

THE ALIEN IN DEUTERONOMY

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The focus of this paper is to examine the use of the Hebrew term *ger* in Deuteronomy. The noun *ger* (pl. *gerim*), often translated into English as “alien,” “foreigner,” or “stranger,” occurs twenty-two times in Deuteronomy, two of which refer to the Israelites, who once lived as aliens in Egypt (10.19b; 23.8). All the other occurrences refer to strangers. The following broad areas are discussed in relation to *ger*:

1. Judicial justice and equal treatment for the *ger* (1.16; 24.17; 27.19), including payment of wages (24.14);
2. Sabbath rest for the *ger* (5.14);
3. Caring for the *gerim* by taking care of their basic needs (10.18) and allowing them to glean in the fields (24.19, 20, 21);
4. Allowing the *ger* to share in the consumption of the triennial tithe (14.29; 26.12, 13);
5. Allowing the *ger* to participate in the celebration of religious festivals (16.11, 14; 26.11);
6. The *ger*, together with the Israelites, entered into a covenant relationship with God (29.10). *Gerim* are required to obey the Torah (31.12).

In Deuteronomy, the *gerim* enjoy a great deal of privilege and protection under the law. The focus seems to be on their legal status. All the occurrences of the noun *ger* are in the singular (except in 10.19b, where the plural form is used with reference to the Israelites who once lived as aliens in Egypt). The use of the singular form is appropriate because the *ger* is mentioned mainly in the context of legal formulations and discussions, and a large proportion of OT laws (including the Ten Commandments) are formulated using the singular form.

The Hebrew word *ger* is derived from the verbal root *gur*, which has the basic meaning of “to dwell for a time,” or “to dwell as a new-comer, without original rights” (Brown, Driver, and Briggs [BDB]). According to BDB, the noun *ger* means: (i) temporary dweller, newcomer; (ii) dwellers in Israel with certain conceded, not inherited rights. In other words, it refers to a non-native, one who

is not an original member of the community in which he or she lives (Spencer 1992, 6:103).

Who then, are these “non-natives”? On what basis do they enjoy legal privileges and protection in Israel?

The earlier scholarly consensus views the *ger* as a non-Israelite. Ridderbos (1984, 58, 175) states that the *ger* is a “semi-citizen.” Begg (1992, 2:829) says that the *ger* in the OT refers to a non-Israelite who has the status of semi-permanent resident. Mayes (1979, 124-5) states that the *ger* in Deuteronomy is a non-Israelite. Christiana van Houten (1991, 107) similarly argues that the references to *ger* in Deuteronomy consistently refer to non-Israelites.

If *ger* in Deuteronomy indeed refers to non-Israelites, one wonders on what basis they are allowed to participate in the religious ceremonies, including the covenant renewal. It also seems somewhat strange that they are allowed to share in the consumption of the tithes, which is considered as sacred.

Van Houten (1991, 77-108) argues that the *ger* is allowed to consume the tithes and participate in the festivals simply due to Deuteronomy’s humanitarian concern for marginal groups, but this argument is not convincing. It does not match the nationalistic and martial spirit that permeates Deuteronomy. We see this militant spirit, for instance, in the instructions on holy war. The surrounding Canaanite nations must be totally wiped out. All aspects of the Canaanite religion are to be eradicated so that the worship of Yahweh may not be corrupted, lest the covenant people be led astray (20.16-18). Besides holy war, Deuteronomy contains numerous laws about wars (20.1-9), regulations about the capture of cities (20.10-20), prisoners of war (21.10-14), and other military arrangements (23.9-14 [Heb. 23.10-15]; 25.17-19). In other words, we catch a glimpse of a society that felt uneasy or threatened by the intrusions of outsiders, and there is a note of anxiety towards foreigners.

In Deuteronomy, the fact that the *gerim* enter into a covenant relationship with Yahweh (29.10-11 [Heb. 29.9-10]) and are required to observe the Torah (31.12) suggests that they are members of the covenant community. Similarly, the fact that the *gerim* are allowed to consume the sacred portion (14.29; 26.13) and participate in the national festivals (16.11, 14) at the single sanctuary is better explained on the ground that they are viewed as members of the covenant people. Van Houten’s explanation that the *ger* is treated favorably simply due to Deuteronomy’s humanitarian concern misses the point. Humanitarian concern in Deuteronomy is primarily directed towards members of the covenant community. This is clearly seen in the sabbatical year of remission of debts, which applies to the members of the covenant community, but the debts of foreigners (*nokri*) are unaffected by the remission (15.3). There is a clear insider-outsider mentality.

A much more plausible view is that the references to the *ger* in Deuteronomy (14.29; 16.11, 14; 24.17, 19, 20, 21; 26.13, and 27.19) have in mind Israelites from the northern kingdom who have migrated and settled in Judah (see, for example, Kellerman 1975, 2:445). Lohfink (1991, 41) notes that scholars generally explain the association of the *ger* with orphans and widows in connection with the massive migration from the northern kingdom to Judah after the fall of Samaria.

This identification of the *ger* with fellow-Israelites also finds support in other parts of the OT. In Judg 19.16, an Ephraimite who settled at Gibeah among the Benjaminites is called a *ger* (de Vaux 1961, 74). Second Chronicles 15.9 describes the inhabitants from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon who migrated to Judah during the reign of Asa as *gerim*. In addition, *gerim* from Israel who lived in Judah participated in Hezekiah's Passover festival (2 Chr 30.25). If *gerim* denote the immigrants from the northern kingdom, it helps explain their favorable treatment in Deuteronomy, as opposed to the harsher treatment of genuine outsiders.

In Deuteronomy, with its clear insider-outsider mentality, there is a need to define the status of the immigrants from the other Israelite tribes who have come to settle in Judah, especially with the influx of refugees after the fall of Samaria. These newcomers are described as having the status of a *ger*. It is a boundary marker that distinguishes the status of the local inhabitants, the new immigrants, and genuine outsiders. This boundary marker is necessary in order to protect the political and religious integrity of the nation. The *gerim* enjoy certain privileges and protection under the law, but this does not mean that they are identical with the Israelites (which here, ironically, refers to inhabitants of Judah) in all aspects. There are differences between the *ger* and the Israelite as well. For instance, the Israelites are forbidden to consume the meat of any animal that dies of itself, but the *ger* has no such restriction placed on him/her (14.21). In addition, in a section dealing with curses and punishment, it is stated that disobedience to the covenant will result in the *ger* gaining power over the Israelites (28.43), resulting in a reversal of social order.

Translating *ger* in Deuteronomy and the OT

We need to bear in mind that the OT, including Deuteronomy, employs a number of terms to refer to outsiders. *Nokri* is used in several instances (Deut 14.21; 15.3; 17.15; 23.21; 29.21) and seems to refer to genuine foreigners. Another term, *zar*, is employed to refer to an outsider (Deut 25.5) or alien things/gods (Deut 32.16). It is not stated that these outsiders will enjoy the same privileges and protection as the *ger*. Although it does not occur in Deuteronomy, the word *toshav* (sojourner, dependant) is sometimes used in other parts of the OT as a hendiadys with *ger* (e.g., Gen 23.4; Lev 25.23; 1 Chr 29.35; cf. Kellermann 1975, 2:448). In short, the *ger* in Deuteronomy seems to occupy an intermediate position between the local inhabitants and the genuine outsiders. This has some implications for translation.

1. It will be helpful to preserve the distinctions between *ger* and *nokri*. GNB and CEV translate *ger* and *nokri* in Deuteronomy as "foreigner," giving the impression that both refer to the same entity. This is not satisfactory. NRSV and NJPS, on the other hand, do make a distinction between *ger* and *nokri*. Both versions translate *nokri* as "foreigner," and use other terms, such as "stranger," "alien," or "resident alien" for *ger*. In this they follow the example of LXX, which consistently translated *nokri* as *allogenos*, and *ger* as either *paroikos* or *proselytos* (though we should note that the latter had probably not yet acquired its later technical meaning of a religious convert).

The distinction between *ger* and *zar* needs to be preserved as well, depending on the context of its occurrence.

2. The translation of *ger* requires some consistency. NJPS is consistent in translating *ger* as “stranger,” except in 31.12 where the singular form *ger* is translated as the plural “strangers.” NRSV translates *ger* as “aliens” or “resident aliens” (e.g., 1.16; 5.14; 14.21) most of the time, but it also uses “strangers” on several occasions (10.18, 19; 16.11, 14). GNB consistently translates *ger* as “foreigners,” except in Deut 23.7 (Heb. 23.8), where it uses the expression “once lived” (“you once lived in their land”). CEV translates *ger* as “foreigners” as well, except in Deut 24.20, 21, where the *ger* is subsumed under the general category “the poor.” As terms like “alien,” “resident alien,” and “stranger” all seem to fit the context of each occurrence of *ger* in Deuteronomy, it is recommended that translators use one of these terms consistently.

3. The term *ger* is used in different ways in different parts of the OT. Meek (1930), in his study of the occurrences of *ger* in the Hexateuch (Genesis–Joshua), argues that in the Yahwist (J) and Elohist (E) documents, the noun should be translated as “immigrants.” He suggests that the noun *ger* in the Book of the Covenant (Exod 20.22–23.19) and in Deuteronomy could be translated as “resident alien.” In the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26) and in the Priestly writings (P), he asserts that *ger* has essentially taken on the meaning of a proselyte, and should be translated accordingly. Meek’s analysis is based on a particular source-critical framework for dating layers within the Pentateuch. While we may not agree with every aspect of his proposal, it is nevertheless a helpful reminder that the term *ger* is used in different ways in different parts of the OT. There is also a metaphorical use of the term *ger*, where the Israelites described themselves in prayer as *gerim* with/before God (Ps 39.12 [Heb. 39.13]; 1 Chr 29.15; see Ramirez 1999, 132), giving the term a spiritual or religious meaning rather than a territorial one. In other words, the term *ger* acquires different dimensions of meanings in different contexts or historical periods.

To render *ger* in a differentiated manner according to its usage in a particular context or a particular book will require a great deal of work, but it may be a worthwhile endeavor. If we do not want to follow that route, it is also possible to translate *ger* with a somewhat vague term like “alien,” “resident alien,” or “stranger,” and use footnotes or glossary to provide some brief explanation of what *ger* might mean in different contexts.

[An Appendix listing translations of ger, nokri, and zar in Deuteronomy may be found on the next two pages, along with the list of references.]

Appendix

Translations of *ger*, *nokri*, and *zar* in Deuteronomy:

ger

Verse	Heb	LXX	NRSV	NJPS	GNB	CEV
1.16	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	resident alien	stranger	foreigners	foreigner
5.14	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	resident alien	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
10.18	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	strangers	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
10.19	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	stranger	stranger	foreigners	them
10.19	pl	<i>prosēlytoi</i>	strangers	strangers	foreigners	foreigners
14.21	sg	<i>paroikos</i>	aliens	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
14.29	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	aliens	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
16.11	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	strangers	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
16.14	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	strangers	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
23.8	sg	<i>paroikos</i>	alien (v. 7)	stranger	once lived	foreigners
24.14	sg	<i>prosēlytoi</i>	aliens	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
24.17	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	resident alien	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
24.19	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	alien	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
24.20	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	alien	stranger	foreigners	the poor
24.21	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	alien	stranger	foreigners	the poor
26.11	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	aliens	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
26.12	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	aliens	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
26.13	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	resident aliens	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
27.19	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	alien	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
28.43	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	aliens	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
29.10	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	aliens (v. 11)	stranger	foreigners	foreigners
31.12	sg	<i>prosēlytos</i>	aliens	strangers	foreigners	foreigners

Notes:

1. The plural form in 10.19 refers to the Israelites, who once lived in Egypt.
2. 23.8 refers to the Israelites, who once lived as aliens in Egypt. This verse is 23.7 in NRSV, GNB, and CEV, but GNB does not use the word “foreigners” here.
3. CEV groups the *ger*, the widows, and the orphans as “the poor” in 24.20, 21.
4. 29.10 in Hebrew, LXX, and NJPS = 29.11 in NRSV, GNB, and CEV.

nokri

Verse	Heb	LXX	NRSV	NJPS	GNB	CEV
14.21	sg	<i>allotrios</i>	foreigner	foreigner	other foreigners	foreigners
15.3	sg	<i>allotrios</i>	foreigner	foreigner	foreigner	foreigners
17.15	sg	<i>allotrios</i>	foreigner	foreigner	foreigner	---
23.21	sg	<i>allotrios</i>	foreigner	foreigners	foreigner	foreigner
29.21	sg	<i>allotrios</i>	foreigner	foreigners	foreigners	foreigners

Notes:

1. 23.21 in Hebrew, LXX, and NJPS = 23.20 in NRSV, GNB, and CEV.
2. 29.21 in Hebrew, LXX, and NJPS = 29.22 in NRSV, GNB, and CEV.

zar

Verse	Heb	LXX	NRSV	NJPS	GNB	CEV
25.5	sg	<i>exō anēr</i>	stranger	stranger	outside the family	outside the family
32.16	pl	<i>allotrioi</i>	strange gods	alien things	idolatry	foreign gods

Note: Elsewhere LXX occasionally translates *zar* as *allotrios* but more often *allogenēs* (another race).

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