


The 'foreigner in our midst' and the Hebrew Bible

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On account of xenophobia, which seems to be a worldwide phenomenon, this article examines the issue of the 'foreigner in our midst' and approaches the problem from an Old Testament perspective. Firstly an overview is given on the concepts of ethnicity and group identity, and then two opposing groups of texts are briefly analysed: those that convey an exclusivist attitude and those that are more open and inclusive in their outlook. Consequently, the contexts in which these texts originated are examined. It appears that both groups, the exclusivists and the inclusivists, share the same religious convictions, namely the worship of YHWH, the God of Israel. The article concludes by urging caution when using the Bible in order to address complex social and political issues in contemporary societies.

Introduction

The influx of Syrian refugees in European countries, the increasing numbers of Polish workers in the United Kingdom (UK), of Asian workers in Australia and the United States (US), and the many hapless and homeless (often) illegal immigrants from African countries who flock into South Africa (SA) create mixed feelings among the locals. These foreigners flee their own country in order to eke out a living, whatever the cost may be, even if it means taking on menial work. From the local side, there may be sympathy towards another in need on the one hand; on the other, the presence of a foreigner poses a threat: he or she becomes a burden to society; he or she takes away the work that could and should be done by the local population; and, last but not least, the foreigner threatens the unique identity of the local population.

Racial hatred and suspicion of foreigners are attested to worldwide, and since the beginning of civilisation groups have tended to favour their own kind rather than welcoming foreigners. One has to acknowledge the fact that it is part of human nature to be suspicious about strangers, not to trust them with a glad heart, and to be rather sceptical about 'the other'. This article will examine the question from an Old Testament perspective, to determine whether it has anything to contribute towards the question of the 'foreigner in our midst'.

Group identity: Ethnicity, boundaries, history

Ethnicity

The term 'ethnicity' is mostly associated with race. Racial or ethnic groups identify themselves as unique and different from others and appropriate different criteria to express their special characteristics. The first reaction to 'ethnicity' is that it is something biological, something that has to do with race, blood relationships, DNA, something that is determined by birth (Berquist 2006:54; Southwood 2012:19). However, ethnicity is not a private individual matter; an individual's ethnic make-up relates him or her to a group of people who is like him or her.

Ethnicity is also an indicator of group identity. Thus, one may assume that people who are related to one another by means of race and descent will share some recognisable characteristics like colour of skin; they will speak the same language; they will have the same religious convictions; and they will adhere to the same cultural norms and behaviour, like diet, circumcision, etc. (Berquist 2006:55; Edelman et al. 2012:7). Of course this was more the case in ancient civilisations' than in modern Western ones, yet cultural and social affinities cannot be ruled out completely.

Boundaries

Edelman (2014:67) agrees with the notion that human groups identify themselves in terms of shared traits, beliefs and customs, but she adds that the uniqueness of a group is furthermore

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confirmed by the establishment of boundaries that separate them from other groups who are not like them. Lau (2011:175) elaborates further and points out that within contemporary societies, certain ethnic characteristics, like physical appearance, customs and behaviour, often become exaggerated in order to stress these differences on a very basic level. 'We' use categories and labels to indicate that 'they' are completely different to 'us'; 'they' become stereotypes of those from whom 'we' would rather distance 'ourselves'. This becomes a process of labelling and stereotyping, which is not merely a means of expressing differences in a neutral way; the result is usually a perception of exclusivity as well as a notion of superiority (Lau 2011:175; Rom-Shiloni 2011:130). Particular groups tend to draw exclusive boundaries around themselves and see themselves as superior towards others.

Stuhlman (1990:631–632) remarks rather disconcertedly that groups often draw artificial boundaries around themselves to set themselves apart from other groups, exactly because the differences are not so clear. In reality 'they' are not that different from 'us'; the problem is in fact that 'they' are 'almost like us'. Therefore 'we' imagine, select and radicalise certain (ethnic) categories to symbolise differences that give us good reasons to exclude 'them' decisively from 'us'. Ethnically and culturally 'they' are not that much different; in fact, 'their' identity is very close to 'ours'. The problem is that this closeness becomes uncomfortable, even threatening. Therefore 'we' draw imaginary boundaries in order to stress the differences and separate 'them' from 'us'.

History

Ben Zvi (2011:100), Lau (2011:175) and Southwood (2012:20) furthermore remark that group identity or cultural awareness is not influenced by ethnicity and descent alone; a strong feeling of connectedness is especially created by a shared past: the history of a people. Such a history is not necessarily based on empirical verifiable facts but on the 'myths of memory'. The history of a nation is seldom the truth and nothing but the truth. Ben Zvi (2011:100) uses the term 'mnemonic community' to describe this element of an ethnic group, namely the memories of a shared past. Such memories would pertain to an ancestral homeland, a physical place of origin; heroes and villains, those who protected and fought for the people and those who sought to undermine and oppress them; joy and sorrow, victory and defeat. All these stories or memories are passed on from generation to generation and contribute to a strong feeling of solidarity among the group.

To conclude this section: it appears that group identity is determined by matters such as ethnicity, a shared past and by drawing boundaries that separate them from other groups.

Subsequently the treatment of foreigners in the Old Testament will be discussed.

The Hebrew Bible

Foreigners are to be excluded

The Hebrew Bible stresses Israel's unique relationship with YHWH. They are his chosen people, his covenantal people, his treasure, his son, his garden (for detail on specific texts, see Edelman 2014:45–52). Even the seemingly benign gestures towards the foreigner in the gleaning laws of Leviticus (19:9–10; 23:22) and Deuteronomy (24:19–21) seem to pertain to strangers among the Israelite community; in the words of Braulik (1996:118), *gehört zum Spektrum der jüdischen Bevölkerung* (see also Fischer 2001:175; Köhlmoos 2010:41). In other words, the 'stranger' is one like me, whom I have not met before but who is now in need and to whom I am obliged to offer my help. The 'stranger' is one of my kind.

On the whole, many texts in the Hebrew Bible (HB) are clearly hostile towards strangers, and rigid borders are drawn around Israel. One of the best examples is Deuteronomy 23:3–4 (HB vv.4–5), which excludes specifically Ammonites and Moabites from the congregation of YHWH. Deuteronomy 7:6 and 14:2 present Israel as the holy and chosen people of YHWH and prohibit them to have anything to do with the people of the land. Deuteronomy 7:1 lists these peoples: Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, and in verse 2 orders Israel to launch a brutal attack on these nations, to utterly destroy them and show them no mercy.

An anecdote of extreme violence is recorded in Numbers 25:6–13. When the Israelites pitch camp on their way to the Promised Land, the men start to commit harlotry with women of other nations. Phineas, grandson of the high priest Aaron, witnesses an Israelite man and a Midianite woman about to have intercourse. He follows the couple to the tent where they went in, and with his javelin, he pierces both of them through the tent, through the lower parts of their bodies, implying, according to Quesada (2002:34), their genitals. The zeal of Phineas equals the zeal of YHWH for his people; the Lord himself is so impressed that he blesses Phineas with a covenant of everlasting priesthood.

A tale of equal brutality is told in Genesis 34, the so-called rape of Dinah. Although the narrative is situated against the background of the patriarchal era, Conczorowski (2011:101–102) is of the opinion that it was inserted here at a much later stage, probably during the post-exilic period, in order to stress a particular point in case. The story goes as follows. Schechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, 'rapes' Dinah, daughter of Jacob. However, Schechem also loves Dinah and wishes to take her as wife. In this regard it is important to keep in mind that the Hivites are one of the nations forbidden by Deuteronomy 7:1 (see previous mention). Negotiations between the families of Hamor and Jacob follow, and 'marriage' is agreed upon. However, there is a precondition: all the men of the Hivites are to be circumcised – circumcision being the sign of the covenant between YHWH and his people. On the third day when all

the Hivite men are in pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Dinah's brothers, go to the city and with a sword in hand they slaughter all of them. The reason they propose is that Shechem treated their sister as a whore and they wished to revenge her humiliation. However, Conczorowski (see previous mention) is of the opinion that the moral that this story wants to convey is that the Israelites considered themselves superior to the 'nations', and not even the willingness to carry out a rite of the covenant – like circumcision – would allow a foreigner to enter the community of Israel.

There are more examples, but to close this side of the argument, I briefly refer to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and their policy of the segregation of nations. Nehemiah 13:1–2 directly takes up the prohibition of Deuteronomy 23:3–4 but simultaneously radicalises the law: on hearing these words, the children of Israel do not separate themselves from Ammonites and Moabites only as the law stipulates but from 'all the mixed multitude' in Israel (v. 3). And when Nehemiah discovers that some 'Yehudim' had married foreign women and that their children mostly spoke the language of Ashdod or a language other than the language of Judah, he 'contended with them, cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair ...' (v. 25) and made them swear not to commit any mixed marriages.

A particular interesting case is Ezra's use of the term 'holy seed' in Ezra 9:2. Several scholars agree that this term is unique to the book of Ezra and reflects the priestly interests of the post-exilic period (see Conczorowski & Frevel 2011:63; Frevel & Conczorowski 2011:43; Pakkala 2011:84; Southwood 2011a:54, 2011b:199, 2012:125; Winslow 2011:136). 'Holy' elicits (priestly) notions of separate and chosen; 'seed' protects Israel's identity at the most basic level of existence. It is almost as if this identity is determined at the very moment of conception, when it should be nurtured to reproduce in an uncontaminated environment. The sin that the children of Israel committed was that they had not separated themselves from the nations, thereby threatening the purity of the 'holy seed'. Thus, when Ezra employs the term 'holy seed', religious and ethnic categories merge to confirm that Israel is different from other nations in all respects: physical as well as metaphysical, biological as well as spiritual (Southwood 2011b:199). 'Holy seed' becomes a powerful metaphor for 'Israel' that draws almost impenetrable boundaries, leaving no possibility for anyone outside to enter the community. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah end by the dissolving of mixed marriages and the expulsion of the foreign wives and their children.

The violence in these texts is extremely upsetting, and even more disturbing is that the separation of nations and harsh measures taken against foreigners seem to be ordained by YHWH himself; like in the case of Phineas, YHWH even blesses such actions. Yet these texts are in the Bible, and in policies of radical segregation, of protecting 'that which is ours' – these texts may be used, for 'so it says in the Bible'.

A softer voice – Don't let the foreigner say ...

Unfortunately, in the HB, the hard voice that excludes the foreigner from the community rings the loudest. Fortunately these are not the only texts. One of the clearest oppositions to the law in Deuteronomy 23:1–4 is Isaiah 56:1–7 (Donner 1985:81–95; Scharper 2011:27–28). In analysing the texts, both Donner and Scharper come to the conclusion that the contradiction between Deuteronomy and Isaiah is not by chance but deliberate. The author of Isaiah alludes directly to the prohibitions of Deuteronomy but abrogates them one by one: those who were previously excluded, like men with an imperfect physique, and the foreigner, are now welcomed in the congregation by YHWH himself.

Other scholars agree with this (Middlemas 2011:110; Nihan 2011:76–77). In her analysis of the whole of Trito-Isaiah (Chapters 56–66), Middlemas (2011:107–108) discerns two circles of identity, namely an intranational identity and an international identity. The nucleus consists of the chapters in the centre, namely Chapters 60–64 and here Middlemas (2011:108–110) notices a negative attitude towards foreigners, as, for example, in the 'War Song of YHWH' against the nations (Is 63:1–6). This nucleus (Chap. 60–64) reflects an intranational identity that is characterised by a close relationship between Israel and its God who live within the geographical and national borders of the land.

Framing the nucleus are texts that qualify the identity of the community on a different basis and that are, according to Middlemas (2011:110), the work of an international redaction. These texts are Isaiah 56:1 through 59:21, and 65:1 through 66:24. The identity of the community is no longer determined by national or geographical interests but solely by religious commitment. In other words, the borders of the community had shifted from an exclusive intranational nature to a more inclusive international one. Blenkinsopp (2011:467) agrees that a development can be recognised: an identity that started as ethnic, local and intranational opened up its borders to construct a new identity in terms of culture and religion that welcomes international potentialities. Blenkinsopp sees this shift from an intranational to an international community as a pre-to post-exilic development, whilst Middlemas seems to ascribe both intra- and international redactions to the post-exilic situation. However, the important point that Middlemas makes is that the international redactor(s) emphasise(s) particular criteria for acceptance into the community, and that is behaviour (Middlemas 2011:117–118).

What is meant by this behavioural component?

It is true that the voice of the prophet invites all who were previously excluded from the congregation of YHWH to come closer and be included in the community, but at the same time the basis for inclusivity is being determined. The criterion for inclusivity is behaviour – behaviour that is pleasing to YHWH: keep the Sabbath (56:2, 4, 6; 58:13); do no evil (56:2); do what pleases YHWH (56:4); keep the covenant (56:4, 6); join YHWH (56:6); serve him, love him and praise

his name (56:6). In other words, the international inclusivity is not open to anyone but strictly dependent on obedience to YHWH and behaviour that is pleasing to him.

Nihan (2011:81–83; 92) agrees with Middlemas' argument about the behavioural component in the inclusive section of Trito-Isaiah: here is no indication of the so-called universalism often proclaimed by scholars who wish to interpret these texts as 'open for all and everyone'. This prophetic oracle applies to certain individuals who, although they are not related to Israel by ancestry, still have a chance to be included in the community, but on the condition that they accept the religion and the customs of the people. Nihan (2011:92) is of the opinion that Trito-Isaiah still envisions Israel as an ethnic community but one that is moving in the direction of integrating foreigners, once they accept the obligations of the covenant. This is not an automatic change from an exclusive ethnicity to an inclusive mixed community. For Trito-Isaiah, ethnicity never vanishes completely and continues to form the basis of the community. What the prophet wishes to convey is that ancestry alone is not sufficient criteria for membership in Israel. Nihan (2011:93) makes the classic distinction between 'assigned' versus 'acquired' membership and concludes that the willingness to accept and adhere to the cultural and religious components of Israel is for Trito-Isaiah of more value than descent only.

Apart from Isaiah 54:1–7, Scharper (2011:30–36) also mentions the books of Ruth and Judith, which make a strong plea for the inclusion of foreigners in the congregation of YHWH.

The Book of Judith is less known, as it belongs to the so-called apocryphal books of the Old Testament, yet it is important for this discussion. Although the plot is set against the Assyrian conquest, most historical allusions are incorrect, and most probably the narrative itself was written during the post-exilic period, perhaps even as late as the Hellenistic period and Greek hegemony of the ancient Near East.

The main character is Judith, a wealthy and most beautiful Israelite widow who delivers her people under the threat of Nebuchadnezzar, according to the narrative, the king of Assyria. With her charms, Judith seduces Nebuchadnezzar's main and most dangerous general, Holofernes, makes him drunk and eventually beheads him. A subplot is introduced by Achior, the Ammonite, who is initially at the Assyrian court and tries to warn Nebuchadnezzar about the power of the God of Israel but is not taken seriously. Thereafter he goes to Bethulia (the village where Judith comes from) and indicates that he wishes to show his solidarity with the people of Israel. He is warmly received. And after Judith beheads Holofernes and returns to Bethulia, Achior is the first one to recognise the head of the slaughtered general that she carries. He then realises everything the God of Israel has done, starts believing in him, is circumcised and becomes part of the Israelites, to this day (Judith 14:10).

The Book of Ruth tells about Ruth, the young Moabite widow who chooses to leave her home country and follow

her devastated mother-in-law back to Bethlehem–Judah. There she demonstrates her steadfast solidarity by gleaning barley and corn throughout the duration of the harvest season to provide food for both of them. She catches the eye of a wealthy landowner, infatuation seems to lead to love and eventually Ruth, the Moabite woman, marries Boaz, the Judahite man. Some generations later King David is born out of this union.

Although the plot is said to have happened 'in the time of the judges' (Ruth 1:1), many scholars nowadays agree that the Book of Ruth was written in the Second Temple period as a polemic discourse against the mixed marriage policy in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah (see e.g. Braulik 1996:115, 1999:10; Cohn Eskenasi & Frymer-Kensky 2011:xli, 4–5; Fischer 2001:62, 124; Goulder 1993:316; Grätz 2007:277; Köhlmoos 2010:xv, 4; Korpel 2001:233; LaCocque 2004:25; Lau 2011:45; Matthews 2004:212; Moen Saxegaard 2010:201; Zakovitch 1999:62–64). The main point is the seemingly 'seamless' acceptance of the foreign woman, Ruth, in the Judahite community. The book advocates a strong argument that the acceptance of foreigners in the community may have a positive outcome for the benefit of all: after all, a king – one may almost say a messianic king – is born to the indigenous nation who accepted the foreigner!

In these books (Judith and Ruth), foreigners who were excluded by law – the Moabites (Ruth in the Book of Ruth) and the Ammonites (Achior in the Book of Judith) – demonstrate their solidarity with Israel and are consequently integrated in the community. Yet the behavioural component remains.

Not all exegetes are too happy with this. In discussing the Book of Ruth, Ellen van Wolde (1997) states:

It is as if the loss of her identity as Moabite is prerequisite for becoming part of Israel's history. Only after the foreignness of the foreigners is negated, they are acceptable as parts of their history. The mirror intended to unveil the audience, unfortunately has led to the emptying of foreigners, who do not confront but confirm the Judahite identity. (p. 28)

Van Wolde regrets Ruth's negation of her Moabite heritage and her willingness to accept an Israelite identity without any protest. In the same vein, Gale Yee (2009:120) uses the Book of Ruth as example of modern-day situations where foreigners from minority groups – such as Asians – in Western civilisations try to become part of the community. Gee argues that Ruth is accepted only on account of her worth and the contributions that she makes to the community: in other words, foreigners are accepted conditionally and by merit. Acceptance has to be deserved and acquired, and Gee protests against this.

Walsh (2014:134) observes that Ruth has been 'domesticated' into Israel and that her 'ethnic Otherness has been effectively muted by her willingness to become another kind of Other, a womb for Israel' (Walsh 2014:135). Walsh concludes that the character of Ruth may have been created by narrators with a specific ideological agenda, namely the inclusion of

foreigners in the community of YHWH, because these foreigners are willing to make a positive contribution in order to ensure the survival of Israel – perhaps at their ‘own expense’ (Walsh 2014:135).

Southwood (2014:114) actually doubts whether Ruth was really fully accepted in the Judahite community. She notices that the epithet ‘the Moabite’, regarding Ruth, is lacking only in two instances: Ruth 3:9 and 4:13 – when Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz, and when he takes her as his wife. Throughout the rest of the book, Ruth remains ‘the Moabite’. This indicates to Southwood that Ruth never really lost her ethnic identity. According to her (Southwood 2014:114), Ruth is an individual outsider for whom the community was willing to expand their ethnic boundaries. Ruth’s Moabite identity did not disappear when she was accepted in the Judahite community. Southwood uses the term ‘ethnic translation’ to describe Ruth’s ethnic change. Hereby she means that an expansion of ethnic boundaries was necessary from both sides: from Ruth’s side as well as those of the Judahite community. They accepted her as being a Moabite; she accepted their customs and behaviours, without abandoning her original ethnic identity completely. In addition, in the Book of Jonah, which is often included among these so-called inclusive texts, it appears that although the Ninevehites (and all their animals!) repented and converted to the worship of YHWH, they remained Ninevehites and did not become Israelites.

The observations of Van Wolde (1997:28), Middlemas (2011:117–118), Nihan (2011:92–93), Yee (2009:120), Walsh (2014:134–135) and Southwood (2014:114) seem to indicate that the universal ‘openness’ towards the foreigner in the so-called inclusive texts of the HB should be questioned. Both Ruth and Achior had to perform in some way or another in order to deserve their welcome in the community. Achior even performed the covenantal rite of circumcision. Isaiah’s non-Israelites and males with scarred or lacking genitals had to accept the religious observances of the Israelites in order to earn their stay. Whether one likes it or not, these so-called inclusive texts do not convey unconditional acceptance of foreigners. Ethnicity in terms of race and ancestry seems to become less determinative, but the religious component gains considerable importance. What Middlemas (2011:117–118) and Nihan (2011:92–93) describe as the ‘behavioural component’ is in fact religion – in the Isaiah text as well as in the Books of Ruth and Judith. Foreigners are accepted in the community only when they worship the God of Israel and behave according to his will.

Thus, these so-called inclusive texts that welcome the ‘foreigner in our midst’ are not as open as they appear to be. All of them set a principle that is not negotiable: religion.

The context: The Second Temple period

The controversial opinions in the texts in the Hebrew Bible regarding the inclusion or exclusion of the foreigner mostly

date to the post-exilic period of Israel’s history, also referred to as the Second Temple period, which lasted roughly from 538 to 323 BCE. The Persians conquered the Babylonians, and the new rulers seemed to govern with a policy of considerable goodwill towards their vassals: they allowed religious freedom and the rebuilding of what was destroyed by the Babylonians, and they appointed governors from among the conquered people to rule on their behalf. The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah attest to these events.

Yet Anselm Hagedorn describes the Persians as ‘the absent presence’ – although they were inconspicuous, they were present at the same time, and this absent presence of the Persians ‘forced biblical authors to rethink and reformulate their theological and historical concepts in an attempt to maintain their ethnic identity’ (Hagedorn 2011:43). Scharper (2011:34) agrees that the core of the post-exilic debate is the issue of identity – to define the identity of the post-exilic community – and in this process questions about exclusivity and inclusivity were asked: that is, who is ‘Israel’, and who is not?

The former Kingdom of Judah was now a Persian province called Yehud, and within and outside its newly defined borders were a number of different groups of people who all considered themselves as part of ‘Israel’. Many scholars address the extremely complex demographic situation of post-exilic Israel and indicate several of these groups (see e.g. Edelman et al. 2012:68–75; Grabbe 2004:168–171; Japhet 2006:97–100; Nihan 2011:67–68; see also Knoppers 2006:272–273 and Lipschits 2006:31–32 with regard to the Samaritans). For the present discussion, the following groups are important.

The most powerful and influential group of people within the borders of Yehud actually came from outside. They were the returnees, the descendants of the Judeans who went into exile, and consisted of priests as well as laity, the so-called Golah (Japhet 2006:97; Kessler 2006:103; Lau 2011:162–163; Römer 2007:167–169; Rom-Shiloni 2011:133–134; Southwood 2011b:205–206). According to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Persian authorities graciously allowed them to return to Yehud and rebuild the city and the Temple. However, it appears that the ‘Golah’ also happened to consider themselves as exclusively Israel, the true Israel. Southwood (2011b:205) states:

The only legitimate bearers of the name ‘Israel’ are interpreted as being the returned *Gôlāh* remnant. Throughout Ezra, self-ascription of the titles ‘Israel’, ‘people of Israel’ and ‘descendants of Israel’ appear when describing the reconstituted *Gôlāh*. (Ezra 2:2, 70; 3:1; 6:16, 21; 7:7, 13; 8:25; 9:1; 10:5)

This becomes evident in the often harsh measures that Ezra and Nehemiah resort to in their attempts to purify ‘Israel’ from foreign influences. Regarding the above discussion (see sections ‘Ethnicity’, ‘Boundaries’, ‘History’), it seems that the Golah drew rigid boundaries around Israel in terms of ethnicity and a shared history: the exile.

Also within the borders of Yehud were the descendants of those who did not go into exile. Throughout the whole period of the exile, they remained in the land to make the best of what was left after the Babylonian plundering. In this case it is interesting to note that Ezra 9:1 refers to the 'people of the land', from whom the people of Israel, the priests and Levites did not separate themselves. Then follows a list of these forbidden peoples: Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, Amorites. However, Fischer (2001:60), Brenner (2011:85), Southwood (2011a:52) and Saysell (2012:203) remark that except for the Egyptians, none of these nations continued to exist during the Second Temple period. In other words, there were no real enemies or foreigners around who could be a danger to the Israelites. Consequently, the assumption can be made that 'the people of the land' in fact refers to the Judeans who stayed behind (see also Cataldo 2014:13). In terms of Stuhlman (1990:631–632 – see preceding discussion), these 'people of the land', who were not real foreigners, may have posed the biggest threat to the 'Golah' in their attempts to purify Israel from foreign influences (Ezra's priestly interests are mentioned in the section 'Foreigners are to be excluded').

Just outside the geographical borders of Yehud were the Samaritans (see Knoppers 2006:272–273 and Lipschits 2006:31–32), the remnant of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Books of Ezra (4) and Nehemiah (4:2) also express a negative attitude towards them; however, just like the 'people of the land', they were akin to the (returning) Israelites, speaking the same language, sharing the same physical traits and probably the same religious convictions.

Outside the land were those living in the diaspora, in former Babylonia, now Persia. The books of Daniel and Esther and also the Joseph narrative reflect something of this community. Apparently they did quite well for themselves and even managed to become part of the bureaucratic administration of the Persian government. Noticeable is the fact that the HB nowhere expresses a negative judgement against this group who chose to remain in the diaspora and not return to the homeland. Outside Yehud, this group was probably the most influential.

Cohen (1999:122) mentions another, extremely problematic group: the real foreigners, the non-Israelites. Apparently during the exile – perhaps also because of mixed marriages – foreigners felt themselves attracted to the people and the God of Israel. They were those who, like Ruth, chose voluntarily to turn their backs on their people and their gods and follow the customs and religion of Israel. However, this group posed a problem, because they were 'ethnically' not related to Israel. Yet a plight for the inclusion of this group into Israel, the 'community of YHWH', is made on the basis of religion, those who seek refuge under his wings (Ruth 2:12), who hold fast to his covenant, love his name, serve him and do what is pleasing to him (Is 56:6).

Thus, it appears that the contradicting voices in the HB regarding the 'foreigner in our midst' arose from the complex

situation during the Second Temple period and the efforts to redefine a true Israelite identity for a scattered population, consisting of different groups with different interests. Two distinct, seemingly opposing viewpoints emerged in the discussion: the voices that wished to exclude the foreigner and the more gentle voices, pleading for the inclusion of the foreigner. Exclusive boundaries were drawn especially on the basis of ethnicity and history; however, the request was made to extend the boundaries on behalf of religious conviction. And this is the meeting point between the two: religion. Religion is just as important for Ezra and Nehemiah as for Isaiah and Ruth.

Conclusion

Is anything that has been discussed relevant for today? Unfortunately the HB does not offer any solution to the 'foreigner in our midst', except to confirm that societies are complex, that foreigners create problems and that the local population has mixed feelings about them. With regards to the 'inclusive texts', the observation of the behavioural component, of acceptance on account of merit, is important. Most local populations warm up to the foreigner who learns to speak their language and makes an effort to adapt to their customs. The religious component is probably the most problematic issue in contemporary societies, for in the HB, whether from an exclusive or inclusive point of view, the worship of YHWH, the God of Israel, is non-negotiable. Worship of YHWH, the God of Israel, is the prime precondition for the foreigner in order to be accepted in the community. Today a number of European countries and Christian communities display a hostile attitude towards Muslims; similarly Christians are not really welcome in strict Islamic states.

In conclusion: this article wishes to caution against the use of the Bible for providing guidelines for complex contemporary social and political issues.

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