

“Stranger” in Zechariah 7

1658. גֵּר *gʿfir*

This noun occurs nearly one hundred times in the Hebrew Bible. It is a common Semitic word, occurring in all West and South Semitic languages (with the exception of Arabic). The noun denotes a social class and status which cannot be reasonably captured by a single word or phrase in English. A resident-alien was a person who moved into an area where he had neither land nor clan ties. Such a person would then be without traditional tribal legal support and protection and vulnerable to abuse. Resident-alien formed a distinct social class in society, neither native citizen nor foreigner nor slave. They usually had to attach themselves to a family in order to survive (cf. Elisha and the widow of Zerephath, at whose house he sojourned, 1 Ki. 17:20). Israel had lengthy legislation on the rights and protection of the resident-alien in society, they “were once sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Exo. 23:9). Abraham was a sojourner in Hebron (Gen. 23:4) and Moses in the wilderness of Midian (Exo. 2:22). Moses named his first son Gershom (According to folk etymology, “a resident alien there”) in recognition of his sojourn there. The Israelites were sojourners in Egypt (Gen. 15:13; Exo. 22:21); and even when they occupied the land of Israel, the LORD regarded them as sojourners in a land He himself owned (Lev. 25:23). The godly of Israel maintained that humble attitude (Pss. 39:12; 119:19), whereas the prophet Jeremiah lamented that sinful Israel treated the LORD as though He were a sojourner in His own land (Jer. 14:8).

Sojourners in the land of Israel were not full citizens, but they could “enter the congregation of God” without being circumcised or keeping the ceremonial law. This was even true for third gener-

ation Egyptians and Edomites (Deut. 23:7f), but not for the Ammonites and Moabites (Deut. 23:3f). There was a “mixed multitude” among the Israelites when they came out of Egypt (Exo. 12:38). These became sojourners with them in the Promised Land, together with many of the Canaanite survivors of the conquest, such as the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:1–27). During the days of Solomon, the sojourners numbered 153,600 (2 Chr. 2:17).

Sojourners were granted certain privileges and responsibilities, similar to those of native-born citizens. Such privileges were quite uncommon in the ancient Near East, where strangers were often mistreated (cf. Gen. 19:1–11; Judges 19:22–30). These privileges included those such as sabbath rest (Exo. 20:10); the benefits derived from God’s covenant with Israel (Deut. 29:11); the right to have their grievances heard before a judge (Deut. 1:16); protection in the cities of refuge (Num. 35:15); the right to glean in the harvest fields, if poor (Lev. 19:10; 23:22); participation in certain societal festivals such as the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 16:14), the Feast of Weeks (Deut. 16:16), and the offering of sacrifices to the LORD (Lev. 22:18; Num. 15:14f); participation in the tithes (Deut. 14:29; 26:12); forgiveness of sins (Num. 15:26); and hearing the word of God read in public (Deut. 31:12). Sojourners were permitted to buy an Israelite as a bondservant (Lev. 25:47).

These privileges were optional, not obligatory, for the sojourner. However, it seems that he was obligated to keep the fast of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29); and if a sojourner wanted to participate in the Passover he had to submit to circumcision (Exo. 12:48f; Num. 9:14).

The sojourners were also made subject to the same penalties and restrictions in matters of criminal law; so they were subject to the death penalty for idolatry (Lev. 20:2), blasphemy (Lev. 24:16, 22),

and presumptuous sin (Num. 15:30f). This also included certain matters of civil and religious law. If they became defiled through contact with uncleanness or disease, they were required to observe the laws of purification (Lev. 17:15; Num. 19:10–13). They could not use leaven at the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exo. 12:19). They could not eat blood (Lev. 17:10–12) nor eat the flesh of an animal that died naturally (Lev. 17:15; Deut. 14:21). They were required to permit the redemption of Israelite bondservants (Lev. 25:48), but they could be bought as a permanent slave without redemption (Lev. 25:45f).

On the other hand, they enjoyed some distinctions from the native Israelite. They were permitted to eat certain unclean food (Deut. 14:21) and perform certain duties improper to the Israelite. They were to be the object of Israel's kindness and love, along with the poor, widows and orphans (Lev. 19:10; Deut 10:18f). Oppression of them was strictly prohibited (Deut. 24:14–17; 27:19; Jer. 22:3; Zech. 7:10), and they were to receive just treatment before the judges (Deut. 24:17; 27:19). This was true because they were the objects of the LORD's care (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 146:9), and Israel herself had endured harsh slavery (Lev. 19:33f). These often-repeated commands were necessary because the strangers were frequently oppressed (Ps. 94:6; Ezek. 22:7, 29) and put to hard labor (1 Chr. 22:2; 2 Chr. 2:17). This was one reason God visited judgment on His people Israel (Mal. 3:5).¹

BDB² 158, KB³ 1:201, STRONG⁴ H1616.

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- 1 Thoralf Gilbrant, "[גֵר](#)," in *The Old Testament Hebrew-English Dictionary*, The Complete Biblical Library (WORDsearch, 1998).
 - 2 BDB Brown, Francis, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs. *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979.
 - 3 KB Koehler, Ludwig and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1994.
 - 4 STRONG Strong, James. *The Exhaustive Concordance of The Bible*.