

Outsiders Know Better? — Introducing the ‘Righteous Foreigners’ in the Hebrew Bible and their Significance

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1. Introduction: God and Israel, and foreigners

If someone says, “As the Book about God and his chosen people, the Bible recounts events which happened between these two parties”, I suppose that this is not far too wrong. Nonetheless, this generalising statement excludes so many chapters, or even some books from the canon. We have, for example, the Book of Job, where no Hebrews are mentioned, or the Book of Esther, where there is no reference to God. The election of Israel among other nations is indeed the basic tenet of the Bible. Accordingly, foreigners are, so to speak, referred to in the margin of the Book. But this Book seems to have generously margined pages. Since God’s chosen people were “the smallest of peoples” (Deut 7:7), surrounded by oftentimes more powerful nations, they could not stay indifferent to those foreigners. Their God is the God of the universe, He is not only concerned with his “peculiar treasure (Exod 19:5 in KJV < Heb. ‘am segulah’)", but also with those whom He did not choose. From that, it is only natural that the Bible is abundant with references to foreigners, even though they are excluded from the divine election.

2. Two ‘classical’ ways of how Israel treats foreigners

Foreigners appear, most oftentimes, in two (and contrasted) versions: ‘the wicked in power’ or ‘the weak in need’. Let us briefly look at these two versions before we go into the third and largely neglected version, which is the main theme of this presentation.

To illustrate the first version concretely, I find it fitting to cite a couple of well-known verses from the Bible.

No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the LORD for ever; because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came forth out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Be'or from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Deut 23:3-4) [Following the Revised Standard Version translation here and below.]

Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Per'izzites, the

Hivites, and the Jeb'usites. Take heed to yourself, lest you make covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither you go, lest it become a snare in the midst of you. You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their Ashe'rim. (Exod 34:11-13; cf. Deut 7:1-2)

In this first category, which can be treated as an exclusive model, foreigners are a threat, or the despicable ones, who possess a variety of enchanting devices to lead the Israelites astray and abandon their faith. These foreigners are often in power, too or at the very least powerful enough to cause the Israelites to worry about the former's potentially disturbing influence on their creed and rituals.

The other category of foreigners, seemingly opposed to the above, can be found prescribed in ethical encouragement as follows.

He [God] executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner (ger), giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:18-19; cf. Exod 23:9)

You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner (ger), or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge; but you shall remember that you were a slave ('ebed) in Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. (Deut 24:17-18)

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers (gerim) in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:33-34)

These examples portray foreigners as weak and in need of help. They depict the Israelites themselves in the past as well, namely, sojourners in a foreign land. Israel, when they see sojourners in difficulty, are to protect them, and include them magnanimously in their community.

3. ‘Righteous Foreigners’ in the Hebrew Bible

Apart from these two types of foreigners, we know that there is one other category of foreigner in the Hebrew Bible, which I would tentatively call ‘righteous foreigners’. Or, to be more modest and safe, and perhaps less attractively, they could be classified as ‘positive and active foreigners’, as opposed to the ‘negative and passive’ ones seen above. They are strikingly different from the two preceding types in that they walk, or show the right and even the divinely inspired path to the chosen, or help the chosen to find that path, quite paradoxical to the election scheme where it is theoretically postulated that the chosen always know better. In addition, *they* take the initiative, that is, they emerge from the position of receivers of Israel's actions (hostile or merciful), and appear on

the scene as the main actors.

Examples of these foreigners, at least illustrative ones, are not so abundant, nonetheless, neither are they insignificantly scarce. Within the limited pages allocated here, we can not afford to go into the details of all the pericopes concerned, but must restrain ourselves to sharing the modest and non-exhaustive list of ‘righteous foreigners’. We will take a quick look at these figures listed in the table below.

| | |
|--|--|
| Melchizedeq (Gen 14:18-20; Psa 110:4) | Tamar (Gen 38) |
| Jethro (Exo 18; cf. 2:16-21; 3:1; 4:18-20) | Balaam (Num 22) |
| Rahab (Jos 2; 6:17,22-25) | Uriah the Hittite (2Sa 11, cf. 12) |
| Naaman (2Ki 5) | The Ninevites (Jon 3) The anonymous foreign sailors (Jon 1) |
| Ruth (Ruth 1-4) | Job (Job 1-2; 42 [so called its ‘frame narrative’]) |

Table 1: the list of the ‘Righteous Foreigners’

Melchizedeq from Genesis 14 was a priest of the ‘Most High’ and the king of Salem. He blessed God and Abraham with bread and wine, and gave him a tenth (or, could it be rather the other way round: Abraham gave Melchizedeq the tenth? The massoretic text is notoriously ambiguous here). Abraham the patriarch, accepted every generous and venerable act of this stranger without showing any bewilderment.

Tamar in Genesis 38 was Judah’s daughter-in-law, likely a Canaanite woman. She was once maltreated by Judah, but by courage and wit became pregnant after sleeping with the patriarch, and succeeded in giving birth to Perez (and Zerah) so that Judah’s family would not perish. (She conceived for him (*lo*), Gen 38:18).

Jethro appearing in Exodus 2-4 and 18 was a Midianite priest, and Moses’ father-in-law. Somewhat echoing Melchizedeq, he blessed the safe return of Moses and his people from Egypt, and praised God with sacrifices. Moreover, he contributed in establishing an effective way of judging conflicts, observing Moses bearing too heavy a load.

Balaam from Numbers 22-24 was a reputed foreign fortune teller, but at the same time behaved as a loyal servant of the God of Israel. He received revelations from God and refused to curse Israel disobeying Balak the king of Moab, and instead kept on blessing Israel.

Rahab from Joshua 2 was a Canaanite prostitute [*zonah*], or possibly a landlady of a sort of an inn. She sheltered two Hebrew spies and helped Joshua’s army in occupying Jericho, and eventually in conquering Canaan.

Uriah the Hittite, from 2Samuel 11 and 12, was a common foreign soldier serving David’s army, and was the husband of alluring Bath-Sheba. Against David’s malevolent ruse, Uriah refused to go home to enjoy intimacy with his wife, thus showing fidelity to the king and solidarity with his

colleagues, only to fuel the king’s maliciousness.

Naaman’s episode was recounted in 2Kings 5. He was a military commander in the Syrian army, suffering from leprosy. He was introduced to the prophet Elisha, and Elisha cured Naaman. Naaman reverentially acknowledged the God of Israel, and sent the prophet a gift as a token of appreciation, which the prophet politely, and perhaps duly, refused. Contrastingly, Gehazi, Elysha’s disciple, reclaimed the gift by greed, and became a leper.

The Ninevites were the people of a notoriously wicked city. But in Jonah 3, they repented immediately after Jonah’s reluctant warning, and were saved from the foretold disaster and annihilation.

The anonymous sailors in Jonah 1 were worshippers of various pagan gods. They acted piously, trying to avoid killing the rebellious prophet Jonah, and prayed to the God of Israel, made sacrifices and swore oaths.

Ruth was the only foreign woman for whom an entire book was allotted (the only man was Job just below). This widow from Moab showed steadfast fidelity to her mother-in-law, her people and its God. Her outstanding devotion led Boaz to marry her and she gave birth to Obed, king David’s grandfather.

Job the righteous man of Uz, especially the one depicted in the frame narrative of the Book of Job, proved his unshakable faith by enduring reverentially the dreadful doom which he actually did not deserve.

4. Diversity among ‘Righteous Foreigners’

These figures, almost countable merely by the fingers on both hands, except for the 120,000 Ninevites in the Book of Jonah, display quite a colourful collection of different human status. I would like to share some observations that I made about this list.

They come from all walks of life: a priest-king (Melchizedeq), a priest-shepherd (Jethro), widows (Tamar and Ruth), a harlot (Rahab), a commander (Naaman), and a common soldier (Uriah), a wealthy man of note (Job), a fortune teller (Balaam), and sailors (in the Book of Jonah). And in passing, it can also be noted that these figures are spread in all three canonical divisions of the Tanakh.

While some are legally integrated into the community of Hebrews by marriage (Tamar, Ruth, Jethro), others belonged to an antagonistic nation (the Ninevites), or did so once (Tamar was probably of Canaanite origin; Uriah the Hittite, Ruth the Moabite).

Most of them acted in cooperation with the Hebrews, but God’s pride par excellence, Job the

righteous, leads a life without any contact with Israel.

Some seem (or pretend) to reflect real historical events, others appear to be more idealised fictional characters (Job, the Ninevites and the sailors in Jonah). One is, of course, merely referring here to the difference in style of description, not to the historicity per se.

Most of them are individuals bearing his or her proper names, but in the Book of Jonah groups of ‘righteous foreigners’ are depicted *without* their personal names, even the king is not an exception.

And perhaps more importantly, a distinction should be made according to how they behaved vis-à-vis the chosen people of Israel. I attempt herewith to introduce another division into our general list, in order to capture significant nuances between those whom I have been simply calling the ‘righteous foreigners’. In my view, they are possibly divided into four to five groups of different types.

| Type | Figures | Common feature among each type |
|------|---|---|
| 1 | Tamar / Uriah / Naaman / Foreign sailors and the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah | Foreigner “more in the right” (Gen 38:26) than the chosen people |
| 2 | Jethro / Rahab | Harmonious cooperator |
| 3 | Melchizedeq / Balaam | Ambiguous (enigmatic?) helper |
| 4 | Ruth / Itai, Hushai, Shobi, Machir (?), Barzil’lai (2Sam 15:17-23. 32; 17:27-29; 18:2.5) / (Rahab?) | Sympathetic follower |
| 5 | Job | ‘Independently righteous’ i.e., no contact or comparison with the chosen ones |

Table 2: Five types of ‘Righteous Foreigners’, according to how they function vis-à-vis the people of Israel

Some are admittedly “more in the right” (borrowing the wording of Judah to Tamar from Gen 38:26) than the chosen protagonist(s) (Tamar than Judah, Uriah contrasted with David, Naaman with Gehazi the disciple of Elisha, the Ninevites and the sailors with the prophet Jonah). Some cooperate harmoniously with the Hebrews (Jethro, Rahab), and others have a more ambiguous stance in their helping (Melchizedeq, Balaam), others are, more modestly, sympathetic followers (Ruth, Itai, Hushai, Shobi, Machir (?), Barzillai from 2Samuel 15; 17), and Job, who is ‘independently’, i.e., without any explicit comparison with others, righteous in the eyes of God.

5. Some common features between ‘righteous foreigners’: a loose web

Now we are well aware that the group of our ‘righteous foreigners’ is far from being monolithic. Apart from their being ‘righteous foreigners’, we can merely point out that each one commonly appears once or just a few times in the Hebrew Bible, and that each one, except the Ninevites (cf. Nahum 1-3), is portrayed as a ‘single-faceted’ character (unlike Noah, Moses, David and so on, who

are multi-faceted humans with both virtue and vice).

This diversity observed above may make it difficult to regard these ‘righteous foreigners’ in one tight lineage. However, in spite of these observations, I maintain that they can indeed be classifiable in one catalogue as examples of unusual and distinct figures who transcend the postulate of ‘the chosen always knowing better’ and ‘the foreigners either wicked or weak’ (as seen in the two ‘classical’ versions in chapter 2 above).

In fact, with closer observation, we discover quite a few things in common among them, each tying some of them close together. One could, to cite some good examples, name eight such elements. 1) Melchizedeq, Jethro, and Balaam are all foreign priests who blessed the Hebrew protagonists and their God. 2) The stories of Tamar and Ruth both have levirate marriages as background. 3) Tamar, Ruth and Rahab form a group of courageous foreign women, and are also the outstanding matriarchs of David’s genealogy. 4) What is common among Melchizedeq, Jethro, Balaam, and Rahab is that they are all contrasted with other hostile foreigners (Melchizedeq with the King of Sodom, Jethro with Egyptians, Balaam with Balak the King of Moab, and Rahab with other townfolks in Jericho). 5) As seen in the previous chapter (Type 1 represented in Table 2), some are contrasted with the Hebrew (not so righteous) protagonists, and “more in the right” than those chosen ones: Tamar (versus Judah), Naaman (vs. Gehazi), Uriah (vs. David), and the Ninevites and the sailors in the Book of Jonah (vs. Jonah). 6) Melchizedeq, Jethro, Uriah and Job are somewhat mysterious figures, who surprise readers by their abrupt and short appearance or disappearance. 7) Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Jethro share a rather exceptional social status: favoured inclusion in Israel’s community. Lastly, 8) all except the Ninevites are depicted as ‘single-faceted’ characters.

With the help of these clues, we can see that one story resonates with another, and these foreign figures, dispersed in remote pericopes, are again revealed to be loosely connected in a large web.

Surely, the connection between them by these links is not so much a strict one, as none of these links are all-encompassing ones, but these pericopes seem to echo one another leaving us with one global impression that, crossing the boundary between the chosen and the *non*-chosen, outsiders actively help insiders out of good faith, and insiders accept these outsiders who behave rather uncommonly, in view of their usual perspective.

It seems important to note that they are not described to be a threat to the chosen ones, that is, they are, in most cases, gently received by the chosen protagonists, who might have acted differently if they had been trapped in their lofty self-identity. And potentially, these foreigners could have assumed quite a subversive role and might even have taken over the more favoured position, but *that* never happened. These marginal individuals and groups of people acted amiably for the good

cause of the chosen, or in the right fear of their God, and the God's chosen people accepted their acts, showing neither surprise nor bewilderment to their foreignness - I say, "mostly" since Jonah might be an exception.

The motives for including these notably uncommon stories in the Bible may not always be the same in each case. But these pieces of evidence scattered in all three canonical divisions show either that there was a certain openness present, not so rarely, on the side of the elite, or that there were chances here and there for self-reflection and criticism which led the chosen few to sense the need or possibility to listen to or to receive the help of foreign outsiders, leaping across the boundary of the chosen and the non-chosen.

6. Possible implications of 'Righteous Foreigners'

As a tentative conclusion from what we have just looked over, I would like to submit the following.

Firstly, the pericopes we have briefly treated are clear testimonies of the possibility that outsiders in the Hebrew Bible, sometimes and somehow, could know better than insiders, or help them, cooperate with them, or to come and stay with them.

And *that* precisely conveys a positive image of the chosen with ears to listen, not only to their Chooser and their peers, but also to their outsiders.

In other words, this 'accepting of strangers' implies Israel's receptiveness to the otherness. Here I would like to insist that this is quite different from all-inclusive universalism. From what we have examined, the boundary itself is not banned, it is firmly valid, and / but the unusual and exceptional figures transcend the boundary just here and there.

Thus, the 'righteous foreigners' can function to relativize the election scheme where the chosen always know better. It is not only the chosen who are in the right, but the chosen can communicate with and learn from the virtuous outsiders. In these somewhat neglected treasures of the biblical narrative, I dare to reckon a narrow but auspicious path which leads to co-existence without fusion, something so daring in the era of conflict where self-centered expansion and neglect of others are not a rarity.

One may find it fitting to conclude this paper by citing a proverbial formula from the Jewish sages: "The wisest is the one who can learn from any person" (איזהו חכם הלמד מכל אדם).

Author’s note

This is basically the paper read at the conference, only slightly polished and modified for the sake of readability, not presuming to be a full-fledged article. I am grateful for the editorial support and patience which allowed the inclusion of this modest work of mine in this volume. For readers wondering about the relevance of the subject treated in this paper to that of the volume, I believe that a brief mention is in order that the conference was about an outsider, in origin, in the tradition for which he showed deep comprehension and so much contributed to.