage to foreign women. This exclusivist stance does not seem to have been
universally accepted among the returnees. Nehemiah’s less rigorous response to the issue
of intermarriage suggests Ezra’s solution, which involved the dissolution of families, may
have been regarded as too extreme among some members of the post-exilic community.

One example of a more inclusive perspective concerning foreigners is contained
in Third Isaiah. Addressing the post-exilic community living in Judah, the prophet

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there may have been different issues concerning the problem of mixed marriages in Ezra and Nehemiah.
Ezra reflects an internal Jewish conflict concerning purity laws between persons who have integrated
themselves with the people of the land and a group intent on separation from all outsiders. Nehemiah, on
the other hand, is more concerned with the political and socioeconomic advantages that some returnees
seek through strategic marriages to outsiders.
19 Tan, *The “Foreignness” of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9*, 51. Tan writes that Ezra’s
concerns were centered on the priesthood and assuring that the Temple remained in the control of the “true
Israel” while Nehemiah focused on the political leaders and the loss of the Hebrew language and culture.
According to Tan, the continuation of intermarriage and the lack of enforcement of the divorce decree
indicates that Ezra’s campaign was not entirely successful.
20 Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 493. The author of Isa 40-55, writing near the end of the
Babylonian exile, is called Second Isaiah (Deutero-Isaiah) while the author of Isa 56-66, writing during the
says, “Do not let the foreigner (ben nekār) joined to YHWH say, ‘YHWH will surely separate me from his people’…And the foreigners (bēnē nēkār) who join themselves to YHWH, to minister to him, to love the name of YHWH, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain…for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa 56:3-7). This passage has some similarities to Isa 14:1 where Israel will be restored and “aliens (gērîm) will join them and attach themselves to the house of Jacob.” An important distinction between these two passages is that Isa 14:1 reflects a position similar to the Torah narratives and law codes concerning inclusion of the gērîm in the covenant community while Isa 56:3-7 represents an innovative perspective that admits the bēnē nēkār as well. Ethnic or national identity does not determine inclusion into the community of YHWH; keeping the covenant joins persons that were formerly excluded.

It is difficult to completely fault the post-exilic community’s desire to maintain a distinctive religious and social identity, particularly as they attempted to reestablish themselves under the rule of foreign empires. On the other hand, a solution that tears families apart appears harsh and seems to contradict the mission of Israel to be a “light to

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21 Thomas L. Leclerc, *YHWH is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 136. In his study, Leclerc looks at the development of the theme of justice throughout the book of Isaiah. YHWH commands the covenant community to “maintain justice (mišpāṭ) and do righteousness (ṣēdqāh)” by keeping the Sabbath and refraining from wrongdoing (Isa 56:1-2). In Third Isaiah’s understanding of the covenant community, the foreigner who follows these ideals will also be included. Leclerc asserts that one of the primary issues during the post-exilic period was the interpretation of the covenant requirements and “that the contested status of foreigners should require a divine declaration indicates the gravity of the concern and the centrality of the issue.”

22 In this passage, the “aliens” may refer to the northern tribes who were assimilated into the southern kingdom after the Assyrian Empire conquered the north.

23 Isa 56:3 includes the eunuch, as well as the foreigner, in the covenant community; in some biblical laws (Lev 21:18-20; Deut 23:1), this impairment would lead to exclusion.
the nations” (Isa 49:6). The prophet proclaims that YHWH gathers the “outcasts of Israel” but will also “gather others to them besides those already gathered” (Isa 56:8).

Third Isaiah goes beyond inclusion of the sojourner (gēr) to also include the foreigner (ben nekār) who follows the way of YHWH into the covenant community.²⁴

5. 1. 3. The “Holy Seed” and the Foreign Woman

According to Tan, the issue of intermarriage in Ezra/Nehemiah raises questions concerning how ethnicity and foreignness were being defined in the post-exilic period. She points out that through allusions to earlier biblical texts “the post-exilic literature seems to adopt, not create, an idea of the dangerous foreign woman.”²⁵ Foreign women are often depicted as dangerous characters who seduce Israelite men and may lead them to apostasy, for example: Potiphar’s wife attempts to seduce Joseph and then falsely accuses him when he rejects her advances (Gen 39); the Moabite women have sexual relations with Israelite men and lead them to the worship of Baal of Peor (Num 25:1-3); Delilah seduces Samson and then exposes his secret which leads to his death (Judg 16); Solomon’s foreign wives turned the king to other gods (1 Kgs 11:1-8); Jezebel manipulates Ahab and conspires against Elijah (2 Kgs 16:31-34; 19:1-3).²⁶

²⁴ In surveying the motif of the stranger in Isaiah, gēr appears in Isa 14:1, possibly in connection to the northern tribes. For Nekār see: Isa 2:6 (“foreigners” who have corrupted the house of Jacob); 28:21 (YHWH’s strange and “alien” work); 56:3, 6 (the “foreigner” joined to YHWH); 60:10 (“foreigners” will rebuild the walls of Jerusalem); 61:5 (“foreigners” will serve Israel); 62:8 (“foreign” enemies will not enjoy the fruits of Israel’s labors). For Zār see: Isa 1:4 (Judah has become “estranged” from God); 1:7 (“aliens” devour the land); 17:10 (an “alien” god); 25:2, 5 (a palace of “aliens” and the noise of “aliens”); 28:21 (YHWH’s “strange” and alien work); 29:5 (the multitude of Israel’s “enemies”); 43:12 (no “strange” god); 61:5 (“strangers” will serve Israel).

²⁵ Tan, The “Foreignness” of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9, 65.

²⁶ There are also some positive depictions of foreign women such as, Rahab (Jos 2), Jael (Judg 4), and Ruth (Ruth); they are depicted as heroines because they accept the God of Israel or further Israelite goals.
Ezra, the “holy seed” was endangered by foreign women (nākrīôt nāšîm), and both Ezra and Nehemiah emphatically opposed Israelite marriages to foreign wives, concerns that are also reflected in the Book of Proverbs through the character of the Strange Woman.

The Book of Proverbs is primarily concerned with endowing the Israelite youth with the wisdom and experience of the elders. The parental advice and parables are rooted in traditional wisdom teachings that see life’s blessings as a reward for obedience and suffering as a sign of God’s punishment for disobedience. Wisdom is personified as a woman who takes on diverse roles in an effort to persuade the youth to follow her way. She is cast as a prophetic figure speaking in the marketplace, the companion of YHWH at the time of creation, and a woman of worth whose exemplary actions in the public and private sphere attest to her virtue and faith.

Wisdom initially appears as a figure who “cries out in the street…at the entrance of the city gates” (Prov 1:20-21), stationing herself at a public location where people would be conducting business or legal transactions. She chastises those who do not follow the way of YHWH, warning that they are on a path to death and destruction while her path leads to life and security (Prov 1:29-33). The exhortations of Woman Wisdom are echoed by the father’s advice to seek wisdom and, therefore, “understand

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27 Carole R. Fontaine, “Proverbs” in Women’s Bible Commentary (ed. Carol A Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 153. Fontaine points out that although the Book of Proverbs is ascribed to Solomon, the final editing occurred during the early post-exilic period. It reflects both the wisdom of the monarchical period and the instructional needs of the post-exilic Jewish community. The book includes folk wisdom that is passed on from parent to child, the wisdom of court sages, and the personification of Wisdom who appears as a woman.

28 Ibid., 155. See Proverbs 1:20-33; 8:22-31; 31:10-31. Fontaine writes that Woman Wisdom may reflect the wisdom goddess traditions of Egypt or Mesopotamia, but that she also typifies the highly valued traditional roles of wife and mother.

29 Claudia Camp, Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 129-132. Camp notes the literary skill of the writer in portraying the ambiguity of the character of Wisdom at the city gates. As a woman who is alone and aggressively seeking companionship, she is not unlike the Strange Woman who frequents the city streets to entice the unwary youth.
righteousness and justice and equity, every good path” (Prov 2:9). The father warns the youth of another path leading to Wisdom’s foil, the Strange Woman who is “the way of death” (Prov 2:18).

The Strange Woman is described as “the loose woman (zārāh), the adulteress (nokriyāh) with her smooth words” (Prov 2:16). The literal translation of zārāh and nokriyāh underscores her standing as a foreigner or outsider in the community, and her strangeness may be understood as either ethnic or social. She is portrayed as an assertive woman who approaches the foolish youth as he passes down her road at night. Dressed as a prostitute, she appears “now in the street, now in the squares, and at every corner she lies in wait” (Prov 7:12). She has fulfilled the ritual requirement to offer sacrifices, but her actions in both the public and private spheres are not in accord with fidelity to the covenant. The Strange Woman’s husband is not at home, and she has prepared her bedchamber in anticipation of seducing the youth. The foolish youth is impelled by “her smooth talk” (Prov 7:21) as she leads him to the “chambers of death” (Prov 7:27). She is attractive to the youth, but also dangerous; her path is a trap leading to death.

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30 The way of Wisdom echoes the way of YHWH that Abraham was commissioned to teach his descendants by “doing righteousness and justice” (Gen 18:19).
31 For other passages referring to the Strange Woman see: Prov 5:3 (“a loose woman”); Prov 5:20 (“another woman…an adulteress”); Prov 6:24 (“the adulteress”); Prov 7:5 (“the loose woman…the adulteress”). The Hebrew word for the Strange Woman is zārāh or nokriyāh.
32 Tan, The “Foreignness” of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9, 86-87. Tan says that this character is depicted as an adulteress which would make her a social outsider, but the description of the woman as the zārāh and nokriyāh with “smooth words” is similar to other “bad” foreign women such as Potiphar’s wife and Delilah. Her foreignness would thus represent the attraction of foreign cultures and religions that lead the Israelites to apostasy.
33 Ibid., 98. Tan writes that “the nature of the sacrifices does not indicate that she is necessarily an Israelite or a YHWHist, but the fact of them does suggest that she is religious.” The “peace offering” is a common offering in ancient Near Eastern cultures; Also see: Fontaine, “Proverbs,” 156. Fontaine asserts that her depiction as an adulteress in this passage reveals the Strange Woman as a person who devalues the meaning of religious observance and who breaks Israelite laws.
The Strange Woman is the antithesis of Woman Wisdom, yet their characters contain some similarities. Both Wisdom and the Strange Woman are assertive and verbally approach the “simple ones.” Both characters operate in the public and private spheres, and both are attractive to the youth. The ambiguity of both Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman is evident in the affinity of their words and actions. Both women entice the youth with their words, offering food, comfort, and love, and the naïve cannot easily discern the difference between them. By listening to the wisdom and experience of the elders, the youth can follow the way of Wisdom leading to blessings and life and avoid the path of Strange Woman leading to alienation and death. According to Tan, the Strange Woman “depicts and symbolizes foreignness through the identification of zārāh and nokriyāh, and is essentially the way of apostasy. Juxtaposed with Woman Wisdom, who is symbolic of the way of the Torah and piety leading to YHWH and his blessings, both women compete against one another to lure Jewish men onto their paths.”

In connection to my study of the Stranger, the zārāh and nokriyāh in the Book of Proverbs is literally a foreigner who leads the Israelite on the wrong path. Portrayed, not only as a foreign woman but as an adulteress, her infidelity would bring shame and dishonor to her husband and household; this makes her character a sharp contrast with the Woman of Worth.

The Book of Proverbs concludes with a tribute to the “Woman of Worth,” a capable wife and mother praised for her integrity, industriousness, and compassion for the less fortunate. The Woman of Worth personifies Wisdom and exemplifies Torah

34 Tan, The “Foreignness” of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1–9, 104.
35 Fontaine, “Proverbs,” 160. Fontaine points out the words ḫēṣet hayīl have been translated as “capable,” “perfect,” or “good” wife, but they literally mean a “woman of worth.” The term hayīl or “worth” is typically applied to a man signifying a “strong man” who is at the height of status and power.
teaching operating in the private and public spheres. She provides food and clothing for “her household” (Prov 31:13-15, 21, 27), engages in public business dealings (Prov 31:16, 18, 24), and reaches out to the poor and needy (Prov 31:20). Her attributes are strength, dignity, and wisdom, and “the teaching of kindness is on her tongue” (Prov 31:25-26). As a woman who “fears YHWH” (Prov 31:30), she serves as a model of covenant love and fidelity and is praised both in the home and in the city gates.

In the post-exilic period, when the returnees were struggling to restore their community, the family and household became central to the transmission of religious tradition, with the mother as the primary teacher. Woman Wisdom, personified as an ideal wife and mother, was linked to fidelity to the Torah teachings while the Strange Woman was representative of the foreign women and ways that endangered the “holy seed.” I will now examine how the Book of Ruth dialogues with the negative views of the Strange Woman (nokriyah) in order to propose that the Stranger, rather than posing a threat, can bring blessings and hope to the Israelite community.

5. 2. The Book of Ruth: Dating and Authorship

The Book of Ruth is set in the time of Judges and written with prose that evokes the literary style of the first millennium BCE, leading some scholars to date this writing

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36 Ibid., 160. This is another personification of Woman Wisdom. The description of the woman as “more precious than jewels” (Prov 31:10) echoes that of Woman Wisdom (Prov 3:15; 8:11). The husband “trusts in her” (Prov 31:11) as one should trust in Wisdom (Prov 1:33; 4:6).

37 The mention of “her household” is somewhat unusual in a patriarchal culture that typically centers on the “father’s house.” The “mother’s house” also appears in Gen 24:28; Songs 3:4; 8:2; and Ruth 1:8.

38 The teaching (torah) of kindness (hesed) represents covenantal language. Here it is centered in the home, with the mother as the teacher.

to the monarchical period. However, the story’s portrayal of the foreigner as a woman of virtue who brings blessings to Israel suggests that the Book of Ruth is a reaction to the negative views of foreigners, especially foreign women, during the post-exilic period. Considering the centrality of women in the story, some scholars have argued for the possibility of female authorship, but this speculative. Alter is more concerned with the literary skill, rather than the gender of the author “who was finely aware of the conventions of earlier biblical narrative as he was sensitive to the prose style of his predecessors, but he subtly adapted those conventions to his own artistic and thematic ends.” The Book of Ruth, on the surface, seems to be a simple, charming folktale; upon closer examination, it reveals the skillful literary craft and purposeful intention of a writer attempting to persuade an Israelite audience to reconsider the Stranger in their midst.

5. 2. 1. Genre and Themes

The Book of Ruth is a short story, or novella, that tells how a foreign woman in Israel came to be honored for her steadfast love and fidelity (ḥesed). According to

40 Hillel I. Millgram, Four Biblical Heroines and the Case of Female Authorship: An Analysis of the Women of Ruth, Esther, and Genesis 38 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 24-26. While Millgram recognizes the scholarly arguments for a post-exilic dating, such as style and linguistics, he posits that the book may have been composed during the literary activity that flourished during the time of the united kingdom under David and Solomon; Also see: Ronald M. Hals, The Theology of the Book of Ruth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 75; R. L. Hubbard, The Book of Ruth (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 23-35.


42 Millgram, Four Biblical Heroines, 27. Millgram acknowledges that definitive proof as to the gender of the author is improbable, but he adopts the possibility of female authorship as the thesis of his book; Also see: Fischer, “The Book of Ruth,” 33-34. Fischer argues that, although we do not know whether the author of Ruth was a man or woman, the writer “saw women’s interests and took them seriously.”

43 Alter, Strong as Death is Love, 59.
Gottwald, the short story genre appears throughout the biblical literature and typically combines historical fiction with heroic and legendary elements, often depicting a “stark reversal of fortunes for the characters.” He points out that while some scholars see polemics as the primary purpose of the stories, the writer’s intent also included “entertainment, moral instruction and formation, inspiration, and even a low-key theologizing that stresses the work of an unobtrusive God within the mundane activities of humans.” During the post-exilic period, the short stories recount the survival methods of Strangers living in a foreign land or under the domination of powerful foreign governments. Unlike the Genesis and Exodus narratives, there is little or no explicit mention of God in some of the post-exilic short stories; rather the divine presence is evident in the faith and actions of the main character as he/she struggles to survive.

The Book of Ruth, the survival story of two women, is interwoven with symbols and themes that portray a journey of movement from emptiness to fullness. The motifs of famine, displacement, promise, and fulfillment allude to the ancestor narratives, but

44 Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 551-552. Gottwald mentions short stories incorporated into larger books in the biblical canon (Gen 24; 38; 39-50; Judg 3:12-30; 4; episodes in 2 Sam 9-20; 1 Kgs 1-2; Job 1-2; 42:7-17; Dan 1-6), those that stand alone (Ruth, Jonah, Esther), and short stories that appear in the Apocrypha (Tobit; Judith; Susanna; Bel and the Dragon). He also points out the prominence of women in the stories as protagonists who employ wit and courage to achieve ends that benefit the Israelite community.

45 Ibid., 552.

46 The Books of Esther and Tobit recount the survival methods of Jews who were part of the Diaspora and who worked within the foreign system to survive and prosper; The Book of Judith tells of the survival methods of Jews who were occupied by foreign armies in Israel and how they employed their wits and trickery to overcome the enemy; The Book of Ruth is an account of the survival methods of two women, an Israelite and a Moabite, with the foreign woman employing her wits and working within the Israelite system to ensure their survival.

with a reinterpretation that places a foreign woman at the center of the narrative. Gottwald writes that the appeal of the story is that it “deals with the stuff of everyday life, with the round of birth and death, with love and marriage, and with work as the necessity of life on the thin line between scarcity and abundance.” This implies that we can all relate to the life struggles of the main characters and that the movement from emptiness to fullness often entails difficult choices and hard work.

5. 3. The Stranger in the Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth recounts the story of two women, an Israelite and a Moabite, whose relationship not only assures their personal survival but also that of the whole community. Within this deceptively simple story, the writer alludes to earlier biblical narratives concerning the motif of the Stranger and YHWH’s special concern for the displaced person. Themes, including the movement from emptiness to fullness, the process of conversion and redemption, and the way of covenant love and fidelity, are interwoven into the story to convey a journey of transformation. This transformation is represented in the lives of the characters, but I will argue that the writer also intended a transformation in the audience’s perception of the Stranger. Kidd points out that the noun gēr does not appear in the Book of Ruth even though it would fit perfectly with the identities of both Elimelech and Ruth. The term zār is also not employed; instead, the Stranger in Ruth is the foreign woman (nokrîyāh).

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48 Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 51-52. Alter likens Ruth to Abraham in that, like the patriarch, she has left the land of her birth and journeyed to a new land. In this sense, she becomes a “founding mother, in symmetrical correspondence to Abraham the founding father.”


50 Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Israel*, 24. Kidd argues that the verb gwr is typically employed for Israelites that sojourn in foreign lands while the noun gēr is a legal term that designates sojourners who
5. 3. 1. An Israelite Family sojourns in Moab

The Book of Ruth begins with a famine in the land of Bethlehem during the time of the judges.⁵¹ Elimelech, an Ephrathite from Bethlehem in Judah, went to sojourn in Moab with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion (Ruth 1:1-2).⁵² The story states that they remained in Moab, and does not mention that the family intended to return.⁵³ Similar to the ancestor narratives, a famine impels a sojourn in a strange land and leads to endangerment for the sojourners. In this account, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi a widow with two sons. Naomi soon emerges as the focus of the narrative, with famine, displacement, and death defining her experience thus far.⁵⁴

Naomi’s sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, but after about ten years Naomi’s sons also died, leaving all of the women as childless widows.⁵⁵ As widows, their status was among the other marginalized persons in society, the orphan and the

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⁵¹ James McKeown, *Ruth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 13-14. The irony is that there is a famine in Bethlehem, “the house of bread.” McKeown also points out the connection to YHWH’s covenant promises to Israel. The Promised Land was supposed to be “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:8), and the famine leads to questions concerning the lack of fulfillment in YHWH’s promises.

⁵² Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, 61. Alter asserts that the names may have symbolic meaning. Elimelech means “my God is king,” Naomi means “pleasant;” the names of the sons, Mahlon and Chilion, meaning “sickness” and “destruction” point to their demise early in the story.

⁵³ Millgram, *Four Biblical Heroines*, 32-34. Millgram considers the seriousness of Elimelech’s decision to leave his home and transplant his family in a foreign land where his status would have been one of a gēr, a landless resident alien. Millgram posits that perhaps the sojourn was driven by more than famine since others remained in Bethlehem and waited out the famine. He implies that by removing himself from the land, Elimelech showed a lack of faith and cut himself off from YHWH.

⁵⁴ Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth*, 77-80. According to Moen Saxegaard, when Elimelech is described as “Naomi’s husband” (Ruth 1:3), Naomi’s status changes from “Elimelech’s wife” to head of the family and from this point on the plot centers around her experience.

⁵⁵ Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, 62. Orpah’s name, meaning “nape of the neck” may be linked to her turning away from Naomi and returning to Moab, but Alter does not see this in a negative light but as Orpah’s obedience to her mother-in-law. According to Alter, the name Ruth may suggest “friendship” but the meaning is uncertain.
Stranger.\textsuperscript{56} The narrative does not mention the cause of the men’s deaths, but their connection to foreign soil and foreign women alludes to endangerment.\textsuperscript{57} McKeown, on the other hand, sees the men’s deaths as an unexplained tragedy reminiscent of the Book of Job.\textsuperscript{58}

5. 3. 2. Naomi’s Return

Naomi "heard in the country of Moab that YHWH had considered his people and given them food" (Ruth 1:6), and she set out to return to Judah with her daughters-in-law. The first mention of God alludes to earlier narratives of YHWH’s concern and providential response.\textsuperscript{59} Naomi’s return is inspired by hearing the news that YHWH has responded to the needs of his people. The motifs of “hearing” or “seeing” followed by a response are typically linked to YHWH, but in this instance the “hearing” and response is in connection to Naomi.\textsuperscript{60} She started out on the return journey with both daughters-in-law, but then encouraged them to “Go back each of you to your mother’s house” (Ruth

\textsuperscript{56} Moen Saxegaard, \textit{Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth}, 43-44. Moen Saxegaard defines a widow as “a woman whose husband is dead, and who has neither any children nor closely related men in the family to support her and take care of her through a levirate marriage.”

\textsuperscript{57} Levine, "Ruth," 85. Levine points out that Moab and its inhabitants, are typically associated with hostility and idolatry (Num 22-25) and may not be included in the assembly of YHWH (Deut 23:3-6). She writes that “not only are Orpah and Ruth Moabites and so members of an already stigmatized nation, their marriages are childless when the sons die ten years later. Moab proves to be the site of sterility and death.”

\textsuperscript{58} McKeown, \textit{Ruth}, 18-19. McKeown recognizes that some interpretations see the tragedies that befall the family as punishment for Elimelech leaving Israel and the sons marrying foreign women, but he avoids this interpretation. He says that since the deaths were not stated as punishments “either the author did not believe that these deaths were punishment, or the author felt that the questions should be left open, just like sad events in life.”

\textsuperscript{59} In Gen 21:15-19, God “heard” the cries of Hagar’s son and responded by providing water for them; In Exod 16, YHWH “heard” the complaints of the Israelites in the wilderness and provided them with meat and bread.

\textsuperscript{60} Moen Saxegaard, \textit{Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth}, 180-181. Moen Saxegaard points out that God is not an active character in the Book of Ruth. We hear of YHWH’s actions and the main characters refer to YHWH, but there is no direct interaction between God and the human characters as there was in Genesis and Exodus.
1:8) to find security with new husbands. Naomi recalls the kindness (ḥesed) that Orpah and Ruth have shown and she prays that YHWH will deal as kindly with them. This positive depiction of a traditional enemy of Israel is unexpected since the reader anticipates hostility rather than kindness from the Moabites. Naomi’s first words are “go back” followed by the second mention of YHWH in the narrative. In the first instance, YHWH has “considered” the people of Judah; here, Naomi prays for YHWH’s blessing on her Moabite daughters-in-law.

At first, both Orpah and Ruth wept and refused to leave saying, “we will return with you to your people” (Ruth 1:10), but Naomi urged them, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way…” (Ruth 1:11-12). According to Alter, the key words in this dialogue are “to go back or return” and “to go” and they will acquire “complicated and even paradoxical meanings” as the narrative progresses. Twice Naomi urges the women to return to Moab, each time citing that their prospects for marriage are far better in their home country.

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61 Levine, “Ruth,” 85-86. Levine says that “father’s house” is the more prevalent term, but “mother’s house” is also found in Gen 24:28 and Songs 3:4; 8:2, “where it appears in contexts of sexuality, marriage, and women who determine both their own destiny and that of others.”

62 McKeown, Ruth, 21-22. McKeown says Naomi’s prayer that YHWH show kindness (ḥesed) to her daughters-in-law in Moab reveal that Naomi believed that YHWH’s activity was not confined to the land of Israel or limited by political borders. The term ḥesed, meaning steadfast love and fidelity, is a characteristic of YHWH (Gen 39:21; Exod 20:6; 34:6; Num 14:18; Deut 5:10). Here Naomi commends Orpah and Ruth for this quality in connection to their kindness toward herself, and her husband and sons.

63 Consider the Moabites’ inhospitality to the Israelites in the wilderness (Num 22; Deut 23:3-6).

64 Alter, Strong as Death is Love, 63. Alter says that Naomi is referring to levirate marriage where a man is obliged to marry his brother’s childless widow in order to beget children in the name of the deceased. In Ruth 4, the practice is extended beyond brothers to kinsman; Also see: Levine, “Ruth,” 86. Levine would disagree; she asserts that Naomi’s comments do not reflect the custom of levirate marriage since Naomi’s new husband would not be the father of Mahlon and Chilion, and the new sons would not be brothers of the deceased. Instead, Naomi is reflecting on her own inability to provide sons as husbands for the women.

65 Ibid., 62.
The third reference to YHWH thus far is when Naomi laments the bitterness of her situation “because the hand of YHWH has turned against me” (Ruth 1:13).66 This is a marked contrast to the kindness that Naomi says she has been shown by her Moabite daughters-in-law. Orpah finally relented and kissed Naomi goodbye, “but Ruth clung to her” (Ruth 1:14).67 Naomi discourages Ruth from following her for the third time, saying “your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law” (Ruth 1:15), but Ruth is persistent; she refuses to turn back and her fidelity to Naomi proves unshakable.68 She vows, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. May YHWH do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” (Ruth 1:16-17).69

66 Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth*, 93. According to Moen Saxegaard, Naomi’s suffering has similarities to the situation of Job. Both lose family and possessions, and then lament that God has turned against them. In the end, both are given new beginnings.

67 Ibid., 130. Moen Saxegaard contrasts Orpah’s “kiss” with Ruth’s “clinging.” She says that both connote intimacy, but she understands them as antonyms in this situation. The kiss signifies “farewell and separation” while the clinging marks a “long-lasting presence.” According to Moen Saxegaard, Orpah is the obedient daughter-in-law while Ruth defies Naomi, but Ruth’s clinging will be decisive for the survival of both herself and Naomi; Also see: Levine, “Ruth,” 86. Levine says that the concept of “clinging” echoes the intimacy of marital relationship expressed in Gen 2:24; the term comes up again when Boaz urges Ruth to “cling to” the women in his fields (Ruth 2:8). She writes that “it is in the company of women that Ruth, like Naomi, will find safety.”

68 Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth*, 133. Ruth is often depicted as an ideal proselyte, but Moen Saxegaard disagrees with this interpretation. She says that the narrator never describes her as an assimilated proselyte; rather, Ruth remains “the Moabitite” throughout the narrative until the end in Ruth 4:13 when she is simply called Ruth. Also see: John D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism” in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 1996), 162. Levenson writes that “the degree of integration of a foreigner into ancient Israel remains shrouded in obscurity.” Ruth remains a Moabitite after her declaration to Naomi, and Ezra/Nehemiah do not reveal the possibility of the conversion of foreign wives.

69 Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, 64. Ruth’s vow might be seen as the conversion statement of a proselyte. Alter writes that “there was no real process of conversion in the ancient Near East. If a person considered residence in a different country, he or she would in the natural course of things embrace the worship of the local god or gods. One should therefore not imagine that Ruth has become a theological monotheist, only that she is recognizing that if she follows Naomi to her people in Judah, she will adopt the god of the country.” Also see: Millgram, *Four Biblical Heroines*, 40-41. Millgram sees Ruth’s vow as a declaration of loyalty and faith in Naomi rather than one in the religion of YHWH.
According to Frymer-Kensky, Ruth’s vow of steadfast love and fidelity reflects the language of “covenant and contract.” As Ruth’s first words in the narrative, they provide an articulated portrait of her loyalty and determination. Ruth’s determination to go forward is reminiscent of Abraham leaving his home country for the land of Canaan, but Ruth was motivated by loyalty to Naomi rather than the promise of land and descendants. The fact that she does not turn back to Moab, despite the uncertainties of her future, stands in sharp contrast to the Israelites’ desire to turn back to Egypt when there was a lack of food and water in the wilderness. When Naomi saw Ruth was determined and would not turn back, she no longer discouraged her daughter-in-law and the two women set off together.

Naomi had been away from her home for more than ten years, and when the two women arrived in Bethlehem, they were met by the townswomen who wondered, “Is this Naomi?” (Ruth 1:19). Naomi, whose name means “pleasant” now asks to be called Mara, meaning “bitter” because she sees her life as drastically changed for the worse since her departure from Bethlehem. She laments, “Shaddai has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but YHWH has brought me back empty” (Ruth 20-21). Ruth seems to be ignored by both the townswomen and Naomi whose bitterness sees only emptiness, and not the young woman at her side. The narrator reminds us that two women made the

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70 Tivka Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 241. Frymer-Kensky cites covenants between kings of Judah and Israel that promise “as mine yours, your people as my people” (1 Kgs 22:4; 2 Kgs 3:7; 2 Chron 18:3) and between Jonathan and David where “God will be between me and you, between my seed and your seed forever” (1 Sam 20:42). She imagines Ruth performing a gesture, “like drawing a hand across the throat,” symbolizing her fate if she breaks this oath. Ruth’s vow essentially “adopts” Naomi’s family as her own and joins her to Naomi beyond death.

71 Alter, Strong as Death is Love, 64. The townswomen are the first to engage in dialogue with Naomi, not acknowledging the young woman who accompanies her. Alter points out that women alone are the active characters in the first chapter and sees this as “a point of departure from the patriarchal norm of classical Hebrew narrative, where there are some strong female characters but the men predominate.”
journey from Moab to Bethlehem, “Naomi returned with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab” (Ruth 1:22). According to Moen Saxegaard, the reiteration of Ruth’s Moabite origins is a purposeful “intertextual marker” with negative connotations linked to incest (Gen 19:30-38), idolatry (Num 25:1-2), and enmity (Num 22:1-6). Ruth has thus far acted with kindness towards the

Israe lite sojourners in Moab and loyalty towards her widowed mother-in-law, but the writer’s emphasis on her Moabite ancestry also recalls the danger and animosity linked to this foreign woman. As the narrative unfolds, Ruth’s actions will reveal her true character and her effect on the community.

The return to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest signals the possibility of a turnaround in the fortunes of the two widows. The mention of the harvest affirms what Naomi “heard” in Moab concerning YHWH’s provision, and the theme of harvesting infers fertility and the promise of new beginnings.

5.3.3. Ruth in the Field of Boaz

Chapter 2 introduces a new character, Boaz, a wealthy kinsman of Naomi’s deceased husband Elimelech. We are not told whether or not Naomi and Ruth are

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72 Levine, “Ruth,” 86. Levine points out that the character of Ruth, who remains silent at Naomi’s side as she laments her emptiness, “provides the ironic commentary and the corrective to Naomi’s homecoming.”


74 Millgram, Four Biblical Heroines, 42. Millgram says that the barley was harvested in mid-April and the wheat crop in mid-June. Ruth 2-4 takes place during the height of the grain harvest season, late spring and early summer.

75 Alter, Strong as Death is Love, 66. The name Boaz is associated with “strength” and in Ruth 2:1 he is called a “man of worth.” Alter says that this is the same designation attached to the “worthy woman” in Prov 31:8 and that will also be employed to describe Ruth. Also see: Moen Saxegaard, Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth, 145-146. Moen Saxegaard mentions the connection between the name of Boaz and one of the pillars in Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 7:21; 2 Chron 3:17) with both serving as a symbol of strength. Boaz is a powerful and wealthy man with significant influence in the community; the problem is that “behind his might and good reputation, he is an elderly man with no heirs.”
aware of his presence in Bethlehem at this point in the story. As two widows, the women have no source of income and must resort to gleaning in the fields, a form of charity for the most vulnerable in society, the widow, orphan, and the Stranger.\textsuperscript{76} Ruth takes the initiative saying, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor” (Ruth 2:2). Her motivation may involve more than the acquisition of food as she also hopes to attract someone’s attention and favor.\textsuperscript{77} When Naomi tells her, “Go, my daughter” (Ruth 2:2), rather than “go back,” it reveals the beginning of a turning point in Naomi, although it is Ruth who acts to turn their fortunes around.

While Ruth is gleaning, “as it happened” (Ruth 2:3), she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, while he, “just then” (Ruth 2:4), arrived from Bethlehem.\textsuperscript{78} Boaz notices Ruth and asks his reapers, “To whom does this young woman belong?” (Ruth 2:5).\textsuperscript{79} He learns that she is “the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab” (Ruth 2:6) and that Ruth has been working in the fields all day,

\textsuperscript{76} Millgram, \textit{Four Biblical Heroines}, 44-45. Milgrim posits that the women’s most pressing needs were food and shelter. The narrative does not specify where or how they found a place to stay, but it is clear that Ruth will provide food by gleaning in the fields. For gleaning laws see: Lev 19:9; 23:22; Deut 24:19. Millgram says that “while laws may be on the books, their implementation lies in the hands of local farmers, and compliance may be spotty.”

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 45. Millgram points out that Ruth may have anticipated that she, as a foreigner, might not be welcomed among the Israelite gleaners and might even suffer molestation by some of the men. By seeking someone’s favor, she looks for welcome and protection, signs of hospitality.

\textsuperscript{78} Alter, \textit{Strong as Death is Love}, 67. According to Alter, the fortuitous events that ensue when Ruth “happens” to come to the field of Boaz may suggest “a concordance between human initiative and God’s providence.” Also see: Frymer-Kensky, \textit{Reading the Women of the Bible}, 243. Frymer-Kensky sees this as more than a providential arrangement, and says that Ruth receives a “coincidence, a serendipitous happening that makes one wonder about causality.” She compares Ruth’s choice to glean in the field that happens to belong to her future husband to Abraham’s servant who has been sent to find a wife for Isaac and happens upon a young woman at a well who gives water to his camels.

\textsuperscript{79} Alter, \textit{Strong as Death is Love}, 67. Alter points out that we learn here that Ruth is a young woman, and that Boaz’ question “to whom does she belong” assumes she is under the authority of a patriarchal household.
“without resting even for a moment” (Ruth 2:7). This passage in the narrative emphasizes Ruth’s foreignness, but also her sense of purpose and her willingness to work hard. The greetings between Boaz and his reapers, “YHWH be with you and bless you” (Ruth 2:4), give the reader a sense of God’s presence behind the scenes of the action.

Boaz urges Ruth, “Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field, or leave this one, but keep close to my young women” (Ruth 2:8). He offers to provide protection from the young men who might bother Ruth, and he instructs her to “drink from what the young men have drawn” (Ruth 2:9) when she becomes thirsty. Alter likens this encounter to a well-betrothal type scene. The well is implied by the “drawing” of water but instead of the future bridegroom encountering a young woman at a well in a foreign land, the future bride meets an older man and is offered water on foreign soil.

Boaz assumes a role as Ruth’s protector and provider, and she seems taken aback at his attention, falling prostrate before him and asking, “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner (nokriyāh)?” (Ruth 2:10). Once again, Ruth’s foreignness is emphasized, but Boaz is not concerned with

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80 Levine, “Ruth,” 86-87. Levine asserts that this passage affirms Ruth’s disconnection from traditional family structures and relationships. As the Moabite who returned with Naomi, “she is no one’s wife, betrothed, or servant. Nor is she a member of the community; thus she is identified by race rather than, as Naomi is, by name.”

81 Moen Saxegaard, Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth, 180. Moen Saxegaard writes that “the frequent use of God’s name in Ruth must therefore be understood as a way of impelling God in the narrative. The question is in which way God is present. Is God an active character, or is he more of a theme?”

82 Alter, Strong as Death is Love, 68. “My daughter,” the same term used by Naomi, suggests familial relationship, but may also reveal that Boaz is a mature man who may be “a decade or two older than Ruth.” Alter points out that “first Ruth clings to Naomi…now, she is enjoined to cling to Boaz’ servant girls.”

83 Ibid., 68.

84 Moen Saxegaard, Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth, 139. Moen Saxegaard likens Ruth’s prostration before Boaz to Abigail’s bowing down before David (1 Sam 25:23). Abigail, like Ruth, was clever and courageous and the consequences of her actions are praise by the man who would become her husband.
her ethnicity, rather with her actions. In his response, he says that he has heard of Ruth’s faithfulness to Naomi and her choice to leave her native land of Moab and live among strangers. Similar to Naomi’s “hearing” of YHWH’s consideration and provision of food for his people, Boaz has “heard” of Ruth’s kindness and loyalty to her mother-in-law. Both YHWH and Ruth exemplify acts of ḥesed; while YHWH works behind the scenes, Ruth is at center stage providing a human example of divine love in action. Boaz invokes a blessing on Ruth, “May YHWH reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from YHWH, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!” (Ruth 2:12). This summarizes one of the main messages of the book: YHWH’s blessings and protection are not limited to the Israelites alone, but to all people who walk in the way of YHWH by doing acts of ḥesed. Ruth acknowledges the kindness that Boaz has shown to her in turn and she hopes he will continue to find favor with her. Ruth implies that she wants this relationship to continue, and Boaz responds by inviting her to share a meal with him.

Boaz shows Ruth special favor, providing grain that “he heaped up for her” (Ruth 2:14), and after Ruth had eaten there was even food leftover, implying that she had been given a plentitude. After the meal, Ruth went back to gleaning and Boaz instructed his reapers not to harass her and to leave extra gleanings in the fields for Ruth to gather. She

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85 Alter, Strong as Death is Love, 69. Alter asserts that the words, “you left your father and mother and your native land” (Ruth 2:11), are the most significant literary allusion in the Book of Ruth. They recall God’s first words to Abraham, but now it is a Moabite woman who reenacts the journey and “she will become a founding mother of the nation as he was a founding father.”

86 McKeown, Ruth, 48. The Hebrew word for wing, kānāp, can be a metaphor for God’s “wings,” signifying strength and protection (Exod 19:4; Ps 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 91:4; Ruth 2:12) or it can denote the corner of a garment (Num 15:38; Ezek 5:3; Zech 8:23; Ruth 3:9). The protection that YHWH provides will be linked to Boaz’ protection when Ruth places herself under his cloak (kānāp).

87 Consider the similarities between Boaz’ blessing on Ruth and Naomi’s blessing on her Moabite daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:8). Both Naomi and Boaz link YHWH’s blessing with the kind deeds of foreign women.
receives more than what is required or expected, both at the meal and in Boaz’ field. In the evening, Ruth returned to Naomi with the food leftover from the meal along with “an ephah of barley” (Ruth 2:17-18).88 When Naomi questions her daughter-in-law about the field that yielded such an abundance, Ruth replies, “the name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz” (Ruth 2:19). This suggests that Ruth and Boaz, a Moabite woman and an Israelite man, worked together that day, resulting in an abundance that was shared with Naomi.89

Upon hearing the identity of the owner of the field, Naomi says, “Blessed be he by YHWH, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead! The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin!” (Ruth 2:20).90 Although the reader knows that Boaz is a kinsman of Elimelech, Ruth is unaware of this until Naomi hears his name and reveals his identity as a “near kinsmen,” a family protector or Redeemer.91 The appearance of a Redeemer and the plentiful provision of food is a turning point in the narrative for both of the women. Naomi’s “bitterness” is transformed into gratitude for the unexpected change in their fortunes. Boaz has shown Ruth special favor, providing food, drink, and protection, and Ruth has shared her good fortunes with Naomi. A “hero” has seemingly

88 Levine, “Ruth,” 87. Levine says that an “ephah” is between thirty and fifty pounds, a substantial amount for one day’s gleaning. The story began with famine and hunger, but now there is more than enough food for Ruth and Naomi.
89 Ibid., 87. According to Levine, Boaz’ invitation to Ruth to take a place at his table and his offering of food, effectively incorporates her into his household. Ruth’s return with food for Naomi at the end of the day shows that she places familial loyalty above her own self-interests.
90 Moen Saxegaard, Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth, 168-169. Moen Saxegaard says that this phrase is ambiguous since Naomi could be referring to either YHWH’s or Boaz’ kindness (hesed). By creating this ambiguity, the writer combines their roles and demonstrates how God works through the human characters. Another interpretation is that Naomi is referring to Boaz since human relationships have been linked to hesed while YHWH has brought suffering and loss.
91 Ibid., 149-150. “Our nearest kin” refers to a go’el or “redeeming kin,” a close relative who takes responsibility for protecting a family’s rights in the absence of the head of the household. Duties include buying back family land, redeeming family members sold into debt slavery, or avenging blood guilt. Boaz is called a redeemer in Ruth 2:20; 3:9, 12; and 4:14. When Ruth later turns to Boaz as the family redeemer, the reader learns that there is a nearer kinsman who has claim to those rights.
arrived who will save the day. One question that arises is, as a near kinsman, why did Boaz not approach Naomi and offer assistance before? He seemed to be aware of her presence in Bethlehem since he had heard about her daughter-in-law accompanying her from Moab. He enters the scene only after Ruth has caught his eye as she gleaned in his fields. In many respects, Ruth is the truly heroic character since she is the one who takes the initiative and provides for Naomi by gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests.

5. 3. 4. Naomi Seeks a Home for Ruth

Naomi reciprocates Ruth’s concern for her through an initiative to attain a husband and a home for Ruth. She advises Ruth in how to show her interest in Boaz who will be at the threshing floor that evening winnowing barley. Ruth is instructed to wash and anoint herself, and put on her best clothing; she is to go down to the threshing floor but should not reveal herself to Boaz until he has finished eating and drinking. Ruth’s preparations to approach Boaz are not unlike the Strange Woman (nokriyāh) who adorns herself before setting out to seduce the youth (Prov 7:10-13). Naomi specifies, “When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and

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92 Millgram, *Four Biblical Heroines*, 51-52. Millgram says that the responsibility as a Redeemer was “absolutely obligating to an immediate relative” but it diminished as the degree of relationship receded. Boaz’ absence may be explained as the decision of a distant relative who felt no obligation to assume responsibility in caring for the widow of a distant kin. He is inspired to help, not so much because of a social obligation, but through his attraction to Ruth.

93 Ibid., 52. When the barley harvest ends, the wheat harvest begins. As the harvest periods ends, two months have passed by.

94 Fischer, “The Book of Ruth,” 29. Naomi’s words, “to seek some security for you, so that it may go well for you” (Ruth 3:1) point out that security for a woman in the ancient world meant finding a husband who would provide a home and protection.

95 Millgram, *Four Biblical Heroines*, 55-56. The threshing floor was an elevated open space where the grain was separated from the chaff. Winnowing took place in the late afternoon and early evening, and after the work was done the farmers would eat a celebratory meal and then remain there during the night to guard the grain from thieves.
lie down; and he will tell you what to do” (Ruth 3:4). Ruth agrees to follow Naomi’s instructions, but takes some of her own initiatives as well.

As instructed, Ruth went to the threshing floor and waited until after Boaz had been eating and drinking; he was contented and went to lie down at the end of a heap of grain. Ruth approached him “stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down” (Ruth 3:7). At midnight, Boaz was startled and turned over to find a young woman lying next to him. This is the first instance where Ruth takes the initiative in this scene. Naomi had instructed her to lie down next to Boaz after he had eaten and drunk, and then await his instruction, but Ruth waits until he is asleep to lie down. When he wakes up, Boaz seems unsure about the situation he finds himself in and the identity of the woman lying next to him. Although the passage conveys sexual imagery and tension, the story doesn’t actually say that they had sexual relations; the reader is left to speculate what occurred between them.

When Boaz asks her identity, Ruth once again takes the initiative and asserts, “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin” (Ruth 3:9). Ruth is not only asking for protection from the kinsman but also proposing

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96 Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 248. According to Frymer-Kensky, Naomi is sending Ruth to do something entirely inappropriate, actions that might lead to scandal or abuse. Prostitutes might come to the threshing floor at night, but not respectable young women. This plan involves enormous trust between Ruth and Naomi, as well as trust that Boaz will continue to act with hesed towards Ruth.

97 Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, 72-73. The meaning of the phrase “uncover his feet” is ambiguous. Alter does not believe that “feet” necessarily refers to genitals, but he does say the phrase implies a sexual encounter. He points out that “the verb of uncovering is the one used in biblical prohibitions of uncovering the nakedness of someone, that is, engaging in sexual intercourse” but the passage does say that this is what occurred. Alter says that the uncovering may also simply be a way to show Boaz that he is not alone.

98 Ibid., 75. “Spread your wing (kānāp)” recalls Ruth coming under the protection of YHWH’s wings (Ruth 2:12), but it can also be a symbol of marriage.
marriage to Boaz. Since the next of kin had the obligation to protect the property and honor of the dead kinsman, as well as maintain the family line, Ruth is reminding Boaz of his responsibilities and essentially staking her claim to marriage.

Boaz reacts by recognizing that Ruth is motivated by loyalty (ḥesed) to Naomi and her kin since she did not seek a husband from among the younger men, but chose him instead. Boaz tells her that he will do anything that she asks and compliments her as being known as a “worthy woman” (Ruth 3:11) by all the assembly of people. The term ēšet hayîl is the same one used for the Woman of Worth in Proverbs, a model of covenant love and fidelity (ḥesed). A marriage between Ruth and Boaz seems assured until we learn of a conflict that develops; there is a nearer kinsman that has a prior claim, and Boaz must deal with him before they can go forward.

Ruth remained with Boaz until morning, but left before it was light since he insisted that “it must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor” (Ruth 3:14). Again, there is ambiguity concerning what transpired between them during the night, but Boaz’ insistence that Ruth leave before dawn reveals his concern for her reputation. Before she leaves, Boaz asks Ruth to hold open her cloak and he fills it with six measures of barley, a substantial amount of grain, so that Ruth will not go back

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99 Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth*, 139-140. Moen Saxegaard says that a woman proposing marriage is rare in the Hebrew Scriptures. Lot’s daughters and Tamar arrange to gain heirs, but marriage is not part of their plans. Ruth needs both marriage and offspring, and she appeals to Boaz’ sense of responsibility to fulfill her intentions.

100 Ibid., 124. Up until this point, Boaz has called Ruth “daughter” (Ruth 2:8; 3:10, 11), but now he refers to her as a “worthy woman” (Ruth 3:11). The term hayîl, meaning strength and family status, is the same word used to describe Boaz (Ruth 2:1). According to Moen Saxegaard, “the term sets Ruth on quite a different social level than the widowed foreigner she has been associated with so far.”

101 Alter, *Strong as Death is Love*, 75. Alter says that Boaz has more than one reason in convincing Ruth to spend the night. He is concerned for her reputation if she should be seen, and “the night spent together is also an adumbration of marital union, though here, in the most likely reading, still unconsummated.”
empty-handed to her mother-in-law.\textsuperscript{102} When she returns, Naomi advises Ruth to wait and see how this plays out later that day.

5. 3. 5. Redemption and a New Beginning

The narrator tells us that “no sooner” had Boaz sat down by the city gate when the next-of-kin came passing by.\textsuperscript{103} This fortuitous encounter can imply divine providence, or perhaps Boaz assumed that the kinsman would pass through this well-frequented public place. Boaz addressed the kinsman as “friend” and asked him to sit down, along with ten elders of the city to act as witnesses to a public transaction.\textsuperscript{104} Boaz informed the kinsman that Naomi, who has returned from Moab, is selling the land that belonged to her husband Elimelech.\textsuperscript{105} The unnamed kinsman has the first option to purchase the land, but if he declines, Boaz will purchase it. As go’él, the next-of-kin also has the moral duty of redeeming the land.\textsuperscript{106} Boaz says, “Buy it in the presence of those sitting

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 76. According to Alter, “the Book of Ruth is all about the transition from emptiness to fullness, from famine to abundance, from bereavement and childlessness to marriage and children.” The fullness of the grain in Ruth’s shawl is a hint of the offspring that Ruth will bring to Naomi. In my interpretation, the grain may also be symbolic of the “seed” that Boaz will later provide for sons, and in that respect counters the prohibition of mingling the “holy seed” with foreigners (Ezra 9:2).

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 77. The city gate was the public center where business and legal transactions took place.

\textsuperscript{104} Moen Saxegaard, Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth, 69-70. Boaz calls the unnamed kinsman “friend.” In Hebrew, he is called pēlōnî ’almōnî, a term used in 1 Sam 21:13 and 2 Kgs 6:8 to designate “a certain place.” According to Moen Saxegaard, the correct interpretation in Ruth 4:1 should be “a certain man,” however she says that Boaz’ use of the term functions as a nickname for this person, such as “Mr. So-and-So.” His anonymity is contrasted with the status and esteem linked to the name of Boaz.

\textsuperscript{105} McKeown, Ruth, 62. This is the first time that we hear about Elimelech’s land and Naomi’s plan to sell the property. McKeown posits that the family’s situation at the beginning of the story raises the possibility that Elimelech may have tried to sell the land before the sojourn to Moab, but was unable to do so. Since Naomi does not send Ruth to glean on the family’s property, the land was probably not cultivated during the sojourn in Moab and has been lying fallow all this time.

\textsuperscript{106} Millgram, Four Biblical Heroines, 19-20. Millgram asserts the significance and responsibilities of “redemption” in a society based on blood kinship. He says, “If the need should arise, and the degree of relationship with one of your kin was sufficiently close, you would be called upon by your conscience and by social pressure to assume the role of Redeemer.” The primary responsibilities of the Redeemer included seeking blood vengeance for the murder of a family member, safeguarding the ancestral lands, seeking the release of kin from debt slavery, and the preservation of the family line.
here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you” (Ruth 4:4). Boaz’ assertions, in many respects, publicly challenge the next-of-kin to step up and assume familial duties, and if he fails to assume those duties, Boaz will take on the role of Redeemer.

Initially, the next-of-kin agrees to redeem the land until Boaz informs him, “the day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance” (Ruth 4:5). Typically, levirate marriage is limited to the brother of the deceased; since all of Elimelech’s sons are dead, the narrative implies that these duties fall on the go’él.107 When the kinsman hears that Ruth the Moabite comes along with the purchase of land, he declines and makes an excuse that the acquisition might endanger his own inheritance, but his true motive may be avoiding intermarriage with a foreign woman.108 He tells Boaz, “Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it” (Ruth 4:6). A legal transaction concerning redeeming and exchange ensues between them with the kinsman relinquishing his rights and Boaz acquiring “from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon” (Ruth 4:9).109 Most importantly for the resolution of the narrative, Boaz acquires “Ruth the

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107 In Deut 25:5-10, the levirate marriage is limited to the brother of the deceased. This may be an attempt on the part of Boaz to ensure that the family land remained with the descendants of Ruth and Naomi, which might not have happened if the next-of-kin redeemed the land but did not marry Ruth.

108 Alter, Strong as Death is Love, 78-79. Alter says that the kinsman does not specify how his own inheritance would be endangered, but if he should beget a son with Ruth, the land would remain within the family of her dead husband. A more significant endangerment might come in the person of Ruth the Moabite, a traditional enemy of Israel.

109 Ibid., 79. The transaction involved the removal and exchange of a sandal between the two men, a physical representation of the conveying of goods from one person to another. The practice seems to have required an explanation in the narrative as a “custom in former times in Israel” (Ruth 4:7) which may indicate the later dating of the story. In another account, the act of removing the sandal is a sign of
Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place” (Ruth 4:10). Boaz shows no reservations about marriage with this foreign woman; in fact, he affirms it is only through their union that this family could be reestablished. This is one of the few scenes in the narrative where Ruth and Naomi are absent from the action. The public exchange between Boaz and the next-of-kin is dominated by the presence of men, whereas the women are objects of the exchange. Although she is not physically present, Ruth, a foreign woman, is seen as integral to the survival of the “name of the dead” and to reverse the displacement from the “gate of his native place.”

Events transpired as Boaz hoped they would. He took on the role of the go’ēl, redeeming the ancestral land along with the widowed Ruth in order to perpetuate the honor and name of the dead relatives. Perhaps, he was also motivated by his attraction to this young woman and his esteem of her character. Throughout the narrative, Boaz shows a growing interest in Ruth despite her foreignness. She initially catches his eye when she is gleaning; as he comes to know her, Boaz learns of her kindness and family loyalty. Through his redemptive actions, he echoes the same ḥesed that we have seen

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110 Levine, “Ruth,” 89. Levine questions why, since Ruth had already shown interest in him and could marry whomever she chose, did Boaz deal with this in such a public sphere rather than just marry her in private. She posits that perhaps Boaz felt the need for the community’s approval of his problematic relationship with a Moabite. In positioning himself as the go’ēl, his responsibilities legally justified the marriage.

111 Moen Saxegaard, Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth, 164. According to Moen Saxegaard, Boaz may also have had some personal interest in Ruth. “Boaz had no heirs until he met Ruth. He had no one to inherit his properties, no one to care for him in his old age, and no one to have his name preserved for prosperity the day he died.” If his intent was to fulfill the levirate law, he failed since the name of Mahlon disappears from the genealogy in Ruth 4:18-22.
throughout the narrative in the character of Ruth. Her acts of loving kindness inspire the actions of other characters in the story in their movement from emptiness to fullness.

The union of an Israelite man and a foreign woman is blessed by the elders and people at the gate saying, “May YHWH make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel…and through the children that YHWH will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah” (Ruth 4:11-12).\textsuperscript{112} By comparing Ruth with the mothers of Israel, Rachel and Leah, and linking her to Tamar, the writer implies that diverse peoples established the foundations for the people of YHWH.\textsuperscript{113} After Boaz and Ruth are married, “YHWH made her conceive, and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13).\textsuperscript{114} According to Moen Saxegaard, up until this point, “it is human action, especially Ruth’s, and not YHWH who drives the narrative forward.”\textsuperscript{115} She says that only after Ruth’s

\textsuperscript{112} Levine, “Ruth,” 89-90. Levine points out that the townspeople initially bless Ruth rather than Boaz. Ruth, the Moabitte, will fulfill the role of two mothers of Israel, Rachel and Leah. The connection to the widowed Tamar, who posed as a prostitute in order to seduce her father-in-law, implies that the townspeople knew about the encounter between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor. According to Levine, the parallels and shared motifs between the narratives of Ruth and Tamar consist of “a move to foreign soil, marriages to foreign women, and the deaths of two sons and a spouse.” Also see: Phyllis Trible, \textit{God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 191-192. Trible says that the comparison of Ruth to the matriarchs of Genesis recalls the comparison between Ruth and Abraham, but with marked differences. The allusion to Abraham compared Ruth’s faith with that of the patriarch while the comparison to the women places her in the more traditional role of motherhood. In both analogies, Ruth is firmly located within the history and traditions of Israel.

\textsuperscript{113} There are no other references to Ruth in the Hebrew Scriptures outside of the narrative; her name is mentioned in the New Testament as an ancestress of Jesus, along with Tamar, Rahab, and the wife of Uriah (Matt 1:3-6).

\textsuperscript{114} Alter, \textit{Strong as Death is Love}, 81. Alter mentions that the phrase “YHWH granted her conception” does not usually appear in reports of conjugal union and conception. He sees this as action on the part of YHWH since Ruth remained childless in the years that she was married to Mahlon. Also see: Trible, \textit{God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality}, 193. Trible sees this passage as affirming that ultimately all life comes from God. She writes “Ten years of a childless marriage in Moab have been quickly redeemed in the union of Ruth and Boaz. YHWH has given conception; blessing has transformed curse.”

\textsuperscript{115} Moen Saxegaard, \textit{Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth}, 179-180. YHWH is known through descriptions from the other characters’ points of view: Naomi accuses YHWH (Ruth 1:13, 20-21), Boaz blesses others in the name of YHWH (Ruth 2:4, 12; 3:10), and the women in Bethlehem praise YHWH (Ruth 4:14). According to Moen Saxegaard, God’s presence behind the scenes does not make him an active character within the plot. It is the narrator or reader who interprets that the actions of the main characters are being directed by YHWH.
conception does God become an active character in the story.\textsuperscript{116} From another perspective, Millgram argues that although God seems hidden from the center stage, “his hidden hand is everywhere present; directing, arranging, moving things along to their desired conclusion, a conclusion totally unsuspected by the actors on the stage.”\textsuperscript{117} Unlike the Torah narratives, YHWH is not a prominent character in Ruth, but the reader does have a sense of God’s presence throughout the story, in events of famine and fertility and the fortuitous meetings that lead to a happy ending for the main characters. I would agree with LaCocque that YHWH is primarily manifest in the character of Ruth the Moabite who serves as a human example of divine \textit{hesed}.

After the marriage and conception, Boaz fades from view and the women once again take center stage. At the beginning of the narrative, when Naomi returned from Moab, the women of Bethlehem encountered a “bitter” woman who lamented that YHWH had turned against her, bringing her suffering, loss, and emptiness. At the conclusion of the story, the townswomen acknowledge that Naomi’s suffering and emptiness have been reversed saying, “Blessed be YHWH, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin…He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 182.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Millgram, \textit{Four Biblical Heroines}, 73. Millgram points out that only after the story has ended does the audience realize that God’s hand, though hidden, was directing every event in the plot.
\item \textsuperscript{118} André LaCocque, “Subverting the Political World: Sociology and Politics in the Book of Ruth” in \textit{Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs} (ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg; New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 27. LaCocque writes that “Human \textit{hesed} is an echo of divine \textit{hesed}. Hence, the \textit{hesed} of God materializes for Naomi by way of the \textit{hesed} of Ruth the Moabiteess. This makes of Ruth an exemplar not only for the people around her, but for the generations to come.”
\end{itemize}
him” (Ruth 4:14-15). To say that Ruth is “worth more than seven sons” affirms the significance of this foreign woman in the eyes of the narrator. Sons were typically seen as more valuable than daughters; sons inherited the ancestral lands and carried on the family name. Naomi, who suffered the loss of her sons at the beginning of the story, has found blessings and restoration through her Moabite daughter-in-law.

The narrative says “Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse” (Ruth 4:16). The women of the neighborhood then acknowledge Naomi’s restoration from emptiness to fullness by saying, “A son has been born to Naomi” (Ruth 4:17). In reality, the child is neither Naomi’s biological son nor grandson, but a son in the sense that Ruth is her “daughter” replacing the family that she lost as a sojourner in Moab. According to Fischer, “Ruth neither gives birth to a child for her deceased husband, as the levirate law would provide, nor for her husband Boaz, as patriarchal societies would normally have it. Ruth gives birth to a child for a woman, namely Naomi.” The narrative tells, not only of the continuation of a family, but of a new

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119 Levine, “Ruth,” 90. Levine says that the women remark the child is of particular value to Naomi because Ruth is the mother and she is “worth more than seven sons,” yet, before the birth of this son, the townswomen did not even acknowledge Ruth.

120 Moen Saxegaard, Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth, 120. The number “seven” is used in other biblical narratives to symbolize abundance and perfection (Gen 2:2-3; 4:24; 5:31; 7:2-4, 10; 8:10; 41:2-4; Exod 12:15-20; Lev 4:6, 17; 16:14). Hannah describes barren women who will bear seven sons (1 Sam 16:10). Jesse brings his seven sons before Samuel, but he actually has eight sons (1 Sam 16:10-11). Moen Saxegaard writes that “an intertextual reading between Hannah’s prayer, the Ruth and the David narratives strengthens the significance of all these texts. David’s being the eighth son gives him an immediate importance, and Ruth being better than seven sons is comparable both to the great David and to those barren women Hannah blesses in her praises.”

121 Alter, Strong as Death is Love, 81. When Naomi became his “nurse,” it means a caregiver or guardian, not a wet nurse. Alter points out that taking the child onto her lap is a natural expression of a grandmother’s love, but also symbolizes the replacement of the sons that she has lost. Unlike some other interpretations, he does not see this as an act of adoption since the child’s mother is still alive.

122 Ibid., 81. According to Alter, the women who address Naomi are “the women of the neighborhood” rather than the townswomen of Bethlehem, pointing to a more intimate gathering of women. The neighborhood women, rather than the father or mother, name the child, reflecting the importance of the community of women in the story.

sense of family that is defined not by societal norms but rather by loving kindness (*hesed*) for one another.

The neighborhood women name the child Obed, and we learn that Ruth’s son will be the grandfather of David. The genealogy in Ruth 4:18-21 begins with Perez, one of the twins born to Tamar and ends with David, the king who united the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The writer is telling us that from a foreign woman comes “God’s Beloved” who will bring national unity as Israel’s greatest king. Levine says that when Naomi becomes the child’s nurse “Ruth is erased from the text” and her continuing relationship with her son, husband, and Naomi are not addressed. I would argue that, although the story is called the Book of Ruth, the true central character is Naomi since she is the one who undergoes the greatest transformation in the story. We come to know her inner life as she struggles with her suffering and loss through anger, resignation, and finally acceptance. Ruth accompanies Naomi on the journey from despair to hope, but then she steps back from center stage at the end of the story in the same way that YHWH has been behind the scenes throughout the narrative. Ruth, the Moabite, has served her purpose. She exemplified the way of YHWH in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

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124 Tan, _The “Foreignness” of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9_ , 180-181. Tan points out the irony in the narrative’s genealogy which includes David as a descendent of Ruth. It recalls the prohibition against admitting Moabites (Deut 23:3) and is likely a rhetorical response to Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s prohibitions against intermarriage with foreigners. The genealogy suggests that good things can come from interactions with foreigners.

125 Levine, “Ruth,” 90.

126 Moen Saxegaard, _Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth_ , 75-77. Moen Saxegaard points out that Naomi’s name is mentioned 22 times in the Book of Ruth; Ruth’s is mentioned 12 times and Boaz’ 20 times. She questions why the book was not called “The Book of Naomi” and concludes that perhaps it is a criticism of her character.
lonely. She brought Naomi, the Israelite, home and restored her to a family. In the end, she assures that Naomi will not be left alone.

5.4. Conclusion

The Book of Ruth centers on the theme of transformation, a movement from one state of being or belief to another. The motifs of conversion and redemption convey that transformation, but the narrative reverses traditional interpretations of those motifs. Ruth is considered the ideal convert who adopts the way of YHWH, yet she acted with hospitality and kindness (hesed) before declaring her loyalty to Israel’s God. In many respects, it is the Israelite characters who undergo conversions in the story. Ruth “converts” Naomi from an attitude of bitterness to one of hope, and then “converts” Boaz from a kinsman who has seemingly neglected the two widows into their Redeemer. Ruth and Naomi are in need of a Redeemer, a kinsman who will redeem the land and provide sons for Ruth. Boaz seems to fill that role, yet it is Ruth that is “worth more than seven sons” and who truly redeems Naomi by reestablishing a family for her.

The story also intends to inspire transformation in an audience who might be hostile to foreign influences, especially that of foreign women. The Book of Ruth serves to counter this perspective, in dialogue with the negative views of the Stranger in the Torah and Writings. Ruth and Orpah are Moabites, traditional enemies of Israel, yet these Moabite women offer hospitality to the sojourners from Bethlehem. Foreign women are often depicted as seductive and dangerous, yet Ruth is portrayed as a paradigm of the “Woman of Worth.” Instead of danger and death, Ruth the Moabite
brings the promise of blessings upon the return home and the promise of the continuation of the “holy seed.”

In the Torah, YHWH has a special concern for the Stranger who is displaced from his/her home country and he responds to their sense of alienation by promising the blessings of home and family. Through their own experience of displacement, Israel is commanded to “love the stranger” (Deut 10:19), but this imperative concerns the gēr, the sojourner who is protected under Israelite law and may be admitted into the assembly. On the other hand, the nēkār or zār, the foreigner or outsider, should be avoided and, in some instances, eliminated.

The Book of Ruth does not command love for the Stranger, but rather serves as an example of love from a Stranger. YHWH’s special concern for the Stranger is depicted in the character of Ruth, a foreign woman (nokriyāh) who serves as the exemplar of loving kindness and fidelity (hesed). Ruth, the Moabite, teaches the Israelites how to love the Stranger, beyond the imperatives of law and duty. Through acts of kindness and compassion, this foreign woman restores an Israelite woman’s family, as well as her faith in YHWH. In an age when boundaries and separation were viewed as essential for survival, Ruth crosses established boundaries and looks to solidarity as the way, not only for the survival of a few individuals, but for the survival and blessing of both the Israelite and the Moabite.
6.1. All Strangers and Sojourners

In summary, the Stranger is one of the central literary motifs in the Torah/Pentateuch and the experience of being “Strangers and Sojourners” is one of the primary ways of speaking of Israelite identity. Israel’s ancestors, beginning with Abraham, are Strangers who are portrayed as gērîm, sojourners that are often vulnerable to hostility and lacking the protection and privileges of the native population. Some of the main plots in these narratives involve: endangerment and rescue; hostility and hospitality; and scarcity and abundance. Despite their marginal status, the ancestors of Israel not only survive, but thrive and prosper through a covenant relationship with God. The Stranger in the ancestor narratives can also be understood as a non-Israelite person, either displaced from his/her country of origin or from his/her family and kin, a person like Hagar who also receives blessings from God. In looking at her story, I concluded that one of the most important elements in the narrative is the revelation that YHWH sees and hears the affliction of persons who are suffering abuse, oppression, or displacement, and YHWH responds to their affliction. Through the covenant promises and blessings, the writer reveals that God has a special concern for the Stranger.

In consideration of the Exodus narrative, I observed the repetition of both the motif of Israel as “Strangers and Sojourners” as well as the theme of God’s special concern for the Stranger. At the beginning of Exodus, Jacob’s descendants were sojourners in Egypt, and as their oppression increased over the years, their cries drew the
attention of YHWH who sees and hears suffering and responds. Moses, YHWH’s liberator, also identifies himself as a “stranger and sojourner” and rather than guiding the Israelites immediately to the land promised to their ancestors, he leads them into the wilderness for trials and testing. The sojourn in the wilderness accentuates the liminal experience of the Stranger who is neither here nor there. Through repetition, the Exodus recalls the motif of the Stranger and God’s special concern for the Stranger that is evident in the ancestor narratives. In employing repetition, the redactor develops the motif and theme into a form of self-identity for a later generation, along with a moral imperative for them to cultivate a special concern for the Stranger, rooted in their own experience as Strangers in a strange land.

In Genesis and Exodus, the Stranger was the gēr, a person displaced from his/her kin or country of origin. In Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the Stranger is the gēr, nokrî, and zār, as well as foreign peoples that the Israelites encounter on their journey to the Promised Land. The gēr is the only category of the Stranger that continuously receives inclusion and protection among the Israelites, while the nokrî, and zār are typically seen in a negative light, both in a social and cultic context. In the final three books of the Torah/Pentateuch, the theme of boundaries, separating insiders from outsiders, is prominent. In some texts, the boundaries are drawn between fellow Israelites, but typically the Israelites are depicted as insiders to YHWH’s covenant promises while the Strangers who are nokrīm or zārīm are outsiders. The distinctions become more pronounced as the Israelites progressively separate themselves from other nations, and antagonism towards foreign peoples and elements escalates the nearer the Israelites draw to the Promised Land. As in the earlier narratives, YHWH still has a
special concern for the *gērîm*, expressing love for them, including them in the covenant community, and commanding a similar response of love for the *gērîm* from Israel. On the contrary, foreign peoples who are not named as *gērîm*, but as *nokrîm*, *zārîm*, or foreign nations are to be avoided, displaced, and even eliminated entirely. In contrast to the love command, YHWH commands Israel to have no pity on foreign nations.

In my research, I found that in the Torah/Pentateuch, YHWH has a special concern for the Stranger who is displaced from his/her home country and he responds to their sense of alienation by promising the blessings of home and family. Through their own experience of displacement, Israel is commanded to “love the Stranger” but this imperative concerns the *gēr*, the sojourner who is protected under Israelite law and may be admitted into the Israelite assembly. On the other hand, the *nēkār* or *zār*, the foreigner or outsider, should be avoided and, in some instances, eliminated.

The command to “love the Stranger,” is explicit in biblical law, but it can also be apparent in the words and actions of a character in a narrative. The full impact of the theme is often not fully understood until the reader contemplates the collection of literature as a whole. Through repetition of the motif of the Stranger and the theme of love for the Stranger, the Book of Ruth serves as a commentary on earlier narratives and laws in order to offer a broader and more inclusive perspective of the meaning of love for the Stranger.

The Book of Ruth does not command love for the Stranger, but rather serves as an example of love from a Stranger. YHWH’s special concern for the Stranger is depicted in the character of Ruth, a foreign woman (*nokriyāh*) who serves as the exemplar of loving kindness and fidelity (*ḥesed*). Ruth, the Moabite, teaches the Israelites how to
love the Stranger, beyond the imperatives of law and duty towards the gēr. Through acts of kindness and compassion, this Stranger who is called a nokriyāh restores an Israelite woman’s family, as well as her faith in YHWH. In a post-exilic age when boundaries and separation were viewed as essential for religious and cultural survival, the Book of Ruth crossed established boundaries and looked to solidarity as the way to survive and move forward together in times of suffering and conflict since, ultimately, we are all “Strangers and Sojourners” on this earth.

6.2. The Stranger in Our Midst in the 21st Century

As I stated in the introduction of this dissertation, one of the goals of this final chapter is to consider how/whether the biblical narratives concerning the Stranger contain a universal message that transcends the original context by asking: Who is the Stranger today, at the beginning of the 21st century? Are the issues and conflicts linked to the Stranger similar to/different from the ancient world? What lessons can we learn from the biblical literature regarding our relationship with strangers? How do we recognize and respect the Other while maintaining our own sense of identity? How do we cultivate compassion for the Stranger?

6.2.1. Migrants and Refugees

The central characters in the ancestor narratives were gērîm, resident aliens who migrated from one place to another, typically to survive some environmental threat to themselves and their families, such as a famine, or to seek refuge from the hostility of other peoples. The promise of establishing a new home and a better future for themselves
and their children provided the strength to endure the hardships of migration. The gerîm in the 21st century are the migrants or refugees who leave their country of origin for many reasons that are similar to the biblical ancestors. According to the United Nations International Migration Report 2015, “In today’s increasingly interconnected world, international migration has become a reality that touches nearly all corners of the globe...conflict, poverty, inequality and lack of decent jobs are among the reasons that compel people to leave their homes in search of better futures for themselves and their families.”

J. Guerra writes that “migrants, and in a special way refugees, are those who flee and leave their territory to save their own life and that of the family or community they leave behind. They leave because they are seeking freedom, well-being, and dignity.”

In the United States, as in the biblical context, these migrants or refugees often experience physical endangerment and social marginalization and vulnerability, lacking the protection and privileges of the native born population. R. Schreiter considers the physical and emotional stress that migrants, or displaced persons, experience during the stages of: leaving one’s homeland, transit to a new location, and then settling into a new situation. The emotional trauma of leaving home and loved ones behind, often at the risk

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1 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2016, International Migration Report 2105: Highlights. (ST/ESA/SER.A/375), pp. 1-2. According to this report, the number of international migrants reached 244 million in 2015, with this figure including nearly 20 million refugees.

2 Jorge E. Castillo Guerra, “A Theology of Migration: Toward an Intercultural Methodology” in A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration (ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 248. Guerra cites two primary causes for leaving: forced emigration due to situations of danger, such as conflicts over politics, religion, ethnicity, sexism, sexual orientation, or extreme poverty; and voluntary emigration due to lack of fulfillment, unemployment, ecological catastrophe, or overpopulation.
of one’s personal safety or life, is often followed with the trauma of settling into a new culture where he/she may not be offered welcome or legal protection.³

In the Deuterocanonical laws, the gēr was classified with the widow and orphan as the poor and marginalized, but there were legal considerations in place that offered sustenance, protection, and a sense of inclusion in the Israelite community for the gēr. In looking at the situation of migrants and refugees in the present century, United States policy and law often fails to address the natural rights and dignity of these persons.

According to Catholic Social teaching, these rights, deriving from human dignity entail “the fulfillment of the essential needs of the person in the material and spiritual spheres.”⁴

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³ Robert Schreiter, “Migrants and the Ministry of Reconciliation” in A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration (ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 108-110. In connection to the physical dangers that both voluntary and involuntary migrants face, Schreiter gives examples of: African migrants crossing the Mediterranean to reach Europe; Latin Americans crossing the desert into the United States; and persons in bondage who are being trafficked to a new country for purposes of forced employment or in the sex industry. Emotional traumas include: facing an uncertain future; unfamiliarity with the language and customs of the new country; having to rely on strangers for safety and sustenance; and discrimination, racism, and xenophobia.

⁴ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), pp. 67-68. These rights include: “the right to live; the right to bodily integrity and the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, the necessary social services; the right to respect for one’s person, and the right to a share in the benefits of culture; the right to honor God in accord with one’s conscience, and the right to practice religion publicly and privately; the rights to the economic, social, cultural, and moral conditions which are necessary for the support of family life, and the rights of parents to educate their children; the right to work; the right to humane working conditions, to appropriate participation in the management of an economic enterprise, and to a just wage; the right to own property; the right to organize societies according to the aim of the members, and the right to organize groups for the purpose of securing goods which the individual cannot attain alone; the right to take an active part in public life, and to make his own contribution to the common welfare of his fellow citizens; the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own State. When there are just reasons in favor of it, he must be permitted to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular State does not deprive him of membership in the human family, nor of citizenship in that universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship of men.”
D. Kerwin finds shortcomings in United States immigration laws and policies, especially in connection to immigrant families and foreign workers. Mixed status families, with both documented and undocumented members, must contend with the possible deportation of a parent, sibling, or spouse, causing emotional and financial trauma for the family. In a nation that purports to uphold family values, Kerwin argues that the current immigration system often divides families who have committed immigration violations, and backlogs and processing delays “frustrate the natural right to live with one’s family.”

Many of these immigrant families arrive in the United States seeking work and economic stability, but instead discover low wages and a lack of benefits and protection awaiting them in the workplace. According to the United States Department of labor, immigrants are one of the foundations of the United States labor force and economy, with foreign workers accepting jobs that native-born workers frequently decline, such as service, construction, meat-packing, poultry processing, and farm labor. Kerwin writes that “overall U.S. labor and workplace protections do not cover large numbers of immigrant laborers, do not carry penalties that deter misconduct, and are not adequately

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6 Ibid., 203-204.
7 United States Department of Labor, News Release: Bureau of Labor Statistics, USDL-16-0989 (Washington, D.C., 2016), 1, http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/forbrn.pdf. According to this document, “the foreign born are persons residing in the United States who were not U.S. citizens at birth. That is, they were born outside the United States or one of its outlying areas such as Puerto Rico or Guam, to parents neither of whom was a U.S. citizen. The foreign-born population includes legally-admitted immigrants, refugees, temporary residents such as students and temporary workers, and undocumented immigrants.”
enforced.” Some of these immigrant workers, who are undocumented, lack legal support and protection and endure unfair and harsh conditions because they fear deportation.

The migrants and refugees in the 21st century, like the biblical gērîm, are often amongst the poor of society, but our modern laws generally fall short in providing the social support system that biblical law provided for migrants and refugees. According to Kerwin, “the United States has an ‘immigration’ policy that determines who can enter and stay, but it lacks a coherent ‘immigrant’ policy to address the integration, educational, and myriad social needs of the nation’s 35 million foreign born persons.”

Like the Israelites who sojourned in the Sinai wilderness, many migrants and refugees undergo the liminal experience of a people who are on the threshold of a new life, but have not yet fully arrived.

In biblical theology, God has a special concern for the displaced and oppressed, promising them the blessings of home and family and providing hope for a better future. G. Gutiérrez relates this to liberation theology with its central theme of a “preferential option for the poor.” Gutiérrez points out that the biblical poor include not only those who are economically poor, but all persons who are marginalized in society. He considers the relationship between poverty and migration and concludes that poverty, while not the only reason for migration, is the primary one. The preferential option for the poor includes being in solidarity with migrants and refugees by recognizing their

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8 Kerwin, “The Natural Rights of Migrants and Newcomers,” 199. Kerwin points out that immigrant workers often live in poverty because they earn below minimum wage and sometimes endure perilous conditions in the workplace that threaten their health and safety.
9 Ibid., 197.
personhood and dignity, and making attempts to eliminate the reasons behind their poverty.\textsuperscript{11} In Deuteronomy, God loves the \textit{gēr} and commands Israel to also love the \textit{gēr} because of their collective memory of living as Strangers in a strange land. This moral imperative can be applied to the migrants and refugees in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. Unless we can trace our ancestry to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, either we ourselves, or our ancestors, voluntarily or involuntarily, migrated to this country from another place.\textsuperscript{12} From our own personal or collective connections to displacement or homelessness, we are called to cultivate empathy and compassion for those who seek a new home in this land.

\textbf{6.2.2. Foreign Cultures and Religions}

In the biblical literature, the Strangers who are named as the \textit{nokrîm} or \textit{zārîm} are foreigners or foreign nations and religions. Typically, they are foreign people who should be avoided socially since they are outsiders in the community or, in some instances, they are excluded or even eliminated because they present a serious threat to the familiar culture or religion. Separation, displacement, or elimination are frequently justified by a divine command. One way of looking at the \textit{nokrîm} or \textit{zārîm} in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century might be from the biblical perspective of particularism, that views foreign cultures or religions with suspicion or even animosity. If these Strangers are approached

\textsuperscript{11} Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Poverty, Migration, and the Option for the Poor” in \textit{A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration} (ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 76-84.

\textsuperscript{12} Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, “Identities and Social Locations: Who Am I? Who Are My People?” in \textit{Readings for Diversity and Social Justice} (Maurianne Adams, et al., eds.; New York: Routledge, 2013), 14. This article points out that although the United States considers itself a “land of immigrants,” not all persons came here voluntarily. African peoples were captured and forcibly brought here as a source of labor, while Native-Americans and Mexicans became foreigners in their own land through European colonization.
at all, it is done with hesitation and uncertainty. The foreignness of the Stranger, when it is seen as a threat to the familiar cultural identity, can lead to the development of nationalism, fundamentalism, or xenophobia. S. Thakur writes that “as civilization becomes more global, it threatens the loss of identity for more or less distinct communities. Religious nationalism is, among other things, a reassertion of the recognizable identities of peoples – as often religious as ethnic or tribal.”\textsuperscript{13} He points out that nationalism or fundamentalism is driven by the “fight” to maintain a particular worldview that is being threatened, and that the weapon of choice is “the evocation of a kind of nostalgia for an actual or presumed past.”\textsuperscript{14} In agreement with this theory, G. Campese points out that much of the political rhetoric in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century centers around the threat of “illegal aliens” who threaten the “American way of life.”\textsuperscript{15}

As a means of protecting cultural or national identity, boundaries or walls, symbolic or real, are established that separate insiders from outsiders. R. Hoover writes that a “prevention through deterrence” strategy at the U.S. – Mexico border, was created to dissuade undocumented immigrants from entering the United States, but instead of deterring migrants, it simply redirects them into the desert where many die from

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\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 75-76. Thakur says that, typically, fundamentalists say that they fight “under God,” in the case of theistic religions, or in the case of non-theistic belief systems, under some transcendent reference.
\textsuperscript{15} Gioacchino Campese, “¿Cuántos Más?: Crucified Peoples at the U.S. – Mexico Border in \textit{A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration} (ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 275-276. Campese points out that the term “illegal alien” is used primarily in referring to Mexican and other Latin American immigrants, while European counterparts are typically called “immigrants” rather than “aliens.” He calls this the “alienization” and “criminalization” of immigrants that come from developing countries.
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dehydration.\textsuperscript{16} Those that survive the journey face new obstacles as they attempt to integrate themselves into a new life in an unfamiliar land. The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR) collected and documented evidence of a U.S. immigration system that “criminalizes immigration status, normalizes the forcible separation of families, destabilizes communities and workplaces, and fuels widespread civil rights violations.”\textsuperscript{17} The transference of the majority of U.S. Immigration and Naturalization responsibilities to the Department of Homeland Security connected “the “war on terror,” border control, national security, crime, law enforcement, and the economy – all under the guise of protecting the homeland.”\textsuperscript{18} In order to address human and civil rights violations and to alleviate some of the fear and uncertainty that immigrants endure, the 2009-2010 report from Human Rights Immigrant Community Action Network (HURRICANE) recommends: the restoration of due process rights and other Constitutional protections for immigrants; the expansion of options for legal migration; the involvement of Congress and other leadership in leading a nationwide condemnation of racial intolerance and xenophobia; and the commitment of all members

\textsuperscript{16} Robin Hoover, “The Story of Humane Borders” in in \textit{A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration} (ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 161. Hoover says that, beginning in 1993, Congress doubled the number of Border Patrol officers along the southwest border of the United States with the intention of pushing migrants away from urban areas into the desert where they could be more easily apprehended. He writes that, “the rise in the number of desert deaths has been most notable in Arizona, where migrants have to walk as many as fifty miles in temperatures that can reach 120 degrees in summer time.”

\textsuperscript{17} National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, “Injustice for All: The Rise of the U.S. Immigration Policing Regime” in \textit{Readings for Diversity and Social Justice} (Maurianne Adams, et al., eds.; New York: Routledge, 2013), 102-103. According to the report, the system is supported by “four pillars”: criminalization of immigration status through laws, policies, and practices that weaken or eliminate constitutional rights for noncitizens; linking immigration to national security and engaging in policing tactics that rely on racial, ethnic, and religious profiling; escalating the militarization of border communities and, thereby, forcing migrants to cross through the most dangerous segments of the U.S. – Mexico border; and scapegoating immigrants for the economic crisis and then employing anti-immigrant sentiment for political purposes.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 103. The report points out that there is currently an upsurge in racial discrimination and hate violence against those perceived as “foreign.”
of society “to address the root causes of displacement and involuntary migration, by promoting and implementing fair trade and sustainable community development policies.”

Along with social and economic problems, many immigrants face intolerance and oppression in connection to their religious beliefs. K. Joshi writes that, “religious discrimination is not a post 9/11 phenomenon. Indeed, it is not even a 21st century phenomenon, nor has it been limited to non-Christian faiths. The United States has a history of religious intolerance from its beginnings.” Since 9/11, most of the religious discrimination has focused on Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs living in the United States, both citizens and non-citizens. Joshi sees a relationship between skin color and religious oppression “associated with whiteness and Christianity, and the othering of dark skin and non-Christian-ness.” He says that “double-minorities” who are both non-white and non-Christian often experience verbal threats and physical attacks from persons who identify themselves as white and Christian. While Christian identity has, historically, been employed to justify oppression of the Other, Christian teachings have also inspired believers to reach out to the Other in fellowship and community. In the declaration, Nostra Aetate, the Catholic Church considers its relationship to non-Christian religions in terms of “the friendship between different peoples…charity among individuals, and even

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19 Ibid., 105-106.
20 Khyati Y. Joshi, “Religious Oppression of Indian Americans in the Contemporary United States” in Readings for Diversity and Social Justice (Maurianne Adams, et al., eds.; New York: Routledge, 2013), 251. Joshi points out that Native Americans, Catholics, Quakers, Mennonites, and Eastern Orthodox Christians faced oppression or persecution from the 17th through the 19th centuries.
21 Ibid., 251.
22 Ibid., 254.
among nations… and what men have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them.”

In considering society’s general perception of foreigners today, Pope Francis recognizes that “the arrival of migrants, displaced persons, asylum-seekers and refugees gives rise to suspicion and hostility. There is a fear that society will become less secure, that identity and culture will be lost, that competition for jobs will become stiffer and even that criminal activity will increase.”

Having recognized our fear of the Stranger, he presents a way that can build community rather than enmity, saying, “a change of attitude towards migrants and refugees is needed on the part of everyone, moving away from attitudes of defensiveness and fear, indifference and marginalization – all typical of a throwaway culture – towards attitudes based on a culture of encounter, the only culture capable of building a better, more just and fraternal world.”

This perspective is similar to the way that the Book of Ruth looks at the Stranger in the Bible. Strangers can be threats to a familiar culture and tradition, but they can also arrive bearing certain values and truths that can open up a new self-understanding to our individual and community identities. Ruth was a Moabite, a traditional enemy of Israel, but through her active and faithful love for an Israeli woman, she restored a family and community, and shattered traditional perceptions of foreigners. Ruth is a Stranger who teaches us how to love the Stranger by crossing the boundaries that separate insiders and outsiders, standing in solidarity the Other, and loving him/her through acts of kindness.

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25 Ibid.
and compassion. L. Chan also sees the Book of Ruth as an examination of self-identity as well as the relationship of the self with Stranger, and he asks pertinent questions that relate both to the ancient world and the 21st century: “What kind of society would we like to become? What ought we to do to get there?” Chan envisions a “world without strangers” where difference is maintained and appreciated while community and society is both formed and reformed. These questions of “who we are” and “who we ought to be” and the concern for cultivating both unity and diversity are also prevalent in Catholic Social teaching.

6.3. Our Common Home

Catholic “social doctrine,” rooted in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, as well as the traditional theological teachings of the Church, became firmly established with the encyclical, Rerum Novarum, authored by Pope Leo XIII. This document, subtitled “The Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor” addressed the “signs of the times,” the dramatic social, cultural, and political changes or “new things” of the late 19th century Industrial Revolution. New discernment was needed to find appropriate solutions.

26 Lúcás Chan, “The Hebrew Bible and the Discourse on Migration: A Reflection on the Virtue of Hospitality in the Book of Ruth,” Asian Horizons 8, 4 (December 2014) 676. Chan and I are in agreement that the Book of Ruth serves as an example of love for the Stranger, and that the narrative can inspire reform of traditional views about strangers in both the post-exilic and modern audience; but, in contrast to my study of the Book of Ruth, Chan looks at Boaz as the exemplar of love for the Stranger while I see that exemplar in Ruth.

27 Ibid., 677-79. In his article, Chan’s suggestions for reform include: hospitality that includes a more equitable distribution of resources towards the poor/vulnerable who are already in our community as well as the immigrant who arrives from a foreign land; awareness and recognition of the human dignity and goodness in the immigrants in our midst as well as awareness of both their needs and contributions; cultivating an environment that welcomes and affords safety to immigrants; creative thinking in establishing policies that identify the needs of immigrants while recognizing the tensions between generosity/limited resources and hospitality for immigrants/concerns for culture and social stability; willingness to make personal sacrifices and to overcome our fear of strangers by letting go of biases; and offering incorporation while preserving unique ethnic identities.
to the “unfamiliar and unexplored problems” surrounding the conflicts between capital and labor.\textsuperscript{28} In addressing the plight of workers, \textit{Rerum Novarum} recognizes that persons are often called to migrate in order to find work since “no one would exchange his country for a foreign land if his own afforded him the means of living a decent and happy life.”\textsuperscript{29} The central theme of the just ordering of society, the evaluation of existing social and political systems, and the suggestion of “lines of action for their appropriate transformation” would serve as a paradigm for successive Catholic social documents and the development of the principles affirmed in \textit{Rerum Novarum}, such as: human dignity and human rights; the family as the central unit of society; the solidarity of the human family; the dignity and rights of workers; the responsibility of good stewardship for the earth; and a special concern for the poor in society.\textsuperscript{30} A full examination of all Catholic social doctrine related to strangers, migrants, and foreigners is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I would like to mention several which are especially significant.

In the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, Pope John XXIII reapplied these principles in the encyclical, \textit{Pacem in Terris}, by considering the relations between all individuals and the world community, and affirming the inviolability of human rights in the pursuit of “peace on earth” in an age of nuclear proliferation.\textsuperscript{31} In connection to migration, one of the human rights states, ““Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own state. When there are just reasons for it, he must

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\item[28] Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 39. According to this Compendium, while the Church’s concern for social matters did not begin with this document in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the encyclical “marks the beginning of a new path” of discourse between the Church and society.
\item[30] Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 40.
\item[31] Ibid., 43. The Compendium states that, “\textit{Pacem in Terris} contains one of the first in-depth reflections on rights on the part of the Church…and continuing in the direction indicated by Pope Leo XIII, it emphasizes the importance of cooperation of all men and women.”
\end{footnotes}
be permitted to emigrate to other countries and to take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular state does not deprive him of membership to the human family, nor of citizenship in that universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship of men.”

In 1971, the Synod of Bishops issued the document “Justice in the World” calling attention to the structural roots of injustice afflicting human relations “which stifle freedom and which keep the greater part of humanity from sharing in the building up and enjoyment of a more just and more loving world.” Among the people who are victims of injustice are migrants who “are often forced to leave their own country to find work, but frequently find the doors closed in their faces because of discriminatory attitudes, or, if they can enter, they are often obliged to lead an insecure life or are treated in an inhuman manner. The same is true of groups that are less well off on the social ladder such as workers and especially farm workers who play a very great part in the process of development.” Included among this migratory population are refugees, “suffering persecution – sometimes in institutionalized form – for racial or ethnic origin or on tribal grounds. This persecution on tribal grounds can at times take on the characteristics of genocide.”

In this same year, Pope Paul VI issued the apostolic letter, Octogesima Adveniens, examining the injustices in domestic and international social structures, and calling on Christians to participate in social and political reforms as a way of living out the Gospel.

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34 Ibid., 21.
35 Ibid., 22.
One of the concerns in the letter was migrant workers “whose condition as foreigners makes it all the more difficult for them to make any sort of social vindication, in spite of their real participation in the economic effort of the country that receives them. It is urgently necessary for people to go beyond a narrowly nationalist attitude in their regard and to give them a charter which will assure them a right to emigrate, favor their integration, facilitate their professional advancement and give them access to decent housing where, if such is the case, their families can join them.”

The encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, builds on these earlier teachings and the principles of Catholic social doctrine to address the “signs of the times” in the 21st century by addressing the ecological crisis of climate change and its relationship to social, economic, and political issues. For example, “changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever.”

Pope Francis asserts the interconnectedness of all systems of life where “every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment.” He says that an integral ecology, which respects its human and social dimensions, the principle of the

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38 Ibid., 142.  The “environment” is the relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it.
common good becomes “a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.”\textsuperscript{39} The encyclical calls for the radical conversion of hearts, minds, and lifestyles that develop out of “an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone.”\textsuperscript{40} Since, according to biblical tradition, we are all only Strangers and Sojourners on the earth, we can “cultivate a shared identity, with a story that can be remembered and handed on. In this way, the world, and the quality of life of the poorest, are cared for, with a sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home which God has entrusted to us.”\textsuperscript{41} In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, as in the biblical narratives, the cultivation of a shared identity and a sense of common ground is integral for the survival of all.

6.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the biblical narratives, the shared identity of all characters is that of Strangers, a literary motif that was developed to include not only Israel’s ancestors or the protected resident aliens among them (the \textit{gērîm}), but also those whose culture and religion were foreign to Israel (the \textit{nēkār} and \textit{zār}). The love command in Deuteronomy 10:17-19 specifically concerns the \textit{gēr}, evoking a collective memory as \textit{gērîm} to inspire empathy and compassion for the \textit{gēr}. The Book of Ruth, acting as a commentary on the negative perceptions of the Stranger (the \textit{nēkār}), evokes a sense of solidarity amongst all

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 158.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 202. Some suggestions for this “conversion” include: a change in lifestyle that does not promote self-centeredness and extreme consumerism; an education in “ecological citizenship” by not only providing information, but cultivating virtues centered on selflessness and responsibility for others; and the development of an “inner life” that recovers a sense of our connectedness to God and all creation.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 232.
Strangers and gives new meaning to the love command, broadening the sphere of compassion to include both the gēr and nēkār.

Is there a universal message that transcends the original context? All literature is written in and reflects a particular historical context, but great literature transcends its own time and place, and has the power to transform the human heart and mind as it speaks to a reader in his/her own historical and cultural context. The biblical literature reveals a special concern to protect the Stranger who is a migrant or refugee; however, the narratives and laws also show fear and antagonism towards Strangers who represent foreign cultures and religions. Israel’s relationship with the Stranger can develop into either hospitality or enmity, and this is determined by whether or not he/she poses a threat to cultural and religious identity, or to environmental and economic resources. These factors have influenced the perception and treatment of those who have been considered “foreign” throughout history into the present day, where rhetoric concerning the threat of foreigners often leads to violence against the Stranger in our midst.

How do we transcend fear and enmity in order to cultivate compassion and love for the Stranger? Laws regulate human behavior; however, they do not evoke compassion and transform the human heart. Some of the most powerful biblical teachings are implicit rather than explicit, and often come in the form of myth, narrative, and parable. The narratives concerning the ancestors of Israel relate the experience of sojourners, migrants who undertake difficult journeys, crossing borders due to famine or other threats for the survival of themselves or their families. These stories convey the vulnerability and struggles of all migrants or refugees who seek hospitality and a home in a new land, but are often met with hostility and marginalization. Love for the Stranger
entails remembering a shared sense of human identity that admits that all of our roots are linked to migration and the search for a better life. The way to love the Stranger may be a lesson that we learn from the Stranger, the foreigner that we may have been taught to fear. Ruth, the Moabite, transforms the perception of the foreigner from that of an enemy who poses a threat to the community, to that of an exemplar of love whose acts of kindness and compassion restore a community to wholeness.

In my biblical research, I have seen the balance between social laws that attempt to conserve order and fairness in society, and the art of narrative that cultivates compassion and transforms the human heart. The recognition of the artistry of the biblical literature does not need to be separated from its theology, and this is where literary-critical method and biblical theology can intersect. The motif of the Stranger is a universal human experience that can be developed into a biblical theology of the Stranger that might be applied, not as a confessional assertion, but as way of entering into intercultural and inter-religious dialogue with those we perceive as Strangers, and subsequently to regard these biblical narratives as sources of reflection for peace-building and social justice in any historical context as we sojourn in our common home.
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