THE STRANGER IN THE BIBLE: THE NEEDY AND THE BROTHER*

JIŘÍ DOSOUDIL

ABSTRACT

The article explores the Bible's relationship to immigrants and people perceived by society as foreigners. The topic is addressed against the backdrop of ongoing society-wide discussions about helping people who have been forced to leave their homes as a result of the February 2022 Russian aggression in Ukraine: outlining how the Bible addresses the issue of acceptance and coexistence with refugees and immigrants is intended primarily as a contribution to the debate in a Christian forum. It shows that the Old Testament society, as long as they were willing to accept the required way of life, treated these people kindly and forbade any disadvantage to them by the local society. The Israelites, it is recalled, were themselves guests in Egypt, so foreigners in Israel should remind them of their own identity as suffering but also God-delivered people. In the New Testament, this attitude is elaborated in a new theologically anchored universalism: the stranger is spoken of in a figurative sense, but in practice, the barriers between the local and the stranger are overcome. The stranger, here as an unknown person, a traveller, is one of the persons in need, and by helping him, the Christian fulfils the gospel of Jesus and meets with God. Although some circles in the Early Church tended to oppose the values and customs of the outside world, they never resigned themselves to the ideal of practically lived brotherly love, which newly included the stranger and the unknown. The paper proves that love for foreigners, regardless of their origin or circumstances, is organically rooted in the Bible and Christian ideals.

Keywords

Stranger; Foreigner; Alien; Immigrant; Israel; Church; Poor; Needy; Love.

DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2022.19

* This work was produced within the framework of UNCE programme No. 204052.

© 2022 The Author. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

The military conflict in Ukraine has brought back into the public debate the topic of helping refugees and people seeking asylum in the territory of the Czech Republic. Discussions on this topic have taken place several times during the existence of the new Czech democratic state. Practically every large-scale or geographically close armed conflict in the recent past has also driven many people seeking refuge into our country and almost immediately filled the media and public space with questions about whether we should help these people, what form our help should take, and where the limits should be. These debates have not and do not avoid the internal forums of the various Christian denominations. Attitudes there have not been uniform – although the ethos of helping one's neighbour has dominated, there have also been arguments and objections against taking in refugees and appealing to the protection of national values, identity, and culture.

One of the most striking elements of these discussions was the extent to which the refugees' difference from people in the local society proved significant. This factor seems to have fundamentally determined the tone, the general atmosphere of the debate, and, closely related to this, the degree of willingness to help. The attitude of the society towards refugees from the territory of the former Yugoslavia, from the Middle East, and, in recent months, from Ukraine has varied considerably. Sometimes the stance was completely at odds with the Bible's approach to these issues, which maintains a welcoming attitude towards immigrants and foreigners across textual traditions. This biblical approach will be examined in this paper.

Our brief review cannot aim to provide a detailed analysis of the biblical relationship with foreigners, but it will examine the relationship from a specific perspective. People living in Israel as immigrants will be portrayed within the perspective of the biblical texts as people in need, neighbours to be helped, as well as brothers to be accepted into society. It will focus on the theological basis of the biblical attitude toward strangers and show that the effort to recognise in every person God's beloved creation runs through biblical traditions. In the New Testament, as we will show, the inherent notion of strangeness among people, whether delineated in political, racial, religious, or other perspectives, is completely overcome. The willingness to welcome and help strangers will be presented as an imperative arising from the very

nature of biblical faith. However, we will begin with the Old Testament texts in which the issue of the relationship with foreigners is given the most attention.

1. The Phenomenon of a Stranger

As immigrants and people of other nationalities constituted a firm part of ancient Israel's world, they are quite often mentioned in biblical texts. However, it is not entirely clear who exactly was considered a foreigner in ancient Hebrew society. Often the figure of the stranger is juxtaposed with a local, a native, or a native-born (אֶזְרָח, *ezrach*),[1] or a brother (אָח, *ach*, also 'relative' or 'kinsman'),[2] however, none of these societal roles are explicitly defined. Nationality in the Bible is not linked to race, and it is also an open question to what extent the modern idea of ethnic affinity can be transposed into biblical thought.[3] Literally, it was marked by belonging to the same tribe in a somewhat idealised form derived from descent from a common ancestor, Jacob (Gen. 49:1–28), or more broadly, Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 17:8); however, it can be assumed that far more likely it was determined by the national cult or by a set of identical cultural and religious patterns, lifestyle or values.[4] The foreigner, unlike the slave, represented a separate economic unit within society.[5] Also, the understanding of who is considered a stranger varies across the biblical traditions: the situation becomes different, especially after the return from exile.[6]

---

1 See Lev. 16:29; 17:15; 18:26; 19:34; 24:16,22; Num. 9:14; 15:30; Josh. 8:33; Ezek. 47:22.

2 See e.g. Lev. 25:47; Deut. 1:16; 15:3; 17:15; 23:20; 24:14; 25:5.

3 On the problem of ethnicity in the Old Testament period and antiquity in general, see Mark R. Glanville, *Adopting the stranger as kindred in Deuteronomy* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 24–25; Helga Kisler, '*Love the Stranger for You were Strangers*: The Development of a Biblical Literary Theme and Motif' (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2009), 10–11; Mary Douglas, 'The Stranger in the Bible,' *European Journal of Sociology* 35, no. 2 (1994): 283–284.

4 Modern research also comes with other concepts: according to some scholars, the degree of foreignness could also have been determined by a person's dependence on the help received from the environment; alternatively, it might have been constructed politically. See Douglas, 'The Stranger in the Bible,' 284–291.

5 See Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger*, 33–41.

6 Such a shift is especially noticeable in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra where, under the influence of actual historical circumstances, the desire for separation from the surrounding nations is promoted. See Kisler, '*Love the Stranger for You were Strangers*,' 13–14.

With possible exceptions in Edom and Egypt (see Deut. 23:7; Num. 20:14),[7] the Bible does not make much distinction between the place of origin of foreigners. It was apparently not important where they came from, but, on the contrary, it mattered very much the extent to which they were willing to adapt to local customs. The Old Testament thus distinguishes the settled foreigner, who adopts the desired way of life, from the passing foreigner, who has no intention of settling permanently in the community, or who spreads foreign cultural or religious ideas. People from the first group have typically been referred to as guests (גֵּר, *ger* – also 'sojourner', 'alien', 'stranger'), who, although they have no blood or other ties to the place, are granted certain rights and participation in social life, and who are also to be integrated into society. With minimal differences in meaning, they are also sometimes referred to as תּוֹשָׁב, *toshav*. Both terms are probably related to more or less assimilated immigrants, typically poor, tolerated in the place by the local society. The second category consists of individuals whom the Bible refers to as נָכְרִי, *nokri*, or זָר, *zar*. Both words have distinctly negative connotations. Etymologically, they are related to otherness, to something that is different,[8] and this otherness is understood here as systematic, programmatic: they denote persons who do not respect local customs or are openly hostile. Therefore, attitudes towards such people are characterised by considerable reserve or scorn.[9]

The attitude of the society of that time towards immigrants was inherently negative. Generally, people of other nations were perceived as enemies or at least viewed with suspicion. It is not surprising, therefore, that the settled guests, *gerim*, were effectively on the margins of society and other foreigners found themselves outside the protection of the law.[10] However much the biblical texts attempt to rectify this

[7] Egypt, one of the dominant powers in the ancient Near East, was probably important to the Israelites mainly for its economic and political power; however, its cultural influences are also evident in the Bible (see, e.g., Prov 22:17–24:22, the Joseph narrative, love poetry). See also Herbert B. Huffmon, 'Egypt,' in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Mark Allan Powell, Revised & Updated (New York: HarperOne, 2011). With the Edomites the Hebrews were linked by the aforementioned idea of common root, kinship – Gen. 25:29–30.

[8] Cf. the similarly used noun נֵכָר, *nekar* – 'that which is foreign', 'foreignness', also with negative connotations, likewise סוּר, *sur* – 'to turn aside', also figuratively.

[9] For a more detailed definition of the terms and their exact meanings, see Petr Štica, *Cizinec v tvých branách: Biblické podněty pro etickou reflexi migrace* (Praha: Karolinum, 2011), 28–34; Kisler, '*Love the Stranger for You were Strangers*,' 6–9.

[10] Cf. Glanville, *Adopting the stranger*, 38–41.

animosity, they show that it was widespread in contemporary practice. *Gerim* are referred to along with Levites, slaves, servants, orphans, and widows (Deut. 16:11) as an endangered group (Ex. 20:10), and sometimes they are even mentioned only after livestock (Deut. 5:14). There are repeated references to foreigners living within the gates of the city (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14; 14:21; 24:14; 31:12), a place where not only important public events took place but also where the poor and the needy were concentrated.[11] It cannot be said for sure whether immigrants were marginalised by society in a systematic way; however, in any case, they were commonly subjected to oppression and injustice (Job 31:31; Ezek. 22:7,29; Prov 14:31). They are sometimes viewed as potential propagators of pagan religious ideas, seducers to idolatry, or apostasy to other gods,[12] so that settled guests are required to respect the principles of ritual purity and the commandments of the law (Ex. 20:10; Lev. 16:29; 17:8–13; 17:15), and to fully embrace Judaism upon their return from exile.

On the other hand, the biblical texts formulate an ethical-legal framework in which any hostility towards foreigners, at least settled ones, is fundamentally rejected. They explicitly forbid their disadvantaging or declassing in public life. The local person is to be in solidarity with those who sojourn in Israel as guests – he is to love the alien as himself (Lev. 19:34). This principle is richly elaborated in the biblical texts. It resonates across them as an ethical imperative (Deut. 1:16; 15:7; 24:14; cf. Lev. 25:47–49), it is implemented in a number of legal regulations and customs (the same laws are to apply to guests as to locals – Ex. 12:49; Lev. 24:22; Num. 15:15–16),[13] it is enforced by the prophets (Isa. 56:3; Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5; cf. Ezek. 22:7,29), and as we will show later, it also contributes to the formation of New Testament texts. The participation of foreigners in the common cult can be seen not only as a duty but also as a privilege (Num. 9:14), although

[11] Gen. 38:14; Judg. 19:15; 2 Kings 7:3; cf. Deut. 14:29; 15:7; 24:14; 26:12. For more on the city gates, their functions and the presence of the poor in their vicinity, see Daniel A. Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israel and Her Neighbors The Form, Function, and Symbolism of the Civic Forum in the Southern Levant* (Leiden: BRILL, 2020), 127–179, 184–190.

[12] Num. 25:1–2; cf. also Prov 2:16; 5:3.

[13] Cf. also Ex. 12:19; Lev. 20:2; 26:12. However, foreigners did not enjoy full equality with local people at the legal level – the awareness of kinship ties aroused the need for 'higher solidarity'. See Deut. 14:21; 15:3; 23:21. See more in The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?: A Journey Through Biblical Anthropology* (London: Darton Longman & Todd Ltd, 2021), 244–245.

its full form is open to the circumcised only (Ex. 12:48). God Himself protects guests and strangers (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 146:9), and since everyone is, in fact, a guest and an alien in the Promised Land (Lev. 25:23), Ezekiel says that all should share in it. The chosen people are to share it with the sojourners (Ezek. 47:22).

The call for the acceptance and integration of settled foreigners is surprising not only in its degree of radicalism but also in its contrast to the actual practice of the time. However, as the following section will show, it was a logical and necessary claim since it was closely tied to the values and principles that constituted the very essence of Jewish national and religious identity.

2. Israel as a Hospitable Guest

A kindly attitude toward aliens seems to be shaped on two basic planes in the Old Testament. The first one is based on the real experience of need and the ubiquity of persons who were dependent on the help of their surroundings. Such people were most often encountered in urban settings characterised by great wealth stratification and social inequality.[14] A particularly poor stratum here consisted of the landless, who earned their living mainly by occasional work of a menial nature[15] – within this group, along with the Levites,[16] strangers are mentioned most frequently in the Old Testament (see Deut. 16:11,14; 26:11–13; see also Judg. 19:1).

However, the state of unequal distribution of wealth, which forced a large part of society to live in very difficult conditions, is repeatedly subjected to harsh criticism in the Bible. The prophets cry out against the entrenched social injustice (Isa. 5:8–10; Amos 8:4–6; Mic. 2:2; see also Eccles. 4:1; 5:7): the poor person is not to be used merely as cheap labour but is to share in the wealth produced. The Deuteronomic ethic strives for the all-round integration of the settled stranger, which, in addition to cult acceptance, should also have an economic and social dimension,[17] seeking to eliminate poverty on a 'systemic'

[14] See Avraham Faust, 'Social Stratification in the Iron Age Levant,' in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Jonathan S. Greer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 490–491.
[15] Peter Altmann, 'The Local Economies of Ancient Israel,' in *Behind the Scenes*, 434.
[16] Num. 18:23; Deut. 10:9; 12:12; 14:27,29; Josh. 13:14,33; cf. Deut. 18:1–2.
[17] Glanville, *Adopting the stranger*, 102–104.

level (Deut. 15:4). However, the biblical authors realistically know that 'there will never cease to be some in need on the earth'. Thus, in the Lord's command 'open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land' (Deut 15:11), a broad theme running through the biblical traditions is articulated (see, e.g., Lev. 19:9–10; Deut. 24:19–21; Ps. 82:3; Prov 14:21; 29:7; 31:8–9; Isa. 58:7–10; Ezek. 16:49).[18] This appeal to solidarity is not only a manifestation of the collectivist spirit of ancient Hebrew society and the desire to maintain social peace,[19] but it also expresses a recognition of the value of every human being as an image of God (Gen. 9:6). The Lord, who Himself takes care of the oppressed (Ps. 12:5; 35:10; Prov 22:22–23; Mal. 3:5),[20] does not distinguish whether the oppressed is a local, a foreigner, or anyone else. When people are in need, their dignity is to be protected, regardless of their cultural, religious, or other backgrounds – for 'those who oppress the poor insult their Maker' (Prov 14:31; cf. 17:5).

The second level on which the biblical texts form their appeal for a kindly attitude towards strangers is based on the experience of a life in a similar situation. The appeal 'you shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Deut. 10:19; cf. Ex. 22:20; 23:9; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 23:8) refers to the collective memory of a miserable existence under a foreign power, but, especially after the return from the Babylonian exile, and also to the experience of oppression in general.[21] In Deut. 24:14–22, the experience of one's hardship and the command to be just and merciful to the needy are interconnected in a quite explicit way. We find here not just an application of the Golden Rule[22] but a reference to Israel's self-understanding as God's chosen and protected people. Awareness of the value of the gift of life in the Promised Land and life in general is reflected in a humble relationship with the Creator, as well as in mercy toward people in whose troubles (Job 29:15–16; Prov 31:8–9) the chosen people are able to see their own history. Israel, in this way, returns to the roots of its national-religious

[18] The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?: A Journey Through Biblical Anthropology*, 244–247.
[19] See Deut. 28:43–44, also Glanville, *Adopting the stranger*, 18–24.
[20] Cf. also Ps. 10:18; 34:7.
[21] José E. Ramírez Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Israel* (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 1999), 87–98.
[22] See Luke 6:31; Matt. 7:12; Tob. 4:15.

identity[23] and adopts on this basis a coherent spiritual attitude of a pilgrim and stranger (1 Chron. 29:15; Ps. 39:12; 119:19). A positive attitude towards people in a similar situation becomes one of the criteria for a godly life (Deut. 14:29; Isa. 1:16f; Jer. 22:3).

In the narratives of Sodom (Gen. 19) and Gibeah (Judg. 19), the protection of the stranger becomes a matter of real personal honour. Both narratives do not criticise, as some later traditions have interpreted them,[24] primarily homosexual or, more generally, violent sexual behaviour, but precisely the cruel and imperious treatment of guests. They draw attention to 'the conduct of a social and political entity that does not wish to welcome foreigners with respect, and therefore seeks to humiliate them, constraining them by force to suffer a shameful process of submission' – and it is precisely this manifestation of power, the attempt to show the guest and the one under whose roof the guest is staying 'who is the master here', that is, in turn, punished.[25] The perniciousness of the 'sin of Sodom' so understood is also recalled by a number of other Old Testament authors and traditions (see especially Wisd. 19:13–17; also, e.g., Isa. 3:9; 1:10; Jer. 23:14; Ezek. 16:49; Lam. 4:6) and reflected upon by the Early Church. In contrast, the narrative of Abraham's hospitality to the three angelic pilgrims (Gen. 18:1–8) remains for other traditions an example of the ideal treatment of guests and a path to God's blessing.[26] Abraham, recognising that he is not just meeting ordinary pilgrims, shows them hospitality far beyond what is necessary,[27] which creates a distinct tension with the Sodom story and also foreshadows the dramatically different ending of the two narratives. While Sodom will be destroyed, Abraham 'shall become a great and mighty nation'; 'all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him' (Gen 18:18). The biblical appeal to hospitality not only sought to

[23] Among many places, see, e.g., Ex. 13:3; 20:2; Lev. 19:36; 23:43; 26:13; Deut. 5:6,15; 7:8; 13:11; 15:15; 16:12; 26:6–8; Ps. 81:10; Hos. 13:4. Particularly in Deuteronomy we see a coherent tradition within which the narrative of the sojourn in Egypt is taken up and developed in different contexts. Glanville, *Adopting the stranger*, 189–193.

[24] Jth. 1:7; cf. 2 Pet. 2:6–10.

[25] The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?: A Journey Through Biblical Anthropology*, 184.

[26] Cf. Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 59–71. The values we saw in the account of Abraham's reception of the angelic pilgrims also appear in many other Old Testament passages. See ibid., 71–86.

[27] See Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Genesis* (San Antonio: Ariel Ministries, 2008), 310–311.

preserve one of the fundamental values on which the life of the ancient world was based, nor did it merely formulate a demand for one of the works of mercy, but it also had a deep religious meaning. Hospitality was 'an expression of openness to the other person and to the Lord, to the gifting of the other person and of God Himself'.[28]

The two presented planes of the Old Testament relationship to foreigners cannot be separated from each other. The experience of the Babylonian exile, which the Israelites project into the narrative of their sojourn in Egypt, is a constant warning against the formation of a society that forces foreigners to live in inhumane conditions unworthy of God's creation; at the same time, the chosen people also always see in the memory of their return to their homeland a concrete experience of God's love and care. They are reminded of the fragility of the privilege of living in relative prosperity in their own land. As spiritual strangers, they show their gratitude to the Creator.

However, it should be emphasised that both of these moments represent a general theological framework that may not always be evident in all texts and that the way it is implemented may vary from text to text and from tradition to tradition. Also, we may see visible exclusivist tendencies in the Old Testament: the surrounding nations are portrayed as dangerous (e.g., in Est.), or sometimes as culturally impure or hostile to God, and Israel is to keep separate from them and subjugate them (Num. 33:55; Judg. 1:21–36). One of the most explicit manifestations of this tendency is the rejection of mixed marriages between Israelites and women from surrounding nations. The books of Nehemiah and Ezra dedicate particular space to this topic (see especially Ezek. 9–10; Neh. 10:29–30), but both texts follow and develop in this respect already existing, similarly focused passages from the historical books (see, e.g., Ex. 34:15–16; Deut. 7:1–4; Josh. 23:12–13; Judg. 3:6–7; 1 Kings 11:1–13; 21:25–26).[29] Only strangers who embrace the Jewish cult are viewed explicitly positively (Isa. 56:6–7, cf. also the fate of Ruth or Jonah). However, these tendencies do not undermine the general, theologically anchored inclination of biblical traditions to see foreigners as needy and brothers. As the broader historical context of the production of the

[28] Štica, *Cizinec v tvých branách*, 34–36.

[29] See also more on the apparent link between these books and the First and Second Books of Chronicles in Pieter M. Venter, 'The dissolving of marriages in Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13 revisited,' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 4 (2018): 7–8, doi: 10.4102/hts.v74i4.4854.

aforementioned books of Nehemiah and Ezra shows, the demarcation from the surrounding nations is much more a side-effect of the process of seeking the identity of one's own nation, which gained in importance and intensity in the post-exilic period.[30] Radical measures of rejecting even the already existing mixed marriages, therefore, do not constitute a programmatic rejection of everything foreign but, unlike the clearly universal positive view of the stranger outlined above, are rather based on the needs of the specific historical and social situation.[31] On a general level, the effort to separate from foreigners is driven by the attempt to preserve one's own cult and identity, and certainly not by any form of xenophobia or diminishing the value of a person solely on the basis of his or her foreign origin.

All of the above-mentioned theological moments mentioned would be important also for the Early Church – but as we will show, within the New Testament, they will also be developed and elaborated in a new theological context.

3. The Stranger in the New Testament

The New Testament speaks of foreigners in different historical and social situations. In the Church, a community called out from all strata, nations, and classes and not primarily bound to one ethnic or geographical area, the figure of the stranger appears in a slightly different meaning. Ξένος, the 'man from elsewhere', the comer or traveller,[32] no longer represents a coherent topic, nor does he stand in tension with the local man who disappears from the New Testament perspective.

In the New Testament, we can find the motif rather in a figurative sense. Every Christian is, in a spiritual sense, a stranger, a person from elsewhere, dwelling in a world without a home. In this sense, however, the texts use the rather synonymous terms πάροικος[33] or παρεπίδημος.[34]

[30] See ibid., 9–11.

[31] Moreover, the presence of multiple layers which have aims differing from each other is evident in the texts. In the rejection of mixed marriages, scholars primarily trace efforts to address various political-legal problems associated with the formation of a new post-exilic community, articulated on a cultic level, on a national and macro-political scale. See Douglas, 'The stranger in the Bible,' 288–295; Venter, 'The dissolving,' 7–13.

[32] In this sense, four times in Matt. 25:31–46; Acts 17:21; Heb. 11:13; 3 John 1:5.

[33] Eph. 2:19; 1 Pet. 2:11.

[34] Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11. In Eph. 2:12,19, however, the above-mentioned term ξένος is used in this sense.

They also sometimes refer to the negative connotations that both had in contemporary Greek: believers are strangers to the outer society, outsiders who have to deal with being disregarded, as well as, presumably, with various forms of material disadvantage (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11).[35] The Epistle to the Hebrews then connects the feeling of being a stranger with the expectation of fulfilling future promises, where living in present conditions is seen as somewhat provisional (Heb. 11:13; cf. 11:8–10). In this respect, it evokes the collective memory of the sojourn in Egypt and the exodus to the Promised Land.

However, when it comes to the figure of the stranger in the proper sense of the word, the New Testament sometimes refers to a stranger, an unknown person, not necessarily an immigrant or a displaced person (3 John 1:5),[36] but often just someone on the move who lacked a background. As such, the figure loses his negative traits and becomes primarily one of the prototypes of the needy neighbour who is looked upon with brotherly love. Our examination, which focuses primarily on the relationship of the biblical authors to strangers as such, will begin with these persons.

4. The Stranger as a Needy Neighbour

The early Christians also had to deal with people who were dependent on the help of others.[37] Following the Jewish tradition of almsgiving, the Church encourages Christians to be in solidarity with these people and to help them (Gal. 2:10; Eph. 4:28; Heb. 13:16; 1 John 3:17; especially widows and orphans are mentioned in this context – see Acts 6:1; 1 Tim. 5:3–4; James 1:27). The poor and needy, after all, are one of those to whom Jesus' Gospel is addressed (Luke 4:18; Matt. 11:4–5; see also James 2:5). Jesus blesses them (Luke 6:20), pays considerable attention to them (Luke 14:12–24; 16:19–31; Matt. 14:14), calls for help and alms (Luke 11:41; cf. Mark 14:7–8), and the distribution of wealth for their benefit he presents as the highest ideal of the godly man (Matt. 19:21; cf. Luke 12:33). The Acts of the Apostles embodies this ideal in the history of the Church, which is depicted as a community of people where 'everything they owned was held in common' (Acts 4:32)

[35] See Mireia Ryšková, *Doba Ježíše Nazaretského* (Praha: Karolinum, 2008), 443–444.
[36] Cf. Denis R. Bratcher, Mark Allan Powell. 'Alien,' in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*.
[37] See Ryšková, *Doba Ježíše Nazaretského*, 116–118.

and there was not a needy person among them (v. 34). However, the references to the already initiated collections in the Pauline epistles (Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1–2; 2 Cor. 8:1–8; cf. also Acts 11:30) and the signs that some of the vulnerable groups had become institutionalised within the Early Church (e.g., the widowhood in 1 Tim. 5:9–16) show that material aid was really provided.

The stranger is perhaps most explicitly linked to people in need in Matthew's parable of the judgment of the Son of Man (Matt. 25:31–46). The man from elsewhere, the wayfarer, is here counted among the 'least of the brothers':[38] the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.[39] Similarly, other New Testament authors, when they encourage hospitality toward strangers (Rom. 12:13; Titus 1:8; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:9), do not forget to mention the needy brethren (Rom. 12:13), prisoners, and the suffering (Heb. 13:3). These exhortations, however, are more than a call for the observance of the rules of ancient hospitality as mentioned in Hellenistic literature or Hellenistic Judaism[40] and referred to in some New Testament epistles (Rom. 16:1–2; Gal. 4:14; 3 John 1:5–6).[41] In each needy person, the Church recognises Jesus himself (Matt. 20:40,45) and sees helping them as a fulfilment of His gospel.

This point comes to the fore when Paul encourages the Corinthians to participate in a collection for the poor brethren in Judea. In

[38] οἱ ἀδελφοὶ … οἱ ἐλάχιστοι, 'the least in importance'.

[39] Matthew here was following a contemporary Jewish tradition in which similar lists of good deeds aimed at benefiting many of the characters mentioned are relatively common. See also Isa. 58:7; Ezek. 18:7,16; Job 22:6–7; 31:17,19,21,31–32; Tob. 1:16–17; 4:16; Ecclus. 7:34–35. Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 278–279.

[40] The New Testament refers to hospitality as a value known even outside the Christian environment – e.g., Luke 14:21; Acts 27:3; 28:2,7. See Jaroslav Brož, *List Židům* (Praha: Centrum biblických studií AV ČR a UK v Praze, 2015), 210. For more on the relationship of Christian principles of hospitality to the hospitality ideals of the Greco-Roman and Jewish world, see Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels*, 94–99.

[41] Much of the contemporary practice of receiving guests is mentioned in the Second and Third Epistles of John – see more in Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 215–216, 222. The principles of hospitality formed an important part of the social order of the time – it can be said that they not only concerned the material provision of those who were traveling but also affected the personal honor of both parties involved, i.e., the guest and his host. Violation of these principles could have serious consequences, which seems to have echoes in, e.g., Mark 6:11; Matt. 10:14,40–42; Luke 9:5; Acts 13:51. For further references to contemporary rules of hospitality within the Early Church, see also Acts 10:24; 16:15; 21:4; 1 Cor. 16:5–12; Phil. 2:19–30; Col. 4:10.

doing so, he refers to the Lord's generosity:[42] although Jesus was rich, he made himself poor so that they 'through his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9). In his reasoning, theological truth is interwoven with everyday reality; reality is shaped and determined by it.[43] The grace received from God through Christ's sacrifice is here made manifest in fraternal love, φιλαδελφία, oriented towards one's own family, clan, or, more broadly, nation (see, e.g., Gal. 6:2; Eph. 5:2; John 13:34; 1 John 2:7–10), and yet elsewhere it turns continuously to φιλοξενία – hospitality, love for those who came from elsewhere. The transition between the two concepts is remarkably seamless in the Epistle to the Hebrews,[44] where the aforementioned scene of the three angel guests in Gen. 18:1–8 (13:1–2) is recalled in relation to them. Although this pericope, according to some exegetes, was directed to the ranks of the Church and applied primarily to the travelling brethren, presumably wandering preachers,[45] the exhortations to hospitality are of universal scope in the New Testament.[46] The point is not so much who is the subject of the help; what matters is that in helping others, Christians fulfil their mission and, in fact, also their cult – they meet with God.[47] Thus, Christians should love everyone, even their enemies (Matt. 5:43–45; Luke 6:27–29; Rom. 12:14). They are not to neglect hospitality and generosity, for 'with such sacrifices God is pleased' (v. 16);[48] moreover, the love of one for another, according to the First Epistle of Peter, 'covers over a multitude of sins' (1 Pet. 4:8).

---

[42] Literally, Paul speaks of χάρις – grace.

[43] Although Paul speaks in the context of the collections of the alleviation of wealth differences among Christians (2 Cor. 8:13), and the reciprocity of aid probably played a significant practical role, as gifts from 'the poor to the poor,' collections were primarily to be expressions of brotherly love (2 Cor. 8:8), following the example of Christ's love. See Georges Massinelli, *For Your Sake He Became Poor: Ideology and Practice of Gift Exchange between Early Christian Groups* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021), 272–277, 219–223. Some scholars also see in the Church's efforts to support the Judeo-Christians in Jerusalem an effort to cooperate with God's plan of history, for it is from Jerusalem that salvation is to spread to all nations. See Ralph Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Carol Streams: Tyndale, 2009), 335.

[44] See Brož, *List Židům*, 210.

[45] Robert P. Gordon, *Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 186.

[46] See Štica, *Cizinec v tvých branách*, 67–70. The extent and intensity of Christian aid to travelers and people in need, precisely because of its ideological anchoring in the theology of the Church, probably exceeded the contemporary standards of Roman-Hellenic society. Cf. ibid., 72–73.

[47] Cf. ibid., 63.

[48] See also Heb. 2:17; 4:15; 1 John 4:20–21.

In helping the brothers and sisters in danger, therefore, the Church not only sought to alleviate the impact of social disparities among congregations or their individual members[49] but, as in the Old Testament, took a specific spiritual stance toward the poor and needy. It is based primarily on Jesus' hope for the imminent coming of the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33).[50] Jesus is sent 'to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt. 15:24, cf. 10:5–6), but to the community expecting the intervention of the all-transforming power of God, the first manifestations of which are already becoming visible, are invited not only Jews but also foreigners-Gentiles. They repeatedly surprise Jesus with the depth of their faith, which surpasses that of those who were of Jewish descent (Matt. 8:5–13; 15:21–28; John 4).[51] Special attention is also paid to the marginalised and needy. No one who helps these people will be left without a proper reward in the new reality of God's kingdom (Matt. 6:1–4; cf. Mark 9:41; 10:42; Luke 14:14; Heb. 6:10). But this help cannot be quantified (cf. Luke 21:1–4 par.)[52] and cannot be speculated upon (Luke 6:30); the story of Jesus' anointing with the precious oil in Mark 14:3–9 par. also shows that it is not necessary to help at any cost. One is not to measure one's help in any way (Luke 3:11). If he does, he should know that God will measure him with the measure (Luke 6:38).

But Jesus' radical stance of openness to God's power penetrates even deeper: it reaches and transforms the basic fabric of social relations. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), a new framework for thinking about to whom one is a neighbour and to whom one is obligated by fraternal love is presented. A universalism is established here in which the concept of neighbour, πλησίον, goes far beyond the circle of one's own nation ('sons of one's people' – Lev. 19:18) or guests, *gerim* (Lev. 19:33–34).[53] Existing political, religious, or social categories cease to play any role, and the concept of neighbourhood is neither based on the status or needs of persons nor their other qualities or characteristics. Jesus leaves the initial lawyer's question 'who is my neighbour' (v. 25) unanswered and replies with a counter-question that

[49] For more on the spiritual focus of Christian aid, see Donald Guthrie, 'The New Testament Approach to Social Responsibility,' *Vox Evangelica* 8 (1973): 51–53.

[50] Cf. also e.g. Matt. 4:17; Luke 11:20; 17:21; Rom. 14:17; Col. 1:13.

[51] See Štica, *Cizinec v tvých branách*, 54–60.

[52] Thus, in Luke 21:1–4, Jesus gives the example of the widow who shared everything she had with the other poor – her entire livelihood, in fact, 'her whole life'. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 317–319.

[53] For a more detailed definition of the concept of neighbour, see ibid., 172–173.

turns the focus to what is really important: who *has been neighbour* to the needy, who has acted as a neighbour and thus fulfilled the core idea of this relationship.[54] Anyone can be a neighbour to anyone – all that matters is in whom I am willing to recognise my neighbour and who can recognise a neighbour in me.

5. Aliens with Citizenship in Heaven

It would seem, then, that the Christian in the New Testament experiences alienation only in relation to the outside world. Here again, we can think of a relation with the spiritual attitude of Jesus himself, who, according to the Gospel of John, is the one who remained unrecognised by the world, who 'came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him' (John 1:11).[55] However, even this relationship does not constitute an obstacle to the love of neighbour that is to permeate all boundaries, including those of the Church. The above-mentioned statements about Christians as strangers in this world are not meant to articulate a negative attitude towards the neighbouring people but, on the contrary, to reflect the attitude taken towards Christians by the outer society[56] or possibly to express the eschatological anchoring of Christian values.[57] Similarly, the various formulations about citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20; see also 2 Cor. 5:1–10) or dwelling in the world as 'aliens and exiles' (1 Pet. 2:11) do not seek to separate Christians from the outside world but focus attention on the heavenly realm and future promises.[58]

The more coherent effort to move away from the world that we find in Johannine theology (John 17:14–16; 1 John 2:15–17; 5:19; see also James 1:27b; 4:4) is based on a view of the world as a place entirely under the power of sin, fundamentally unreformable and hostile to

[54] See Ian A. McFarland, 'Who is My Neighbor?: The Good Samaritan as a Source for Theological Anthropology,' *Modern Theology* 17, no. 1 (2001): 59–60, 62, doi: 10.1111/1468-0025.00151.

[55] Also, in other passages of John's Gospel, several characters refer to Jesus as someone from elsewhere (e.g., 4:9; 8:48; 9:29; 18:35), and sometimes even Jesus refers to himself in this way (8:14; 16:28). Moreover, we find in the Gospels Jesus as a person on a journey, a wanderer (Matt. 2:13–23; Luke 9:58; 24:18). Cf. Štica, *Cizinec v tvých branách*, 73–75.

[56] Jan A. Dus, *První list Petrův* (Praha: Česká biblická společnost, 2017), 13.

[57] Štica, *Cizinec v tvých branách*, 75–77.

[58] See also Col 3:1–2.

its Creator (see, e.g., 1 John 3:13–17; John 7:7; 15:18–27).[59] However, the same Johannine texts also call for unconditional love (John 13:34; 15:17; 1 John 2:9,11; 3:17; 4:7–21).[60] It, or the closely related faith in Jesus, marks the difference between such a negatively viewed world and the Church. What we see here, then, is not a principled rejection of the world – after all, God loves it and all who inhabit it as His creation (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9–10)[61] – but rather an effort not to conform to its values. At the very least, there remains a concern for the ultimate fate of the world.[62] The love of one for another is to be a sign and a witness to the people of the world (John 13:35); they are to come to faith in Jesus (John 17:21).

The logic of living according to God's love, unknown and incomprehensible to the outside world, fundamentally transforms the shape of relationships within the Church. Believers are called into a new identity as the children of God (1 John 3:1; cf. John 1:10–11), where no longer is anyone a stranger (ξένος) or an immigrant (πάροικος), but all belong equally to the family of God (Eph. 2:19). In the context of the Letter to the Ephesians, the formulation is not just to overcome the conflict between groups of Judaism and Gentile origin (Rom. 10:12), nor is it to address only cultural or ethnic differences. The Spirit in which people are baptised and joined into one body (1 Cor. 12:13) also transcends social roles determined by gender (Gal. 3:26–29) or locality (Col. 3:11)[63] and, most importantly, establishes an environment profiling itself as a family.[64] According to the ancient ideal, people are not only to find refuge and protection there but also to gain a new identity and sense of belonging.[65] Here the Old Testament concept of the chosen

[59] Paul A. Rainbow, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 121–129.

[60] Cf. also 1 Cor. 15:34. Although the First Epistle of John in the first place speaks of love for a brother or brothers (ἀδελφός), the synonymous statements about mutual love (3:11,23; 4:7,11,12) show that the love is to be set on a religious plane. Also, within the reference to Cain (3:12.15), it is spoken of a brother in a non-communal sense. Cf. also Gal. 6:10.

[61] Moreover, this world and its inhabitants are to be transformed and saved by God's intervention. See Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*, 139–141.

[62] John 3:17, cf. Matt. 5:13.

[63] The local affiliation is probably marked by the dualism of βάρβαρος (Berber, south) and Σκύθης (Scythian, north). See Mireia Ryšková, *List Koloským* (Praha: Česká biblická společnost, 2018), 158.

[64] The addressees are οἰκεῖος – members of the same household or family members.

[65] Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 212. See also Petr Štica, *Cizinec v tvých branách*, 66–67.

people of God is picked up, but now with a radical openness to all people – whether those who already belong to this community of love or those who are still only invited to it.

Conclusion

Our study has presented the figure of the stranger in the Bible as a person to be welcomed and helped. Although the answer to the question of who exactly a stranger is and how society should relate to him or her has evolved within the biblical traditions, there is a clear, theologically anchored tendency to take a welcoming attitude toward these people.

Although contemporary practice differed, the Old Testament texts call for respect for the rights and dignity of persons who settled in Israel as immigrants and for their integration into the social system. This attitude is based on the collective experience of sojourning in Egypt. On the one hand, it is interpreted as a period of deprivation and need, which leads to sensitivity towards those who are in need now, and on the other hand, it incorporates the remembrance of the exodus to the Promised Land, in which the identity of a people tended by God is commemorated. A spiritual attitude of gratitude towards a loving Creator is formed, which is reflected in a loving relationship with all people.

The New Testament builds on both of these theological planes but develops them in a new theological context. The stranger, now understood more as a traveller, the poor, or the needy in general, is included among the neighbours to whom one owes a special duty of love. It follows Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God and calls for effective help for these people, thereby bringing to life the promises of Jesus' gospel. In the Church, a community founded on the new identity of God's children, all strangeness among people passes away. Some circles of this community feel alienated from the outside world and therefore tend to concentrate on those in their own midst, but even these do not despise or ignore the people who live outside the boundaries of the Church but show them hospitality and bear witness to them by living out of God's love.

Our examination of the biblical relationship to strangers also has important implications for debates over the question of taking in refugees and migrants today. It can perhaps never be emphasised strongly enough that a welcoming attitude towards foreigners is not and cannot

be simply a matter of worldview, one of moral obligation, or a lofty ideal. In the Bible, this attitude derives from the very essence of faith in a liberating God, and as such, it is deeply woven into the anatomy of the life of the community that experiences God's saving work upon it. It is presented as an important part of the spiritual identity of a believer, and as such, it plays a crucial role in his or her search for an appropriate attitude towards strangers and refugees today. The texts do not call in the first place for the application of the ideals of interpersonal relationships within the Early Church, which are often not transferable to a society-wide situation; rather, the crucial point here is the adoption of a new way of thinking in which who the others are and where they come from ceases to play any significant role. Each person is the work of the Creator, and in everyone we can recognise ourselves in situations of need. Jesus' appeal to see the neighbour in every person, the stranger, the overlooked, or the alien, shows that beyond helping those in need, we also need to become free of any xenophobia, even toward those people we may tend to see as enemies today. If it is no longer Samaritans, Assyrians or Egyptians, such people may be Muslims, Belarusians, or Russians.

Catholic Theological Faculty
Charles University
Thákurova 3
160 00 Praha 6
Czech Republic
E-mail: jiri.antonin.dosoudil@gmail.com