

Loving the alien

*A series of Bible studies to help Christians engage with biblical teaching
and develop a Christian approach to asylum and immigration*

from the Jubilee Centre, Cambridge

Biblical teaching on ‘aliens’ or foreigners is scattered across Old and New Testaments, often in single verses. Only rarely is there a single, substantial passage that deals with the ‘alien’ or with issues that relate directly to our modern ideas of asylum and immigration.

For this reason the following Bible studies are based on themes, rather than single passages. Each one may be used separately, although the four do fit together to cover the range of biblical teaching on the subject.

The four studies are entitled:

1. Who do you think you are? The influence of identity
2. Being a Samaritan: How to cross borders
3. Loving the alien: Practical responses to the alien in our midst
4. The early church: Living as strangers in a strange world

Each Bible study is designed to last 45 minutes to 1 hour and draws on material from *Asylum and Immigration: A Christian perspective on a polarised debate* (Paternoster, 2004)

Bible Study 1: Who do you think you are? The influence of identity

Throughout the Bible the question of how we should live is never considered on its own. Instead questions of social organisation or ethical behaviour are based on more fundamental questions: Who is God? What he has done for us? And who, therefore, are we? Early Israel was shaped by its knowledge of God and its experience of the exodus and the early church by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

These facts are particularly important when it comes to understanding the biblical attitude to the 'alien' or foreigner.

Read Deuteronomy 26.1-10

What does this passage, and in particular the prayer of dedication, have to say about who God is, what he has done for Israel, and what that means for their relationship ?

Israel's history, as revealed and repeated in this prayer of dedication, has its roots in a frightening and sometimes oppressive alien experience ('my father was a wandering Aramean... the Egyptians mistreated us'). How should that identity have influenced Israel and, in particular, the way the Israelites treated the aliens in their midst?

Read Exodus 22.21, Leviticus 19.34 and Deuteronomy 10.19 to get an idea of how this history and identity *should* have influence the Israelites. What do you think these commands might have entailed in real life? (More details on this can be found in study no. 3.)

Now go back to Deuteronomy chapter 26 and read verses 11-15. What role do the 'aliens' play here? Why are they bracketed alongside the Levites, fatherless and widows? Why is it so important that the aliens are treated in the way this passage (and the others) say they should be?

Regrettably, if not surprisingly, the reality did not always live up to the theory. Look at Ezekiel 22.29, Jeremiah 7.4-7 and Malachi 3.5. Discuss how and why Israelite life failed to match the commands of the Torah, and what was the result of this.

Christians are taken up into a story and identity that goes beyond that of the Israelites in the Old Testament (see study no. 4). But the principle that the manner in which you think of your identity affects the way you treat the alien and the foreigner holds across all societies and ages.

Can you think of some examples of how the history and identity of a modern nation or people group has affected their treatment of immigrants? (Think of UK, USA, Australia, Russia, or Germany, for example)

How do you think the history and identity of the modern Britain shapes our attitudes to immigration today? How do you think they should?

What about you personally? Where do you derive your identity from and what influence does this have on your attitude to immigration (a difficult question – you may need to think carefully and search your heart for an honest answer!)?

How might the example of Israel be helpful to us in this instance? How far do you think this biblical teaching about Israel is tied to the specific circumstances of the time and how far does it reflect timeless moral guidelines based on the character of God? Is it right to appropriate the ideas discussed above for contemporary Britain? If so, in what way might you go about using them?

Bible Study 2: Being a Samaritan: How to cross borders

The Good Samaritan is one of the best known of all Jesus' parables. As a critique of religious hypocrisy, a message of universal humanity and an example of practical love it is hard to beat.

But our familiarity can blind us to its implications. The Jewish historian Josephus tells several stories that illustrate the depth of hatred between Jews and Samaritans in the first century. In about 6 AD a number of Samaritans secretly joined Jewish Passover pilgrims and entered the Temple with them. Once inside they committed 'about the worst desecration possible' by spreading human bones in the porticoes and the sanctuary. Around 50 years later, Samaritans from the village of Ginae murdered some Jewish pilgrims on their way to the Passover. The killings, combined with the Roman indifference to calls for justice, resulted in a Jerusalem mob descending on Ginae, massacring the inhabitants and razing the village.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the interpretation typical in Jesus' day of the Torah's command to 'love the alien' (see study 1) was that the alien excluded Samaritans!

Read Luke 9.51-56

What does this story tell us a) about Jewish-Samaritan relations, b) about the disciples and c) about Jesus?

Can you think of any parallels today? Are there any people groups you can think of who have this kind of relationship – in the world? in the UK? in your locality? in your life?

Read Luke 10.25-37

In spite of what he and his disciples had just experienced, Jesus uses a Samaritan as the model figure in his story. Why? What impact might that have had on his audience? Can you think of an equivalent story today? Tell the story – or imagine one – that would have a similar affect on an audience today.

Read John 4.4-26

This story is usually read as another example, like the two incidents above, of Jesus breaking down the barriers of hostility between people. What is there in the story that supports that interpretation?

The encounter also has other implications. Look at verses 21 and 22. What might this aspect of their meeting tell you about the importance of cultural barriers?

Jesus befriends the woman but that does not prevent him from implicitly criticising her marital ethics or asserting the superiority of the Jewish understanding of God. What can we learn from this?

Think about British society today. Who are the Samaritans and why? Where are the social and cultural fault lines in British society? What about your life and the life of your church? Are there any Samaritans there? Who are they and why?

How do these passages help us as a nation, church or individual cross those borders? How do they call us to think differently? What do they call us to do?

Bible Study 3: Loving the alien: Practical responses to the alien in our midst

The command to ‘love the alien’ is repeated 36 times in the Old Testament. Yet our modern idea of love have been so thoroughly personalised and sexualised that we sometimes fail to recognise the hard-edged practical implications of the kind of love that biblical teaching commands.

These commands are scattered around the Old Testament, so you might find it useful to print out the attached sheet (Bible Study 3: Texts – although this can be dangerous and ideally you should try to pay attention to the context of each of the passages). There are quite a number of texts and questions here, perhaps more than can be fruitfully covered in one Bible study. Feel free to stretch the material over two studies or select the passages you feel are most appropriate.

Read Leviticus 19.9-10, Leviticus 23.22 and Deuteronomy 24.19-22

What is God commanding the Israelites to do here? What reasons does he give for these commands? How might these commands be translated for today? What do you think might be the modern equivalents?

Read Deuteronomy 14.28-29 and Deuteronomy 26.12-13

How do these two passages relate to those just read? What more do they say about the role of the *ger* or alien in early Israel? How might these commands be translated for today?

Read Deuteronomy 24.14-15 and Deuteronomy 24.17

Previous passages have been about economic issues from a standpoint of merciful behaviour, whereas these take a more explicit justice-based point of view. What more do they tell us about the position of the *ger* in early Israel? What might they imply about common treatment of the *ger*? How might these be translated for us in the UK today?

Read Numbers 15.29-30

What does this short passage tell us about the position of *gerim* (i.e. aliens) under the Israelite law? What implications might this have for us today?

Read Deuteronomy 29.10-13, Deuteronomy 31.12 and Exodus 12.43-49

These passages move to an area that we less readily associate with legislation but which Israel took very seriously – the question of community cohesion and belonging. What does the first passage suggest regarding the role of the aliens in Israelite society? What is the implication of the aliens’ presence in the two Deuteronomy passages? What about the position of the alien in the Exodus passage (i.e. in verses 48 and 49; the ‘foreigner’ and ‘temporary resident’ mentioned in verses 44 and 45 are different – see below)? Can you think of a modern British equivalent to the covenant, the assembly or the Passover in these passages? If yes, what are the similarities and differences? If not, why do you think that is? Can you imagine what one might look like? How might it be used to foster social cohesion among ‘citizens’ and with ‘aliens’, as it did for Israel?

Have another look at Exodus 12.43-49 and read also Ezekiel 44.6-9 and 1 Kings 8.41-43.

These passages all make reference to a different kind of foreigner. The Hebrew words used are *nokrim* or *zarim* rather than *gerim*, and are usually translated as ‘foreigner’ rather than ‘alien’. It is not always clear quite how these groups of people differed from one another but

it appears that 'aliens' were among the more vulnerable members of society, often housed under an Israelite roof, and economically and socially dependent. Perhaps most importantly, they were people who had made some personal commitment to Yahweh and to the covenant and so identified themselves with Israel. 'Foreigners' were probably more independent, might not be permanent residents in Israel and had loyalties elsewhere. They tended not to identify or commit themselves to the nation in which they found themselves. These three passages shed some light on how these differences in personal commitment and identification made a difference.

What are the implications of the differences outlined in Exodus 12.43-49? How are these reflected in Ezekiel 44.6-9? How does 1 Kings 8.41-43 redress the balance? Taken together, and referring back to the earlier passages (in particular Deuteronomy 29.10-13, Deuteronomy 31.12 and Exodus 12.43-49) what do these passages suggest about the importance and implications of 'belonging' to Israel? What model might they suggest for us today?

Bible Study 3: Texts

Leviticus 19.9-10

⁹ When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 23.22

²² When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

Deuteronomy 24.19-22

¹⁹ When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. ²¹ When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. ²² Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

Deuteronomy 14.28-29

²⁸ At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, ²⁹ so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Deuteronomy 26.12-13

¹² When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. ¹³ Then say to the LORD your God: "I have removed from my house the sacred portion and have given it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, according to all you commanded. I have not turned aside from your commands nor have I forgotten any of them."

Deuteronomy 24.14-15

¹⁴ Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. ¹⁵ Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.

Deuteronomy 24.17

¹⁷ Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.

Numbers 15.29-30

²⁹ One and the same law applies to everyone who sins unintentionally, whether he is a native-born Israelite or an alien. ³⁰ But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from his people.

Deuteronomy 29.10-13

¹⁰ All of you are standing today in the presence of the LORD your God – your leaders and chief men, your elders and officials, and all the other men of Israel, ¹¹ together with your children and your wives, and the aliens living in your camps who chop your wood and carry your water. ¹² You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your

God, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, ¹³ to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Deuteronomy 31.12

¹² Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns-so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law.

Exodus 12.43-49

⁴³ The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, These are the regulations for the Passover: “No foreigner is to eat of it. ⁴⁴ Any slave you have bought may eat of it after you have circumcised him, ⁴⁵ but a temporary resident and a hired worker may not eat of it. ⁴⁶ It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones. ⁴⁷ The whole community of Israel must celebrate it. ⁴⁸ An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD’s Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. ⁴⁹ The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you.”

Ezekiel 44.6-9

⁶ Say to the rebellious house of Israel, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Enough of your detestable practices, O house of Israel! ⁷ In addition to all your other detestable practices, you brought foreigners uncircumcised in heart and flesh into my sanctuary, desecrating my temple while you offered me food, fat and blood, and you broke my covenant. ⁸ Instead of carrying out your duty in regard to my holy things, you put others in charge of my sanctuary. ⁹ This is what the Sovereign LORD says: No foreigner uncircumcised in heart and flesh is to enter my sanctuary, not even the foreigners who live among the Israelites.”

1 Kings 8.41-43

⁴¹ As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name – ⁴² for men will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm – when he comes and prays toward this temple, ⁴³ then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.

Bible Study 4: The early church: Living as strangers in a strange world

The earliest Christians were overwhelmed by a sense of homecoming. God had arrived in their midst, announced the advent of his new kingdom, ended the exile of sin and, in the manner of the prodigal son's father, rushed out to greet them.

Yet, there was still a powerful sense of being aliens on earth. They may no longer have been strangers to God but that, if anything, made them more like strangers in the world.

The early Christian bishop, Clement of Rome began one of his letters with the words 'From the Church of God which is transiently sojourning in Rome', in doing so using a technical term that denoted temporary rather than permanent residence, the life of the alien rather than the native.

In a similar way, the anonymous writer of the slightly later *Letter to Diognetus* described the early Christians thus:

Though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behaviour there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens.

This was a powerful theme for the early Church and can be seen in some of the New Testament letters.

Read 1 Peter 1.1-17 and 2.4-11

How does Peter describe the people to whom he is writing? Take particular note of chapter 1, verses 1 and 17, and chapter 2, verse 11. Why does he address them in this way? What implications does it have for how he feels they should behave?

Read Hebrews 11.8-10

This is a well-known passage in which the author uses a number of renowned figures from Israel's history to encourage the early Christians. Abraham is one of the most important. What is it about Abraham that the author treats as inspiring? How is his life and experience as 'like a stranger in a foreign country' an example to the early Christians?

Now read Hebrews 11.13-16

The writer expands in these verses on the idea in verses 8-10. Again, how were these verses appropriate to the early Christians? What might they have taken from them that would have encouraged them? Unlike Peter, the writer is not explicit in drawing ethical conclusions from this analogy, but what do you think he is implying for the early Christians?

Think about your own experiences living as a Christian today. Do you feel like an 'alien and stranger' in any way? If so, how? Explore whether you have shared feelings and experiences in this area and, if so, what their common features are.

What do you feel about this? What have you done to address it? What do you think you could do? What is there in any of these passages that helps you or gives you cause for comfort in this area?

What do these experiences indicate to you about how you should live and behave as an individual and as a church? How do they relate to the strong emphasis on hope that seems to go with the description of early Christians as 'aliens and strangers' on earth? How do you think the Christian's identity as an 'alien' and 'stranger' should affect his or her attitude toward immigrants today?