"For you were aliens"
Discipleship in loving the other

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The question of the alien, the stranger, the foreigner, the sojourner—the other—is a question any group seeking to maintain identity faces. For the Old Testament Hebrews seeking to maintain integrity as the people of God, the question of the alien was one of ethics. For North American Anabaptists today, this ethical question is crucial—as we live in a world where immigrants, documented and undocumented, are in our midst as those neighbors.

The question of relationship with the alien is one of discipleship. How did God's people, informed by their covenant relationship with YHWH, establish a healthy relationship with the stranger? How do Anabaptists today, informed by our covenant relationship and the complicated world around us, seek a relationship of integrity with our immigrant brothers and sisters? Powerful memories in our own heritage of persecution should compel us to seek this relationship.

The question of relationship with the alien is one of discipleship. How did the Hebrew people, informed by their covenant relationship with YHWH, establish a healthy relationship with the stranger? How do we?

We can learn from the relationship of covenant law and the alien, from Exodus's book of the covenant, the holiness codes of Leviticus, and the book of Deuteronomy. The law, integral to creating healthy community, provides security for marginalized groups within the Hebrew people. Trusting that God's favor often rests with the vulnerable, those who observe the law's mandates treasure the foreigner in their midst.

A discipleship that seeks relationship with the alien is built on a foundation of motivation. The motivation for healthy relationship with the alien comes from YHWH's character, and from Israel's experience as a once alien but now redeemed people. To our

relationships with aliens, Anabaptists bring our experience of a once persecuted but now redeemed people.

Five separate instances in Old Testament literature reveal a theology based on historical memory—the injunction that Israel is to treat the alien with justice, precisely because the people of Israel were once aliens in Egypt and were redeemed by God. This paradigm sounds familiar, and can be potent for Anabaptists as we seek to love our neighbors who may be strangers—because we were once oppressed and have experienced God's redemption.

Hospitality

M. Daniel Carroll, in his work on Hispanic immigration issues and Old Testament studies, begins his examination of law with the foundation of hospitality. "Hospitality to the stranger is a virtue" not just for the Hebrew people but in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Carroll sees an intensifying of this cultural norm within the laws that mark the people of God, as hospitality becomes valued for its spiritual significance and as an echo of the hospitality that YHWH manifests: "Whatever might have been the common cultural impulse to be hospitable to the stranger in ancient times is here given a more profound motivation. To be hospitable is to imitate God."

Hospitality, this imitation of YHWH, weaves its way into Torah law and becomes part of Israel's identity as a people. With Torah law seen not simply as a set of archaic legal codes related to sacrificial atonement (as we today can so easily assume), but instead as a tradition that helps define and describe covenant community, "the laws reflect something deeper: Israel's stance toward the foreigner was part of the larger fabric of its ethical life. It was part of the ethos of what it meant to be the people of God."[1]

The alien and the law

The aliens of whom the Old Testament speaks can be any number of different peoples, but they are all characterized by their vulnerable status and the special attention God asks that God's people give them. The English translations of the four Hebrew terms—*ger*, *nokri*, *tosab*, and *zar*—vary: alien, sojourner, stranger, resident alien. And they overlap in their usages. The term that occurs

most frequently is *ger*, used to describe both the identity and nature of what makes a sojourner a sojourner. Ethnicity is part of what defines a *ger*, but even more important is the dependent and vulnerable socioeconomic status of a *ger*, as we see when the patriarchs are referred to as sojourners.

The identity of the *ger* rests on two foundations: economic poverty and poverty of relationship. The lack of these two resources—the relational security of family ties and the financial security of land ownership—provides a contrast to what Israel as a community of people connected to their land holds dear. This alien is often grouped with the widow and the orphan in prophetic calls to do justice and especially attend to the needs of these categories of people. They are among the vulnerable who have a special place in God's heart. Recognizing the *ger* as lacking these two distinct resources can help us discover who that *ger* is in our land.

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A quick glance at the alien's presence in the law codes reveals that much of the content is centered around a few key elements of Israel's social structure. Foreigners are specifically included in the provision regarding Sabbath rest from work (Exod. 20:10; Lev. 16:29; Deut. 5:14), mentioned in conjunction with Israelites or "native-born" people when subject to the same dietary and social regulations (Lev. 17; 18:16; 20; 22; 24:27), listed as beneficiaries of gleaning policies and rhythms of redistributive tithing (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Deut. 14:19; 26:12, 29–31), and invited to celebrate in Israel's religious feasts and listen to the reading of the law and renewing of the covenant (Deut. 15; 26:11; 29:11; 31:12), among other interactions.

The alien identified as *nokri* is not allowed certain privileges retained for native-born Israelites, such as kingship and interest-free debt repayment (as recorded in Deut. 15:3; 17:15; and 23:20). The sojourner is both protected under Torah and expected to share in the responsibility of the societal order, but often the distinction of foreign-ness is maintained and the alien is not considered part of the majority culture.

For you were aliens

The most powerful call to live justly with the foreigner comes five times throughout the Torah texts. This motivation of former enslavement, and God's redemptive hand, is unmistakable as justification for treating the alien with mercy. These texts serve as our basis for continuing the conversation about loving the stranger among us, loving the immigrants even as we remember Anabaptist experiences of being immigrants: "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt" (Exod. 22:21; NIV). "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt" (Exod. 23:9). "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 19:33–34). "And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt" (Deut. 10:19). "Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there" (Deut. 24:17–18).

In conversation with Christian community development

My experience of discipleship the past few years has been one of synthesis—of two different communities interacting to form a more full view of God, and more full understanding of the praxis I am compelled to seek out. As a student at Fresno (California) Pacific Biblical Seminary as well as the Fresno Institute for Urban Leadership, my challenge and joy in this season has been to make connections between the two learning environments.

The principles of urban Christian community development can be understood, as articulated by pioneer John M. Perkins, as "practical biblical principles evolved from years of living and working among the poor." The development of these ideas by practitioners, and their birthing out of intentional listening to the "outsider" and to scripture, endows them with a holistic significance worthy of our attention. The three key principles are known as the three R's: relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution.[2]

Relocation

Relocation, as a commitment of urban Christian community development, encourages Christians to physically root themselves in the midst of poverty, set a personal stake in the neighborhood, and function as newcomers until settled into the culture. This choice to relocate—as many urban community development people are doing, in seeking to be good neighbors in a new context—expands the definition of who is the alien. In different contexts we discover different "others," an experience that reminds those from the dominant culture that it is not only the vulnerable one who is the stranger. The identity of the *ger* becomes our own identity, if we choose to root ourselves in an unfamiliar context for the purpose of transformation. The theological response is a choice to embrace an interdependent and culturally critical identity as the *ger*, an identity resonating with that of the *gerim*, who are both the sojourning patriarchs and the dependent marginalized.

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As Anabaptists, we often find ourselves blessed with a strong communal identity. Whether the connection is through physical proximity or through congregational intimacy, we know who we are as a people. The challenge to relocate—voluntarily entering unfamiliar territory—means letting go of that identity security. To be in relationship with our immigrant brothers and sisters means meeting them in their homes, perhaps outside our home. It means we may meet documented and undocumented neighbors outside our places of theological comfort, outside our places of cultural familiarity, and outside our everyday interactions. We enter into another world to become the *ger*, to become the sojourner and seek mutual transformation. Relocation calls us to venture into another's home territory and risk experiencing marginalization.

Reconciliation

The second principle, reconciliation, means that God's redemptive work is able to break down barriers of race, ethnicity, culture,

theology, and economics; disparate groups are called to witness together across boundaries for kingdom justice. The commitment to reconciliation creates cross-cultural partnership as a priority, and recognizes the challenge in witnessing effectively together. It is apparent that any kind of community development or transformation must be the work not of one dominant monoculture but of varied groups who have a stake in the future of the community. The theological response, born from clear calls in Leviticus, may be to intentionally include the *ger* in our contemporary "religious feasts" and celebrations of covenant renewal, crossing boundaries with hope for reconciliation.

If we understand the *ger* today as a vulnerable immigrant, and understand our call to do justice as we remember our own story of oppression and redemption, it should be Anabaptist voices leading the movement for justice for the foreigner.

Our Anabaptist church today has a vibrant and diverse momentum—giving us a glimpse of the reconciled kingdom where monoculture does not exist and embrace across boundaries is the norm. As people of God, we seek covenant community with one another, and we choose the "one anothers" we seek out for community. An intentional pursuit of reconciliation pushes us to look for "one anothers" in new places, flinging open the doors of community to make space for God's Spirit to move powerfully. We can also, perhaps more importantly, begin to listen more closely to the voice of the other already living within our community. Cross-cultural or racial reconciliation does not end with an invitation, but discipleship continues as we place value on relationships and on the good fruit that comes from intercultural, antiracist fellowship.

Redistribution

The third principle, redistribution, has to do with understanding both the needs of a community (felt and real) and the resources present in the community that can be brought to life and shared. The assumption is that God's people are present and rooted among those with poverty of varying kinds, able to put skills and resources to work as the community is empowered. The *ger* is marked by a poverty of wealth and relationship, and Christian

community development reminds us that poverty or lack of resources can be manifested in different forms—financial, relational, educational, spiritual, and others. The freedom and flexibility of organic redistribution means that different methods will be used to engage the foreigner because of differing needs, echoing the variety of protections and expectations placed on the alien in the Pentateuch.

It seems undeniable that the immigrant, documented or undocumented, lacks certain resources. A response of discipleship birthed out of commitment to redistribution, and commitment to honor Old Testament values, is to provide resources to the under-resourced, especially those who are vulnerable immigrants in our midst. Our Anabaptist heritage is one of peace and justice—one often of advocacy and action—and values the hard work of discipleship. Redistribution is a manifestation of that hard work, a practical and tangible way to live out the hospitality and generosity that we hold dear. Redistribution means sharing the financial and relational resources that are present in our community, from the intimate act of housing a stranger to the pursuit of systemic immigration reform.

Historical memory

Let us revisit one of the most powerful primary texts around the very foundation for justice in relationship with the alien—Israel's historical memory, the identity of being once oppressed but now redeemed. These few rich statements hold elements of ethics instruction, reminders of Israel's identity, and assertion of God's authority and character: "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 19:33–34). The bold suggestion here is that, if we understand the *ger* today as a vulnerable immigrant, and understand our call to do justice as we remember our own story of oppression and redemption—it should be Anabaptist voices leading the movement for relationship with the alien, justice for the foreigner, and immigration reform for the sojourner.

In a world where Christianity has become a dominant, powerful, and secure faith practice, and where the church has become

Constantinian (to use John Howard Yoder's term),[3] the responsibility to remember redemption from oppression falls on those groups whose persecution or hardship still remains strong in their historical memory. As Anabaptists, we remember our hardship. Our persecution is ingrained in our identity, our story, our memory as a people. We have not forgotten what it is like for God to liberate the oppressed and bring redemption. This memory is a gift. It can enable us to speak prophetically against mistreatment of immigrants who are now in our midst, because the recollection of our own persecution has not disappeared into complacency; it is not too far gone to compel us to action.

For Anabaptists, memory of persecution and liberation is a gift. It can enable us to speak prophetically against mistreatment of immigrants who are now in our midst.

Our identity as a people once persecuted but now redeemed should powerfully direct our discipleship. Without this collective memory, we are hardly Anabaptists. But without action in response to it, we are hardly disciples. How much do our Anabaptist narratives of flight, refuge, persecution, and redemption mirror the struggle of today's immigrant communities? How much, if we have experienced God's redemption as a people group struggling to survive, should we be advocating for the redemption and survival of another vulnerable people group? How much do we love the story of Dirk Willems's conviction and his mercy crossing of the icy pond at Asperen to rescue his pursuer who had fallen through the ice?[4] How much do we wonder what powerful stories will arise from our brothers and sisters crossing La Linea, the U.S.–Mexican border, in the scorching desert?

For you were immigrants

What we read in the Exodus book of the covenant, in the holiness codes of Leviticus, and throughout the book of Deuteronomy is that the presence of aliens is not a thing to be ignored. Studying the presence of the foreigner in the law codes, and understanding the relational and financial poverty that makes the *ger* a marginalized person are imperative in our quest to establish a healthy relationship with the alien today. Justice for the foreigner is a key element of the law that seeks healthy community for the Hebrew

people who were oppressed and then redeemed. Principles of Christian community development can equip us to engage our urban and complex world, and a more full embrace of our identity as now-redeemed Anabaptists should propel us to action. We are called to engage the Old Testament as a source that is living and vital for discipleship: justice for the sojourner is not to be ignored. Quite the opposite: justice for the alien is a clear call to those of us who know what it is like to be strangers in a strange land.

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Knowing that God has bought liberation to our Anabaptist community—and trusting that God will bring liberation to today's immigrant community—we can creatively craft an alternative narrative to the Leviticus passage that calls Israel to remember their foundation for loving the sojourner: "When an *immigrant* lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The *immigrant* living with you must be treated as one of your *own heritage*. Love her as yourself, for you were *immigrants persecuted in Europe*. I am the Lord your God" (adapted from Lev. 19:33–34).

Notes

[1] M. Daniel Carroll, *Christians at the Border: Immigration, Church, and the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008. Carroll focuses on immigration to the United States, but his discussion has wider applicability.
[2] John M. Perkins, *Restoring At-Risk Communities*. Ada, MI: Baker Books, 1995.
[3] The label *Constantinian* identifies shifts in church-state relations (and in theology and practice) associated with the Roman emperor's legalization of Christianity in 313. Eventually membership in the church came to be associated with citizenship in the state, and Christian religion began to legitimate the exercise of political power and the maintenance of a social order.
[4] Dirk Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist, had escaped from prison. His merciful act led to his recapture. He was burned at the stake in 1569.

About the author

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