



Research Paper

## Strangers in a Strange Land: Outsiders in Judaism and Christianity

James W. Ellis, Ph.D., J.D.

<sup>1</sup> Case Western Reserve University, USA

Yeshiva University Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, USA

**ABSTRACT:** *The virtue of showing hospitality to strangers, outsiders, and visitors is a recurrent theme of the Bible. The Torah recounts the hardships endured by the Hebrew people during their years of Egyptian enslavement and records the Lord's later directives to the Israelites that, rather than oppressing outsiders, they should commiserate with and love strangers. The books of the New Testament expand the scope and import of the prior commandments by universalizing the definition of neighbor and by suggesting enduring consequences for not showing proper hospitality and benevolence. This essay traces the theological development of this biblical theme by examining well-known narratives from the life stories of Abraham and Moses and the parables of Jesus. The narratives and parables express remarkably consistent messages and suggest transcendent, even eternal, significance.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Christianity, Judaism, Neighbors, Strangers, Theology*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the observance of Passover, Jews partake of a ritual feast known as the Seder. During the Seder, the story of the Israelites' liberation from enslavement in ancient Egypt is retold, including a recitation taken from the book of Deuteronomy:

“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil, and oppression. So, the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders” (Deuteronomy 26:5-8 NIV).

The ancient people of Israel were a persecuted minority in Egypt and relied upon divine providence for deliverance. God's miracles of deliverance in Egypt have been understood metaphorically, as “miracles of human kindness that can happen anywhere and at any time,” when a person helps neighbors or helps “strangers” [1].

The written *Torah*, the divine instructions and guidance revealed to Moses and contained in the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, includes dozens of dictates concerning how the people of Israel were to treat strangers or sojourners living amongst them. Exodus 23:9 is typical: “Thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (KJV) (see also, Exodus 12:49, 22:21; Leviticus 19:33-34, 24:22; Numbers 9:14; Deuteronomy 10:19, 23:7). The Torah's dictates were further expounded in the *Talmud*, a record of rabbinic teachings from the first through the sixth centuries [see, for example, 2 and 3]. Both the Torah and Talmudic writings indicate that the collective experience of the ancient Hebrews' Egyptian captivity, persecution, and deliverance should collectively sensitize all Jews to the difficulties of outsiders living in their midst.

Similarity often breeds sympathy [see 4]. Even though many people have difficulty identifying with and empathizing with others from divergent backgrounds who have differing lifestyles, “there tends to be a correlation between our identification with a person in need and our inclination to help that person” [5]. In theory, a person whose ancestors experienced the hardships of being an enslaved stranger in Egypt would more naturally empathize with other types of strangers in their own community.

The Hebrew scriptures (or Christian *Old Testament*), as well as the books of the Christian *New Testament* use several related terms to refer to people who were not of the nation of Israel, and/or did not practice Judaism, but nevertheless lived among the Israelites. The above-quoted passage, Exodus 23:9, refers to a “stranger,” an English word that was translated from the original Hebrew גַּר (transliteration: *gār* or *gēr*, plural *gerim*), meaning roughly a foreign guest [6]. Genesis 23:4 uses the related term “sojourner” from the original Hebrew שׂוֹכֵן (transliteration: *tōšāb*), denoting a resident alien. Sojourner is interchangeable with “foreigner,” as seen in Exodus 12:45 and elsewhere. In the New Testament scriptures, Jesus often addresses the proper way to treat “neighbors,” a word translated from the original Greek πλησίον (transliteration: *plēsion*) and related to the Hebrew term רֵעָא (transliteration: *rēa*). Although some ancient Jews considered only fellow members of the nation of Israel to be their neighbors (see, for example, Leviticus 19:18), Jesus taught that any person, irrespective of their nationality or religion, should be considered a neighbor; this is the message contained in his Parable of the Good Samaritan, which will be discussed later (Luke 10:29, 36). A *parable*, from the Greek παραβολή, is a simple metaphorical story taken from everyday life that conveys a greater transcendent message.

Prior to the biblical Exodus (from the Latin Exodos, meaning “road out”), the Israelites were themselves considered resident aliens (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt. Only after the people of Israel left their Egyptian bondage did they attract their own *gerim* (see Exodus 12:38). After the Exodus, *gerim* living amongst the ancient Israelites were to be treated as “protected strangers,” because they relied on the Israelites’ patronage and protection [see 7: 397-398]. In a basic sense, *gerim* were simply outsiders “living apart from their tribes,” who had left their own regions or ethnic groups to live among the Israelites for either a short or extended period. “Being strangers, they would be natural targets for discrimination and abuse because they lacked the protection of their own clans or communities” [8]. Such strangers though might in time become converts to Judaism, and, if so, they also merited special protection from potential harassment based upon their non-Jewish origins. The Torah warns against such harassment, in part because the Israelites faced similar religious persecution during their centuries of Egyptian enslavement, and (possibly) because the Lord had the foresight to know they would face religious persecution again.

Indeed, for the past three thousand years “Jews have [continuously] been strangers and minorities in foreign lands [and have often] suffered discrimination and persecution solely for being religious strangers” [8]. Rabbi David Rosenn, who teaches at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, has described Jews as “paradigmatic strangers” [9]. Throughout their troubled history, Jewish residents have been expelled from multitudes of nations and regions. Circa 1400-1200 B.C., the Egyptian pharaoh ordered the Israelites to leave his kingdom (the Exodus). In the eighth century B.C., Neo-Assyrian kings Shalmaneser V and Sargon II conquered the Kingdom of Israel and forced thousands of Israelites into exile in Assyria. In the sixth century B.C., Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II exiled Jews of the Kingdom of Judah to his capital of Babylon. Roman emperors periodically expelled Jews from Rome and its provinces. Between A.D. 1100 and 1600 Jews were excluded from most European realms at one time or another. Of course, in more recent times, Jews were forced to leave the Russian Empire during periodic pogroms and were forced to become refugees or face death during Germany’s Nazi era. Jews collectively and historically understand what it means to be labelled as outsiders or strangers, and to be marginalized.

## II. TALMUDIC AND OTHER COMMENTARY ON STRANGERS CONVERTING TO JUDAISM

After the ancient people of Israel left Egypt, they travelled through the wilderness and deserts between Egypt and Canaan for forty years and along the way picked up numerous *gerim*. When the Israelites finally claimed the land of Canaan, many more *gerim* joined Jewish communities, and overtime droughts, famines, and wars swelled the ranks of refugees and resident aliens living in Israel. Newly arrived *gerim* tended to be impoverished. Thus, the Hebrew scriptures stipulated avenues of benevolence. “Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. [And] 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 for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:10; 23:22 NIV). In effect, impoverished *gerim* were to be treated similarly to poor native-born Israelites.

“If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a *foreigner and stranger* [emphasis added], so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them

food at a profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God” (Leviticus 25:35-38).

The written Torah provided stipulations and requirements in cases where foreign residents wished to convert to Judaism. For example, the Lord told Moses and his brother Aaron (the High Priest), “A foreigner residing 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” (Exodus 12:48). The Torah made gerim converts subject to laws concerning food consumption, sexual practices, and purification (Leviticus 17:10-16; 18:26; 19:10). In addition, converts were expected to follow traditional religious practices, such as observing the Sabbath and religious festivals, fasting on the Day of Atonement, and offering burnt sacrifices at the tabernacle and temple. However, in one crucial area foreign-born residents and native-born Israelites were not placed on an even footing.

It may seem curious that in the Torah enslavement is not treated as synonymous with oppression [see 10: 180-200]. The book of Leviticus has a section sometimes called the “Holiness Code” (Leviticus 17:1-26:46), which includes regulations for holy living and holy practices. Toward the conclusion of the Holiness Code, the Lord declared, “Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves.” However, when the Israelites took possession of *the promised land* of Canaan, they were allowed to acquire “male and female slaves” from surrounding nations. Furthermore, the Lord declared the Israelites could “buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property” (Leviticus 25:42, 44-45) [see 7: 397-398]. If an enslaved foreigner or enslaved alien living among the Israelites escaped though, they were allowed to take refuge among other Israelites, who were forbidden to return them to their former owners. “Let them live among you wherever they like and in whatever town they choose. Do not oppress them” (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). Israelites were allowed to enslave people of foreign birth or from among resident aliens but were forbidden to oppress the people they enslaved.

The authors of the Talmud understood the term translated as “stranger” in the Hebrew scriptures to mean “newcomer,” specifically “someone who had chosen to join the community” as a *proselyte* or convert to Judaism [11]. The Talmudic rabbis taught that if a person either 1) oppressed or 2) wounded a proselyte they transgressed three “negative commandments,” namely Exodus 23:9 (“do not oppress”); Leviticus 19:33 (“do not mistreat”); and Leviticus 25:17 (“do not take advantage”). The Talmudic author known as Nathan the Babylonian is credited with a comment on Exodus 23:9, which reads, “Thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (KJV). Rabbi Nathan commented, “A defect that is in you, do not mention it in another” [2]. The medieval Sephardi scholar of the Torah, Maimonides (1138-1204), or Rambam, further commented on the importance of showing proper respect for a newcomer who converts to Judaism: “Loving a convert who has come to nestle under the wings of the [divine presence fulfils] two positive commandments: one for he is [also] included among the ‘neighbors’ [whom we are commanded to love] and one because he is a convert, and the Torah (Deuteronomy 10:19) states: ‘and you shall love the converts.’ [Thus, God] has commanded us concerning the love of a convert just as He has commanded us concerning loving Himself as [Deuteronomy 11:1] states: ‘and you shall love God, your Lord.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, loves converts as [Deuteronomy 10:18] states: ‘and He loves converts’ [12].

The *Parashah* (Hebrew for “portion”) is a portion of the Torah read or chanted in synagogues on the Sabbath. *Mishpatim* is a Hebrew word translated as “rules,” “ordinances,” or “laws.” The *Parashat Mishpatim* contains approximately 12% of the mitzvot (“commandments”) found in the Torah, ranging from civil, criminal, ritual, and family laws [13]. The Mishpatim includes the Torah’s first injunction to protect the stranger, Exodus 22:21 (KJV): “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.” However, the concept of the stranger appears earlier in the Torah. In the book of Genesis, God blesses the Patriarch Abraham. God tells Abraham “I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and [...] give thee this land [Canaan] to inherit it” (Genesis 12:2; 15:7), but God also told Abraham that before his descendants inherited Canaan, “thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs [Egypt], and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years” (Genesis 15:13). A recent author commented that the period of Egyptian bondage would be only the beginning of “the experience of living as a stranger [that] infuses Jewish tradition for thousands of years to come. [...] Jews didn’t just endure four hundred years living as the stranger in Egypt, but also subsequent centuries living as strangers under foreign, often hard and cruel, powers” [14]. During “subsequent centuries,” world-wide history is replete with examples of “afflicted” strangers, affliction of *The Other*.

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), who was imprisoned in Nazi Germany and whose father and brother were killed by the *Schutzstaffel* (“SS”) was particularly concerned with the ethics of The Other. Levinas considered concern for The Other “the most authentic form of obeying God’s will. God as a transcendent Being is unapproachable, except through the encounter with The Other [another human being];

which imposes an obligation.” In Levinas’s estimation, this obligation “is the essence of a true religious life – the concern for other’s well-being” [15; see also 16].

Many contemporary Jewish authors have stressed the transcendent significance of the Torah’s exhortations that Jews show respect toward strangers. These authors understand the “ye” in the Torah’s often mentioned phrase “ye [emphasis added] were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21 KJV) as having a continuing relevance to all later generations. Moses delivered his final address to the people of Israel in the book of Deuteronomy as they were poised to enter Canaan. Moses spoke to his assembled audience about “all that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes [...] Unto thee [his miraculous powers were] shewed” [emphasis added] (Deuteronomy 4:34-35 KJV). However, most of Moses’ audience had not lived during the Exodus. Moses spoke to a generation that had been born during the Israelites’ wanderings through the desert, to then-deceased parents. Moses was aware of what he was saying though, and his “generational slide [should] be interpreted less as a faithful description of historical fact and more as a normative charge to the nation. Through the frisson of misidentification, the desert generation [and all later generations of Jews were] implored to reach past the boundaries of self and become the witnesses whom [Moses] invokes, [to take] on the existential reality of our enslaved ancestors” [17]. The duty to strangers continues.

Considering the attention given to the treatment of strangers in the Torah, it is surely no coincidence that there are key lessons regarding this theme in the life stories of the pivotal figures of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian Bible. In particular, the biographical accounts of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus teach the importance of showing proper respect and hospitality to outsiders, foreigners, and guests. The rest of this essay will consist of examinations of well-known biblical stories that relate directly to the care that should be afforded to strangers.

### **III. ABRAHAM: “GET THEE OUT OF THY COUNTRY.”**

A major section of the book of Genesis is devoted to the life of Abraham (Genesis 11-25), the progenitor of the Jewish nation and, in his later years, a perennial stranger. When Abraham was already 75 years old, he left his home city of Ur in Mesopotamia and travelled toward the land of Canaan, stopping along the way in the city of Haran in northern Mesopotamia (Genesis 12). The Lord had called upon Abraham to leave Ur, saying “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee [...] and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3; see Acts 7:2). Despite the Lord’s great vow, Abraham’s willingness to travel to an unknown country manifested tremendous faith. The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews (the apostle Paul?) wrote, “By faith Abraham, when he was called [...] obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country” (Hebrews 11:8-9).

When Abraham and his wife Sarah finally arrived in Canaan, they lived the itinerant lives of nomads, travelling from place to place, including the regions of Shechem and Bethel, and the Negrev wasteland, before they eventually moved their tent once again, “and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the Lord” (Genesis 12:6-9; 13:18). The scriptures say that the Lord then came to Abraham in a dream to reveal that Abraham’s offspring would eventually inherit the land of Canaan, but first they would endure centuries of hardship in another country.

“And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, a horror of great darkness fell upon him. And [the Lord] said unto Abram, ‘Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance’” (Genesis 15:12-14).

The term translated “strangers” in this passage comes from the previously mentioned Hebrew term גֵר (transliteration: *gār*), which elsewhere is used to denote sojourners or aliens.

Abraham and Sarah were already quite elderly when the Lord promised them their descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 12:4; 15:5; 17:1,17). However, they had never conceived children, in part because they thought Sarah was barren (Genesis 11:30). And after Sarah reached the age of 90, even Abraham may have wondered if they would ever produce any offspring, as the Lord had promised.

One can only wonder what Abraham was thinking one fateful day as he sat at his tent door in Mamre “in the heat of the day” and lifted his eyes to see three strange men standing nearby (Genesis 18:1). As the author of the book of Hebrews suggests, Abraham may have reasoned he should put aside his own concerns temporarily and not “forget to show hospitality to [these] strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2 NIV). The phrase translated “show hospitality to strangers” comes from the Greek term φιλοξενία (transliteration *philoxenia*), which literally denotes “[to be a] friend to a stranger.” The phrase also appears in Romans 12:13, where the apostle Paul exhorts readers to “share

with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." These passages indicate that when a person assists sojourners or strangers, they may in reality be assisting a heavenly spirit, such as an angel (Greek ἄγγελος transliteration *aggelos*), or a human envoy sent on a divine mission (see Matthew 11:10; Luke 22:43).

Abraham went to great lengths to show kindness to the three strange men standing at his tent. To one of "the men," Abraham said,

"My Lord, if now I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on' [...] And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth.' And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it. And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat" (Genesis 18:3-8 KJV) (see fig. 1).

It is significant that Abraham addressed one of the men with the honorific and deferential title "My Lord" (Hebrew יְיָ transliteration *'ādōn*), which is often used in the Bible in reference to the Lord God, Lord of the whole earth. Contextual scriptures clearly imply the three strangers were the Lord God and two accompanying angels (see Genesis 18:1, 13, 17, 20, 22, 26, 33; and 19:1). The importance Abraham placed on showing kindness to his (divine) guests is made evident in several ways: 1) he immediately tended to the newcomers' needs; 2) he addressed them with respectful terms while referring to himself as "thy servant;" 3) he intimated it would be an honor to have their feet washed and to serve them a lavish meal. And as the men ate their meal, Abraham did not join them, but stood nearby as would a servant. Torah scholar Everett Fox has written that "the idea of hospitality" is the central theme of this story, emphasized by the generous manner in which Abraham speaks to the strangers and by Abraham's sudden flurry of activity [fetching water and bread, hastening Sarah to make cakes, and running to his heard to fetch a tender calf]" [18; see also 19]. Although one Talmudic writer went as far as to opine, for Abraham "hospitality toward guests [appeared] greater than receiving the Divine Presence" (Tractate Shabbat 127a-b), the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas thought in fact there is little distinction: "the respect for the stranger and the sanctification of the name of the Eternal are strangely equivalent" [20: 27].

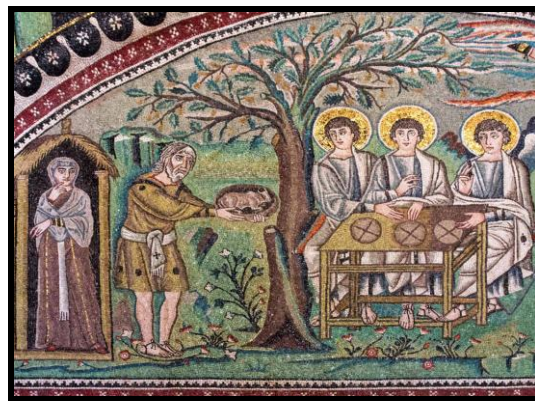


Figure 1. Abraham and Isaac Lunette, c. 527-548,

Mosaic, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, Public Domain.

This Byzantine mosaic shows Abraham welcoming the three heavenly visitors. Going from left to right, Sarah stands in the doorway laughing to herself, Abraham offers his guests a tender calf, and the three visitors dine on fresh baked bread. The loaves are incised with crosses, suggesting the *Eucharist*.

As the divine visitors ate their sumptuous repast, they asked Abraham where Sarah was, and Abraham replied she was in the tent. Then the Lord told Abraham, "I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son." Sarah, concealing herself from her husband and the strangers at the tent door, heard what the Lord had said, and she laughed to herself (silently), doubting that in their old age she and Abraham could still have a child. The Lord (who could not have heard an audible laugh) then asked Abraham: Why did Sarah laugh and doubt that she could have a child? "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14). Sarah was afraid and denied she had laughed, to which the Lord replied, "Nay; but thou didst

laugh” (Genesis 18:10, 15). Despite this awkward encounter, Sarah’s faith strengthened and endured, and a New Testament author later wrote, “by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise” (Hebrews 11:11).

Abraham and Sarah’s reaction to the three heavenly visitors appear to be a study in contrasts. Abraham showed profound respect, while Sarah stood at a distance, seeming to scoff at their prophetic announcement of a coming miraculous birth. Was Sarah being discourteous? Would she dare disrespect her heavenly guests? It must be remembered that the narrative begins with the statement “the Lord appeared unto *him* [Abraham] as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. And *he* [Abraham] lift[ed] up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him.” Sarah may have physically confined herself to the interior of the tent and was unaware of the visitors’ divine characteristics or was unaware of the special indicators that showed one of the visitors was the Lord. This might explain Sarah’s incredulity. Further, whether Sarah understood the character of the newcomers, or not, the text explicitly says she “laughed within herself,” and, it may be assumed, she also said within herself she might be too old to give birth. If the Lord had not had the ability to perceive her thoughts, no offense to hospitality would have occurred [see 22 and 23]. The Lord was surely less offended by Sarah’s silent offense to hospitality and more concerned that she still harbored doubts about his promises, his power, and the impending birth of her child.

#### IV. MOSES: “STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND”

The Lord’s revelation to Abraham, “thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years” (Genesis 15:13), began to be fulfilled during the lifetime of Abraham’s grandson Jacob (also known as Israel) and his twelve sons, whose progeny grew into the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob’s favorite son was Joseph, and this caused intense sibling rivalry. Eventually, Joseph’s brothers sold Joseph to a group of Ishmaelite merchants from Dothan who, in turn, took Joseph to Egypt and sold him into enslavement (Genesis: 37:28, 36). Dothan was a village near the ancient city of Samaria (Hebrew: שָׁמְרוֹן) that sat along a caravan-route stretching from Syria to Egypt. Joseph eventually rose above his unfortunate circumstances to a position of prominence as an Egyptian administrator and trusted assistant to the pharaoh (Genesis 41:39-45), and in appreciation of Joseph’s service, the pharaoh allowed Joseph’s family to immigrate to Egypt and shepherd their flocks in Goshen, “the best part of the land” (Genesis 47:5-6). Later Egyptian rulers did not treat the Hebrew strangers with similar kindness though.

“And Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation. And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them. Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph. And he said unto his people, ‘Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we: Come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land.’ Therefore, they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens” (Exodus 1:6-11).

Moses, the great Israelite prophet and lawgiver, was born into this social situation, approximately four hundred years after Joseph and his family had arrived in Egypt (Exodus 12:40-41). The second chapter of the book of Exodus tells of Moses’ early life and teaches dark lessons concerning the oppressive treatment of outsiders and strangers. Just before Moses was born, the Egyptian pharaoh issued a decree that all the new-born male babies of the enslaved Hebrews should be put to death, but Moses’ parents took steps they hoped would ensure their son avoided this terrible fate. Moses’ mother placed her baby in a tar-coated papyrus basket and set it adrift on the Nile River. Seemingly miraculously, the basket and baby were found by pharaoh’s daughter, and even though she recognized the child was a Hebrew, she decided to adopt the orphan and gave him the name Moses (מֹשֶׁה or *Môsheh*, meaning “drawn out” [of water] (Exodus 2:1-10). When he was grown, Moses went out among the Hebrews and “looked on their burdens” and saw a slave master whipping “one of his brethren” and he killed the slave master (Exodus 2:11). Because of this, Moses was forced to flee Egypt (his homeland) to live among strangers. He eventually settled for a time in the land of Midian (modern north-western Saudi Arabia).

Though Moses was raised in a pampered, royal household, “when he had grown up, [he] refused to be known as the son of pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Hebrews 11:24-25). In the palaces of pharaoh, Moses had been an archetypical *insider*; but after he fled to Midian, he became a permanent *outsider*.

When Moses arrived in Midian, he stopped beside a well. Seven daughters arrived to draw water from the well for the flock of their father, a local shepherd and priest named Reuel (Hebrew רְעוּאֵל, which translates as “friend of God”) [regarding Reuel’s name see 24]. Suddenly a group of shepherds also arrived and drove away the sisters, “but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock” (Exodus 2:17). In a show of gratitude

and hospitality, Reuel welcomed Moses into his tent and put him to work shepherding his flock, and eventually offered Moses the hand of his daughter Zipporah in marriage (fig. 2). According to English biblical commentator, Matthew Henry (1662-1714), this episode demonstrated that through *divine providence* “God will recompense kindnesses” and those who show kindness to strangers “shall in no wise lose their reward.” The Lord worked through Reuel’s hospitality and willingness to shelter Moses “for a time,” so that Moses was provided “a hiding place” in the day of his distress so he could prepare for the greater services “he was further designed for” [25]. As he had previously been adopted as an outsider into the house of pharaoh (and had been treated well), Moses was graciously adopted as an outsider into Midianite society. Nevertheless, he still lamented that he had become “a stranger in a strange land” (Exodus 2:22). Indeed, Moses and Zipporah named their first child Gershom (Hebrew גֶרְשֹׁם, meaning “foreigner”). When Gershom later joined the people of Israel, he was counted among the priestly tribe of Levi, which was responsible for worship in the tabernacle, and later at the temple in Jerusalem.

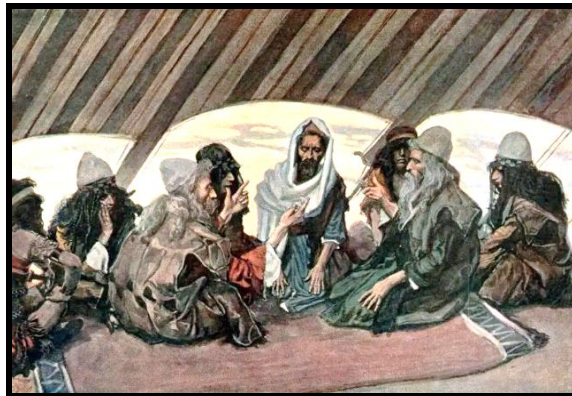


Figure 2. James Tissot, Moses in the Tent of Jethro [Reuel], 1900, Watercolor and Gouache, Public Domain.

There was a major difference between the Egyptians who had first adopted Moses and the Midianites who later accepted Moses into their society. The Egyptians had occupied the same territory for millennia. The Midianites, on the other hand, were a relatively loose association of nomadic tribes; they wandered from place to place and engaged in pastoral pursuits and caravan trading, and, thus, were themselves perennial outsiders and strangers [26]. Moses was not just accepted by the Midianites; he formed a familial bond with the Midianites through marriage and his offspring. This may be reflected in the contents of the Torah. In the “Book of the Covenant,” which was delivered to Moses at Mount Sinai, the Lord tells the Israelites, “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21). However, when Moses personally addressed the Israelites at the end of his life, he said, “Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19). It is possible to avoid oppressing strangers by avoiding strangers altogether; but loving a stranger requires affirmative interaction, such as Reuel and the Midianites’ positive dealings with Moses.

The Book of the Covenant (Exodus 21:2-23:33) explains in greater detail practical ways to apply the principles of the “Ten Commandments” (Exodus 20:1-17). While criminal, civil, and ethical (or humanitarian) laws are freely entwined in the Book of the Covenant, the humanitarian laws focus primarily on four groups that constitute “the classic biblical categories of disadvantaged people: those without power and without legal protectors, who must depend on the good will of society to help them,” namely widows, orphans, the poor, and strangers [8] (see Psalm 146:9; Jeremiah 22:3). As has been stated, the commandments concerning strangers were consistent, they were not to be “oppress[ed].” (Exodus 22:21). The Torah also attributes to the Lord the term translated “oppress” (Hebrew לָחַץ transliteration *lāḥaṣ*), when he describes the people of Israel’s deteriorated condition in Egypt: “behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them” (Exodus 3:9). Divine intervention would bring the people of Israel out of Egyptian oppression and divine directives forbade the oppression of foreigners living among the Israelites. It seems clear the Lord envisioned the Israelites’ “love of the stranger” being premised on empathy, whether that empathy was drawn from an understanding “through association with common faults or through a reference to a shared common sense of history” [27].

## V. NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS ON “NEIGHBORS,” “GUESTS,” AND “STRANGERS”

Both the Old and New Testaments consider not only the plight of social and ethnic strangers; they also recognize that all people are mere visitors on earth [see 28; 29]. In the book of 1 Chronicles, King David

proclaimed, “We are strangers before [the Lord], and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow” (1 Chronicles 29:15). David’s son, King Solomon, who was renowned for his wisdom, described death as a great equalizer awaiting all: When each of us die, “then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit [of each of us] shall return unto God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7). In this sense, there was no entirely compelling reason for the people of Israel to treat foreigners residing amongst them differently than the native-born (see Leviticus 19:34). An otherworldly and inclusive conception of the stranger, that each person’s spirit is merely passing through a physical existence, became a central theme in the Christian theology of the New Testament. Jesus encouraged his disciples to move beyond seeing others as either ethnic or religious insiders or outsiders. Rather, Jesus urged his disciples to see each person as a “neighbor” and as a potential fellow citizen in the “kingdom of God.”

In the Holiness Code, the Lord told Moses to say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18 KJV). Rabbi Nahmanides (c. 1194-1270) was a medieval Spanish teacher who wrote influential commentaries on the Torah and the Talmud. Regarding Leviticus 19:18, Rabbi Nahmanides wrote, “One should place no limitations upon the love for the neighbor, but instead a person should love to do an abundance of good for his fellow being as he does for himself” [see 30]. A millennium and a half after the writing of Leviticus, Jesus was asked “Which is the great commandment in the law [of Moses]?” Jesus responded, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40 KJV). In these scriptures, the word translated into English as “neighbor” is the Greek word *plesion* (πλησίον). In biblical texts, *plesion* frequently refers to members of the Hebrew race, however, Jesus also used the term to describe any person, of any nation, among whom we live or whom we happen to meet (see, for example, Matthew 5:43; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:36).

When a religious scholar asked Jesus “And who is my neighbor?”, Jesus answered by telling a story known as The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37).

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ [Then Jesus asked] ‘Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’ The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (Luke 10:30-37) (see fig. 3).

To understand the profound implications of The Parable of the Good Samaritan, it is crucial to realize that Jesus told the story to a Jewish man described as an “expert in the law” (Luke 10:25 NIV). He was a scholar well-versed in the Torah and its commandments to “love your neighbor” (Leviticus 19:18). The scholar may have accepted that such commandments were applicable to his fellow (*pure-bred*) Jews, but perhaps he thought they were not applicable to (*half-breed*) Samaritans [see 31]. Following Solomon’s reign over the people of Israel (c. 970-930), the Israelites split into two separate kingdoms: the Kingdom of Israel in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. Jerusalem and the temple were in the southern Kingdom of Judah. In 721 B.C., the Assyrians conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel, inhabited the land, and intermarried with Jewish inhabitants, producing a half-Jewish, half-Gentile people who became known as the Samaritans [32]. In 586 B.C., the southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and exiled many of the inhabitants to Babylon. In the 5th century B.C., the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. This led to tensions with the Samaritans who had occupied the land (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah). Though both the Samaritans and Jews claimed Abraham as their father and Moses as their liberator, and worshiped the God of the Torah, they were estranged by political and religious differences. Samaritans worshipped at the northern Mount Gerizim, rather than Jerusalem’s Mount Zion. Samaritans followed the Torah, but not the other Hebrew scriptures: the *Nevi'im* (“Prophets”) or *Ketuvim* (“Writings”) [see 34]. As Samaria became increasingly *Hellenized* (adopted Greek culture), the Jews of Judea persistently resisted outside influences. At the time Jesus told The Parable of the Good Samaritan to a Jewish religious scholar, it would have been a safe assumption that the scholar did not, in his heart, consider Samaritans to be his neighbors.



Although many Jews despised Samaritans, considering them impure and idolatrous, during Jesus' ministry he shared his gospel message of salvation with the Samaritans (John 4:4-42; 8:48; see also Acts 8:25), and he taught that love of one's neighbor should not be limited by national or ethnic boundaries. The hero of Jesus' parable is the Samaritan (a hated foreigner) who looked beyond personal differences to offer kindness and assistance to another person in their time of need. The villains of the story, on the other hand, were the precise types of people whom one might expect to render aid in any circumstance: a priest and a Levite. Priests performed the duties of atonement, worship, and prayer at the temple. Levites played peripheral roles in the temple (such as playing music, opening gates, and standing guard). Whereas the Jewish priest and Levite were recognized as God's servants, they refused to help the injured stranger in any way, but the despised Samaritan rendered aid without prejudice. The Samaritan was compassionate regardless of the injured man's ethnicity or religious beliefs. Jesus taught that the rewards of heaven await those who serve others without thought of recompense, specifically those who help the hungry, thirsty, and needy, who invite in "a stranger" without expectation of personal benefit (Matthew 25:31-46).

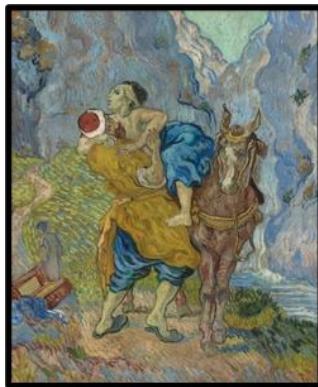


Figure 3. Vincent van Gogh, *The Good Samaritan* (after Delacroix), May 1890, Oil on canvas, Kröller-Müller Museum.

Dutch painter, Vincent van Gogh turned to art only after failing in his efforts to be a minister and missionary. He was tormented by depression and anxiety disorders throughout his brief life. In May 1889, van Gogh was mentally exhausted and unstable and committed himself to a psychiatric asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France. Inside his tiny room, van Gogh copied pictures of paintings by other artists, including *The Good Samaritan* by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863). As he received care from (foreign) French doctors, van Gogh may have identified with the injured man who received care from the Good Samaritan.

## VI. AN HONORED GUEST: JESUS ANOINTED BY A SINFUL WOMAN

The Gospel of Luke includes an evocative account of an incident in Jesus' life that encourages comparison with the account of the three mysterious men who visited Abraham and Sarah, found in the book of Genesis (Luke 7:36-50; Genesis 18:3-8). Each story concerns the proper way to honor a divine visitor or guest, and suggests, by extension, the importance of showing proper respect and love for all visitors and guests (see Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). In the Gospel of Luke account, a Pharisee had invited Jesus into his home for a meal. Jesus arrived at the Pharisee's home and was allowed to enter. Then, apparently without any intervening courtesies, Jesus reclined beside a table to eat. Next, another visitor arrived, described as "a woman of the town who had lived a sinful life" (Luke 7:37 NIV).

"[She] brought an alabaster box of ointment and stood at [Jesus'] feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, 'This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.' And Jesus answering said unto him, 'Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee.' And he saith, 'Master, say on.' 'There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?' Simon answered and said, 'I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most.' And he said unto him, 'Thou hast rightly judged.' And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, 'Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I

came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.’ And he said unto her, ‘Thy sins are forgiven.’ [...] Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace” (Luke 7:36-50 KJV).

As in The Parable of the Good Samaritan, the reader is given a stark contrast to consider. Jesus had been invited into the home of a Pharisee. Pharisees were members of a Jewish sect (or religious party) that flourished during the *intertestamental* or Second Temple period (roughly 515 B.C.–A.D. 70). Pharisees were known for advocating strict observance of the rites and ceremonies of the Torah. From studying the Hebrew scriptures, the Pharisee would have known that the minimal gesture of hospitality to be shown invited guests was providing water to wash one’s feet (see Genesis 18:4; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21; 1 Samuel 25:41). Yet, the Pharisee, a recognized scriptural scholar from whom one would expect the utmost courtesy, did not extend even this small consideration. Unlike Abraham, the Pharisee neglected to show any sincere hospitality and in so doing neglected a divine being (see Hebrews 13:2).

To the Pharisee, the Sinful Woman may have seemed like an unlikely role model (like the Good Samaritan), yet she went beyond minimal or superficial gestures and demonstrated true love. She had apparently heard Jesus preach about the forgiveness of sins and came into the house of the Pharisee to show her gratitude. The sincerity of her faith and deep appreciation were clear from her demeanour (she wept as she washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and hair). She poured expensive perfumed ointment onto his feet and kissed his feet. *Anointing* (pouring oil on a person) was a ceremonial means of conferring a divine or holy office (see Leviticus 8:12; 1 Samuel 16:13; Psalm 20:6; Isaiah 61:1; Acts 10:38; 1 John 2:20). Usually, the oil was poured upon the person’s head, but, in this case, the Sinful Woman was perhaps too modest to make such a grand gesture. Still, everything she did evidenced her great belief and repentance, and as a result Jesus forgave her sins. The Pharisee had shown neither Jesus nor the Sinful Woman courtesy, but Jesus had rendered the Sinful Woman (both a social and religious outsider) empathy and mercy.

## **VII. THE PARABLE OF THE SHEEP AND GOATS: “I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU INVITED ME IN.”**

Jesus and his disciples often referred to strangers living in a strange land, but they spoke in spiritual (rather than material) terms (see John 15:19; 17:14-16; Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 13:1-2; 1 John 4:4-5). For Christians, the earthly world and the earthly body are mere temporary abodes for the spirit, which will live on eternally. Jesus taught, “My kingdom is not of this world” and the apostle Paul wrote that the true “citizenship” of Christians is in heaven (John 18:36; Philippians 3:20). Paul described Christians as “no longer foreigners and strangers [in earthly societies], but fellow citizens with God’s people” (Ephesians 2:19). However, Jesus commanded that while his followers live on earth, they must demonstrate compassion for strangers and love their neighbors (Matthew 22:39). Just a day or two before he was betrayed and condemned to be crucified (see Matthew 26:2), Jesus delivered one of his most important lessons, The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The parable, which includes both metaphorical and literal content, foretells of a great coming judgment day and reveals that when Christians show courtesy and kindness to strangers, they essentially are revealing their commitment to Jesus’ central directives.

Jesus said a day would come when, “the Son of Man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory” (Matthew 25:31). The designation “Son of Man” appears more than eighty times in the Gospel accounts, usually in reference to Jesus’ messianic role as a heavenly figure whom God entrusts with glorification and sovereign authority [33]. When the Son of Man arrives, “before him shall be gathered all nations [both Jews and Gentiles]: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25:32). The sheep congregated on the right side of the Son of Man will receive his commendation: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: *I was a stranger, and ye took me in* [emphasis added]: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me” (Matthew 25:34-36). When the sheep ask the Son of Man when they treated him so kindly, he will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). The goats congregated on the left side of the Son of Man will then receive his condemnation, because they offered no food when he was hungry; offered nothing to drink when he was thirsty; offered no clothes when he had none and did not take him in when he was a stranger. When the goats ask the Son of Man when they treated him so unkindly, he will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (Matthew 25:45). Then, the goats will be led away to eternal punishment, and the lambs to eternal life. One may easily imagine the Good Samaritan being among the lambs led away to eternal life. One can also imagine the priest and Levite mentioned in the same parable being among the goats led away to receive punishment.

### **CONCLUSION: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN**

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus reconceived definitions of neighbor and stranger, and transformed the conception of citizenship. His disciples were to be neither “Jew nor Gentile,” but instead citizens of the “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 4:17; Galatians 3:28; see also Ephesians 2:19). The kingdom of heaven would not be temporal or external, nor confined to a visible, specific location. Jesus taught, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:20-21 NIV). The people whom God adds to his kingdom will not undergo an outward physical transformation in this world, but their consciences and spirits will be transformed. In the world to come though, as the apostle Paul explained, “flesh and blood” will not inherit the eternal kingdom of God, nor will “the perishable inherit the imperishable.” But, Paul wrote, when the Son of Man returns, those destined for eternal life will see their perishable bodies clothed with “the imperishable,” and their mortality replaced with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:50, 53-54). After this divine transformation, past distinctions between neighbors and strangers, between those native-born and outsiders, will be irrelevant.

At the end of his earthly life, Jesus was placed on trial and falsely accused of leading a treasonous rebellion against Tiberius Caesar (42 B.C.–A.D. 37), the Roman emperor. When Caesar’s representative, Pontius Pilate asked Jesus if he considered himself to be the king of the Jews, Jesus responded, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:33, 36). At the conclusion of his trial, Jesus was condemned to die, was crucified and, according to the scriptures, was then resurrected and “was taken up into heaven,” to sit on the right hand of God the Father (Matthew 26:64; Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:9-11). Decades after Jesus’ ascension, the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation, in which he described his vision of the kingdom of heaven. John wrote,

“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away [...]. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem [...]. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God’ ... I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb [Jesus] are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there” (Revelation 21:1-3, 22-25).

Since Jesus and his apostles saw this “new heaven” and “new earth” as the ultimate desired destination, they urged their followers to see themselves as “strangers in a strange land,” as Moses had in Midian (Exodus 2:22). The apostle Peter wrote a letter to Christians living in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Peter described the recipients of his letter as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation* [emphasis added], God’s special possession” (1 Peter 2:9). Peter wrote that, “as foreigners and exiles,” they should “abstain from sinful desires” and lead godly lives (1 Peter 2:11). In this passage, the Greek word translated as “foreigners” (πάροικος transliteration *paroikos*) means “aliens” or “sojourners,” and is the equivalent of the Hebrew : רֶגֶז transliteration: *gār* or *gēr*, plural *gerim*, found in the Hebrew scriptures, or Old Testament. In this passage, the Greek word translated as “exiles” (παρεπίδημος transliteration *parepidemos*) means “strangers” or “those of a foreign land [heaven] residing among natives.” The terminology in the Hebrew scriptures relating to earthly strangers is nearly synonymous with the Greek texts found in the New Testament that relate to spiritual strangers.

The Hebrew and Greek texts and directives are complementary. The Hebrew directives to not oppress and to love strangers is foundational; and the Greek scriptures of the New Testament build upon that foundation with further revelations and spiritual applications. The Torah’s commandments were given to the Lord’s chosen people, the Jews, but Jesus’ teachings and commandments involve spiritual blessings that reach beyond the limits of the people of Israel. Specifically, in the Torah the Lord instructed the people of Israel to show compassion toward outsiders based, in part, on the collective lessons learned from the oppression and abuses endured by the Hebrews during the era of Egyptian bondage. Jesus then took a fundamental commandment from the Torah’s Holiness Code, “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18) and elevated it to the level of the second greatest commandment in the Law of Moses (second only to loving God himself) (Matthew 22:39). And, finally, in his parables and in the book of Revelation, Jesus gave a glimpse at the grace and rewards that await those who show sincere compassion on strangers, and he gave a glimpse of the wrath awaiting those who do not.

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