

The Stranger: A Biblical Journey

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Current events are focusing our gaze on the other, the stranger, the one who flees his country to seek refuge and live his life. On the one hand, the United States has decided on a policy in which walls are erected for the sake of protection. On the other hand, more and more immigrant families are crossing the border to find a host country here in Canada.

As we know, biblical texts deal with the stranger/foreigner. But oddly enough, they do so in contradictory ways. According to the text chosen, one is supposed to either love or kill the stranger! I therefore invite you on a biblical journey to see what could inspire us in our own context.

Being a Stranger

When they reflect on their origins, the Hebrews begin this way: "My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien... the Egyptians ill-treated us, they oppressed us and inflicted harsh slavery on us." (Dt 26:5-6) The people of the Bible see themselves as a people of immigrants who have suffered discrimination and violence because of their ethnic origin.

The *Book of Exodus* tells how God identified with this oppressed people. He could have chosen the Egyptians, who had such an important civilization. But no, he adopts a people of immigrants who had become slaves in order to free them.

Kill the Other, the Stranger

When the Hebrews settle in the Promised Land, the *Book of Joshua* tells how God asks them to exterminate the Canaanite peoples. So, whereas the Hebrews were formerly victims of ethnic violence, they now become the aggressors, ready to kill the strangers to have control over the land.

Israel's history will remain marked by military tensions with the other nations that surround it. We thus find several negative words against strangers. In particular, marriage with foreign women poses a problem (Ezra 9:1-15). For some biblical writers, these mixed marriages lead to the destruction of the people and must be prohibited.

The Stranger Shall Be Welcomed

The Old Testament also contains texts calling for an attitude of welcome towards strangers. For example, the *Book of Exodus* transmits this command twice: "Thou shalt not molest or oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (22:20 and 23:9)

The *Book of Leviticus* goes so far as to command that the stranger be loved: "You shall treat the stranger among you as though they were native-born and love them as yourself—for you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt." (19:34)

The prophets place the stranger beside the widow and the orphan as vulnerable people who must be helped. "Thus says Yahweh: Act uprightly and justly; rescue from the hands of the oppressor anyone who has been wronged, do not exploit or ill-treat the stranger, the orphan, the widow." (Jeremiah 22:3)

The Stranger in the New Testament

The New Testament continues this tradition of welcoming the stranger. Several speeches of Jesus indicate the importance of the love for the other, even if he is a stranger, even if he is an enemy. Yet one narrative shows that Jesus himself had to go through contact with a Syro-Phoenician woman to take an interest in strangers or aliens. (*Mk 7:24-30*)

At the beginning of the encounter, Jesus refuses to cure her little daughter since she is not part of his people. By a bit of deft rhetoric, she makes him recognize that even dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Jesus therefore accepts to heal the child of a foreign woman.

"I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me"

Like the Hebrews who base their reception of others on their own experience in Egypt, Jesus identifies with strangers because he himself has been a stranger. From the very first pages of the *Gospel according to Matthew*, the family of Jesus must leave everything behind to survive the violence of a tyrant who is executing the children of Bethlehem. They then live the life of refugees in Egypt. Paradoxically, Egypt, the place of xenophobia par excellence in the Bible, now becomes a land of welcome.

The ministry of Jesus in the *Gospel of Matthew* ends with the Last Judgment (*Mt 25:31-46*). In this proclamation, the criterion for salvation is clear: give drink, welcome the stranger, provide clothing, visit the sick and the prisoners. Jesus identifies with strangers. We all saw the image of little Alan Kurdi lying dead on the Mediterranean beach. Chapter 25 of Matthew enables us to understand that it is Jesus who died with him because of our inability to welcome the stranger. Conversely, it is also Christ who is welcomed when helping refugees, even if they are Muslims.

We Are the Stranger

Julia Kristeva, psychoanalyst and author, says: "Strangely, the stranger lives in us; he is the hidden face of our identity. [...] Why, then, meet the stranger? This answer is this: Because men are all strangers to one another."¹ Everyone has already experienced some form of discrimination. It is for that reason that we can understand the position of the stranger and even identify with him. No matter what the differences are, racial, religious, sexual, ideological, linguistic or other.

The story of Cain and Abel asks the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Gn 4*) Well, I think we have to answer yes and even engage in concrete acts in the name of our faith.

Other Biblical Texts to Read on this Topic

The departure of Abraham, the migrant *Genesis 12*

1. Conference given October 1, 2014, at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris in the "Law, Liberty and Faith" cycle of conferences.

Abraham receives three strangers
The inhospitality of Sodom
The Good Samaritan
Peter and Cornelius

Genesis 18
Genesis 19
Luke 10, 29-37
Acts of the Apostles 10