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To be a stranger and to deal with foreigners
– an Old Testament survey¹

1 Introduction

The last time I had the privilege to give a talk for EBF at the consortium of European Baptist Theological Teachers Conference at Odessa Keith Jones commented afterwards, that the difference between Germans and other speakers is, that Germans start explaining the structure of their talk and the British are telling a joke. Because we are having fellowship together to learn from different cultures and ethnic groups, I am changing the German way for a second and do *not* start explaining the method of my survey, but give you an illustration:

This face is what comes to my mind first – when we speak about diversity and unity, about being a foreigner and being integrated in community.

This is David Alaba.

He looks like an African. But he is Austrian.

He looks like speaking foreign languages, but he is fluent in “Österreichisch”, some kind of German speaking in this country.

And last but not least – he is playing in the best soccer team of the world – for Bayern Munich – a team which integrates players from Austria, Brazil, Italy, Belgium, Turkey, Spain, Netherlands, Switzerland, Cosovo, Ukraine, Croatia, Peru and Germany – so thirteen nationalities, one team and three titles – the triple! Welcome to unity and diversity!

Ok – let us switch to the German academic style.
What do I want to share with you this morning?

I want to share an overview of old testament aspects about dealing with being a stranger, foreigner and diversity – imbedded I will visit together with you an oriental tent and drink some tea with a foreigner... so let us start...

2 The Bible challenges our attitude towards migrants²

Ex 23:9; Lev 24:22

⁹ *“Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.”³*

¹ This paper was given as a bible study at the EBF Mission Conference at Vienna, June 2013.

² Personally I belong to the advisory board of the bible society “Von Cansteinsche Bibelanstalt Berlin e.V.”, which produced an exhibition about migrants and foreigners. The texts 2, 3, 4 and 8-12 has been the resource of inspiration for this paper.

³ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ex 23,9

²² *You are to have the same law for the alien and the native-born. I am the LORD your God.*⁴

In the history of the chosen people as well as the Early Christian Church many people were already living abroad and the Bible tells us about people who were refugees. The lives of migrants during biblical times are worthwhile to be looked at more closely. There were many reasons for people to leave their native country. Leaving their country took them on a long journey with an unknown destination. After having finally arrived at the new place, the newcomers were seldom welcomed. The struggle began: **integration or assimilation, living the own identity, but being considered as a foreigner. Being a foreigner is a common experience throughout the Bible.**

However, God himself is close to the stranger. God can turn the difficult experiences of migration, fleeing your home country or even expulsion into a **blessing**, not only for the strangers themselves, but also for those who meet them.

What the Bible tells us about strangers among us is highly *relevant and challenging*.

Of course one has to keep in mind that the Bible mirrors experiences of faith throughout *centuries*. Therefore, there are *different* views of the strangers. The Bible knows about fears and prejudices as well as the danger of losing one's own identity. Certain types of migrants were always treated in a different way – those who came as trades-men or those who were political allies were *more* welcome than those poor people who were seeking refuge. Of course, not all migrants were behaving in the way that the local people were expecting them to. Differences in religious beliefs could cause a lot of troubles.

Nevertheless, the legal situation as well as the special protection for refugees in the Bible is striking. **Equal rights for natives as well as for strangers are secured for many aspects of life.** This is a result of the **experience** the Israelites had when they were slaves in Egypt. It is worthwhile *rediscovering* the biblical concept of **hospitality** for our lives – disappointments are not excluded. This bible study may contribute to reconsider the view of foreigners in our midst, especially of refugees and asylum seekers.

3 Abraham and Sarah – Migrants forever

Gen 12:1

*The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."*⁵

Abraham and Sarah have to be mentioned among the migrants of the Bible. Their biographies are so closely linked with departure, travelling and feeling to be a foreigner wherever they arrive. Already Abraham's father, Terach, departs with the

⁴ *The Holy Bible : New International Version.* electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Lev 24,22

⁵ *The Holy Bible : New International Version.* electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Gen 12,1

family from the Chaldean city of Ur and moves to Haran. At Haran Abraham is called by God and despite his age of already 75 years he leaves again. God promises Abraham that he will be a blessing in the land that God will show him. In the Promised Land Abraham is a *stranger*. Only his faith in God gives him comfort and stability. Due to a period of famine Abraham and his wife Sarah are forced to depart again: For a certain time they have to live in Egypt. It is striking how honest the Bible is telling that Abraham was *not honest* with the Egyptian authorities regarding his relation with Sarah: he claimed her to be his *sister*. He hoped to not telling the truth. Only God's intervention secures a happy end.

This does not prevent Abraham from falling into the same mistake again when he and Sarah are forced to move again out of the Promised Land, this time to Gerar (Genesis 20). Abraham's and Sarah's son, Isaac, is forced to move to the land of the Philistines due to famine, together with his wife Rebecca.

Despite their own experiences of migration, Abraham and Sarah are involved in another fate of migration: Since Abraham and Sarah have **no children** of their own, Sarah suggests that her maid, Hagar, could bear a child for her. Hagar flees from the oppression of Sarah. God tells her to return. However, the situation gets more difficult after Sarah's own son, Isaac has been born. Both, Abraham and Sarah, send Hagar and her son away. **God takes care of these two migrants.**

4 Joseph and his brothers in Egypt

Gen 47:6

⁵ *Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Your father and your brothers have come to you, ⁶ and the land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land. Let them live in Goshen. And if you know of any among them with special ability, put them in charge of my own livestock."*⁶

Jealousy and conflict within a family are the reasons for Joseph being sold by his own brothers to human traffickers who take him to Egypt and sell him to an influential person at the court of the King (Genesis 37). Nowadays one would rather speak of riots between tribes. However, Joseph is a good servant of Potiphar, his owner, and starts a career. The wife of his owner tries in vain to seduce Joseph. In order to take revenge she accuses Joseph of raping her. Joseph is imprisoned for two years. Due to his special gifts and qualifications Joseph gets out of prison and in the service of the King of Egypt. Joseph's biography is the **story of a successful integration**.

Joseph gets an influential political position and cooperates well with the King. Joseph even marries a native Egyptian and has a family in Egypt. Due to the foresight of Joseph grain is stored during years of good harvest. In the following seven years with poor harvest nobody is starving. Even the brothers of Joseph who are suffering famine in their home land, travel to Egypt to purchase grain there. After some

⁶ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Gen 47,5-6

complications Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers. When the brothers together with their father, Jacob, move to Egypt and settle there, the King of Egypt shows overwhelming **hospitality** to the newcomers

5 Moses and the people of Israel

Ex 22:21

“Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.”⁷

Only one generation after Josef and his brothers moved to Egypt between the Egyptians and the foreigners living among them arise. Egyptians are concerned that the foreigners could outnumber them. Therefore they oppress the strangers and force them into slavery in the agriculture, but especially for construction work. A law orders that all new born sons of the people of Israel shall be killed. One of these endangered boys Moses, will not only be saved, but will be chosen by God to lead his people out of Egypt.

Moses himself is forced to flee from Egypt to Midian after he killed an Egyptian who mistreated one of Moses' own people. At Midian Moses is well integrated and even gets married there. It is there, in a foreign country, that God calls commands him to return to Egypt and to prepare the people for leaving.

To deepen our understanding of integration I want to turn to one passage of the time of Moses more carefully.

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6 Encounter in the tent – relationship opens possibilities for faith and the ability to take criticism

18 *Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt.*

² *After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her³ and her two sons. One son was named Gershom,^a for Moses said, “I have become an alien in a foreign land”;⁴ and the other was named Eliezer,^b for he said, “My father’s God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.”*

⁵ *Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, together with Moses’ sons and wife, came to him in the desert, where he was camped near the mountain of God.⁶ Jethro had sent word to him, “I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons.”*

⁷ *So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. They greeted each other and then went into the tent.⁸*

⁷ *The Holy Bible : New International Version.* electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ex 22,21

^a *Gershom* sounds like the Hebrew for *an alien there*.

^b *Eliezer* means *my God is helper*.

⁸ *The Holy Bible : New International Version.* electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ex 18,1-7

Moses experiences to be integrated in a foreign society. He married a woman from the midianites. The midianites do not worship Jahwe, but we are not well informed, what kind of God they worship. The biblical tradition does not take offence at this inter-religious marriage and relationship.

The two sons of Moses are called with *symbolic* names: Gershom - I have been an alien (Hebrew ger) in a strange land and Eliezer – God is my help.

To be an alien / a stranger is combined with the assessment: God can help being an alien in a strange land!

The relationship of Jethor and Moses is quite tricky, because Jitro is his father in law and you know that sometimes it is not easy to handle the relationship to father in laws...

additionally Jitro is a priest, worshipping another God than the God of Moses – but there is no comment about religious **arguing** about - who is the better God.

The encounter of Jitro and Moses seems to be **ideal** –

Moses acts with decent behavior – he leaves the tent to approach Jitro and to meet him, he kisses him.

But Moses is placed on the same **eye level** to his father in law –both ask each other of their “shalom” / it is more than “How are you?” – but it is a deeply “How are you?” – they both ask each other to know about feelings and thoughts.

And they come into the tent.

This tent meeting – for me it is one of the most striking examples of good **relationship** between very different people – formally they have a different status, they come from different cultures, they are worshipping different Gods, but

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they practicing **hospitality** in the tent – and there – in the tent – they start telling, telling, telling what is going on in their hearts.

Of course, this tradition breathe the atmosphere of an oriental Nigth – the midianites are nomade / Beduin people - used to walk around from pasture ground to pasture ground and to live in tents. A Beduin tent spends shade and guards you from rain, it is the location for hospitality par excellence – drinking tea, smelling cinnamon and coriander, sitting in pillows and carpets, eating sweet figs and fruits. This kind of location and atmosphere opens the mouth to tell and narrate...

Moses starts to talk – about all experiences of life.

⁸ Moses told his father-in-law about everything the LORD had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the LORD had saved them.

If different cultures meet – don't hesitate to tell, what you experienced **with your God** – but also **do not keep quiet about your problems**, troubles, travails either. **Up and down – the whole scale of life – in this tent is room for everything.**

Moses is full of experiences, he wants to share and everything bubbles out of him, how he experienced God – he may is talking about all the ten plagues – and the

hope to be able to flee from the pharaoh – he bubbles from the desert experiences, suffering hunger and thirst, to feed upon bread from heaven and water from the rock...

Moses does not feel forced just to speak about *good* things – he is sharing troubles and difficulties either.

But he is not just telling funny or interesting *stories*, he shares his *testimony*, how GOD is able to save and that God is a God of liberty.

The belief of the Jewish religion and the Christian religion is founded on people, who **can not keep quiet in telling**, how God changed their lives and how God can save and liberate.

The Jewish and Christian belief needs the **testimony** of experiences with him!

The Holy Scripture is a **library** of books, they confess experiences with God, although in today's world *precious few people* trust in the Holy Scripture, but they start to listen very carefully, if you *share your own experience* with the living God.

People do not listen to doctrine, even if it is good doctrine, but they love to listen, if somebody shares his life and his experience.

If people meet like this – if you have a special **encounter** like this – you ask each other about your *shalom*, you tell, what God has done, especially in difficult times and how he managed to help, BELIEF is catching and infectious!

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Jitro, the Midianite priest, he starts to be amazed about this God:

⁹ *Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians.*

Jitro is touched by the stories of a saving God!

Moses does not discuss about the true doctrine, the right belief, the only God, he just **testifies his personal belief!**

But he does not testify his belief without **relating** to his strange opposite, without entering the tent and drinking tea.

Moses does not stand at the trade road and shouts to anybody who listens or not, he invites his **alien into his tent!**

And Jitro can join the joy of the life of Moses.

It releases hopelessness, if you hear that somebody testifies the help of God in his life!

And Jitro starts to praise the God of Israel:

¹⁰ *He said, "Praise be to the LORD, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians."*

Even it is not his own experience and own history, the story about experiences with the living God, leads him to *praise* about what God has done!

And because of joy and praise, his beliefs are changing. Now Jitro knows something more and different than before:

*¹¹ Now I **know** that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly.”¹² Then Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and other sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses’ father-in-law in the presence of God.⁹*

As a shepherd of cattle you are not offering animals, you **need** them to survive, - to offer an animal means to *sacrifice*, to abstain from something, because you trust, that you will have enough even if you sacrifice. To give back something, because you are grateful, means to offer or sacrifice.

Jitro learns to trust and together with Moses and the elders he experiences the special fellowship of **offering** and **eating** together.

Too idealistic to be true?

I love this story of encounter, because we need **encouragement** that encounter of strange and alien, of different religions, even father in law and son in law, can match, can be a success, can be a holistic encounter – for the Glory of God!

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And I am convinced that this personal encounter and the built friendship in diversity is the foundation for the coming story – the **ability** to take criticism the morning after the evening sitting together in the tent – but this is another story to tell... especially to Germans, who like to criticize before relating to people...

We realized: At Midian Moses is well integrated and even gets married there. It is there, in a foreign country, that God calls commands him to return to Egypt and to prepare the people for leaving.

God is with his chosen people and leads them out of the **oppression** and slavery in Egypt – despite the attempts of the Egyptian king to stop them. However: Decades of travelling in the desert are awaiting the Israelites. After they finally arrive in the Promised Land, other people are **already living there**. **The experience of oppression and being foreign in Egypt has impacted the Israelites: Foreigners are not to be oppressed and abused.**

Centuries later the people of Israel had to experience being foreign again: They were forced to leave their home country and go to **Babylonia**. It was a challenge to preserve the own religious identity there, while trying to seek integration at the new

⁹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ex 18,7-12

place.

Let us jump into this time of the history of Israel – when the Israelites were a minority in a multi ethnic environment: The time of the Babylonian Exile, the time of the Prophet Jeremiah.

7 Jeremia and his challenge to seek the shalom of the foreign city

Jeremiah has a tricky message for his people. It would be easy to promise, that the minority situation will end *quickly* – like his opposite prophet Hananja is promising – but Jeremia has to preach, that Israel needs to **accept** the loss of their own temple, the loss of their own city wall of Jerusalem, the loss of their kingship and the loss of their land – and that this situation will last for some times – for 70 years and not 2 years, like Hananja wants to sugar them the situation.

We need to have a realistic picture of the situation. About 20 percent of the population of Israel – were displaced to Mesopotamia – most of them leading persons – as former priests, former public officers, craftsmen or ground landlords. They are not treated as slaves, not treated like the Hebrews in Egypt, they are allowed to live in villages, to do business and trade, to live their own life as minority in a foreign land.

Jeremiah is writing a letter to the elders in Babylonian. What is he recommending how to deal with the situation?

He is not recommending to separate from society, he is not recommending to reject everybody around, but he is recommending to become **part of society** – while keeping their own religious identity and belief.

Jer 29:4-7

⁴ *This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:* ⁵ *“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”*¹⁰

These famous words can be read like a guideline for todays church work as well: To seek the **shalom** of the city, for in the shalom of it lies the own shalom. It is not a prosperity gospel, it is a shalom-gospel!

Shalom is not only considering the right belief – it is social peace, friendship, relationship, living as a part of society and do Good for them – not asking, what you gain from it, but what you can give – in the name of your own Lord of giving!

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible : New International Version.* electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Jer 29,4-7

To save identity the Jewish community at Babylonia is rediscovering the tradition of *circumcision* the flesh of the foreskin – it was usual to be circumcised at Canaan and even at Egypt, but it was not usual to be circumcised at Babylonia. Therefore it is an old but newly rediscovered **identity marker** for Jewish people, but it is not a **public** sign, it is a **secret** sign to **convince** the **own** group about their belonging.

Diversity and Unity – both parts of community are integrated during the Jewish community at Babylonian.

We can see: Successful integration is part of the testimony of the Old Testament about multi ethnic community.

The atmosphere of the exile situation is probably the culture medium to tell old stories about hospitality:

8 Ruth – sharing hospitality to a foreigner

Ruth 2,10

¹⁰ At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” ¹¹

Due to famine Elimelech, resident at Bethlehem, leaves his home town together with his wife Naomi and his two sons and settles in the area of Moab. After the death of their father both sons get married to Moabite women, but the sons die young. Naomi decides to return to her home town, Bethlehem. One of the young Moabite widows, Ruth, follows her facing an uncertain future in a foreign country.

They arrive in Bethlehem during the time of the grain harvest. Ruth is gathering the grain, that the harvest workers leave. This custom ensured the provision to famine Elimelech, resident at Bethlehem, leaves his home town for the poor. Boaz, the owner of the field, where Ruth gathers the grain, shows hospitality to the foreigner, encourages his workers to leave more grain on the field and invites Ruth to eat together with them.

It turns out that Boaz is a relative of Naomi. Boaz likes Ruth and after everything is sorted out according to the legal procedures, he marries her and she gets the inheritance of her late husband.

One of the shortest books of the Bible bears the name of Ruth, the foreigner from Moab. The descendants from Ruth and Boaz include King David – and Jesus.

9 Biblical commandments protect the foreigners

Ex 12:49; Ex 20:10; Eze 22:7

⁴⁹ The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you.” ¹²

¹¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ru 2,10

¹² *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ex 12,49

¹⁰ *but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.* ¹³

⁶ “*See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood.* ⁷ *In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the alien and mistreated the fatherless and the widow* ¹⁴

The first books of the Bible, the Law, contain several commandments and regulations protecting foreigners. The same regulations apply to **natives** and **foreigners**. It is the own experience of being a foreigner in Egypt that **determines** the attitude towards foreigners. Some of these regulations are repeated several times and show on the one hand how important it is to accept and support the stranger. On the other hand there have probably been some problems that have been solved by these regulations.

According to Scripture, **God himself is protecting and loving the foreigner**. He leads people out of hardship and oppression. Therefore foreigners are not to be abused or oppressed.

The regulations regarding the Sabbath and the feasts apply also to foreigners. For their work they shall receive a fair **salary**. The economic situation of foreigners has obviously been **difficult**. This explains why they are mentioned with other poor and needy groups like widows and orphans. Special regulations make sure that people from these poor groups get their share of the harvest.

Also a special **fund** for the needy has to be collected regularly. On the other hand the foreigners are expected to become **valuable members of society**. Especially with other religions the relation between natives and foreigners could be a difficult one. **Until today the biblical commandment to love the foreigners is a challenge.**

10 Practical Experiences

Ps 146:9a

⁹ *The LORD watches over the alien
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.* ¹⁵

The biblical stories about people's lives who were foreigners and experiences God's protection in a special way, are narrative descriptions of the biblical commandments regarding the treatment of foreigners. Foreigners are a special social group in danger of poverty and therefore need **solidarity and help**. God's protection and his blessing belong to the foreigners. One could mention the institution of the asylum – the cities of refuge for natives as well as for foreigners (Joshua 12,13). Job in his long list of righteous actions can point to his **attitude** of hospitality towards any foreigner who passed by his house (Job 31,32: ³¹ if the men of my household have never said, 'Who has not had his fill of Job's meat?'— ³² but no stranger had to spend the night

¹³ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ex 20,10

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ez 22,6-7

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ps 146,9

in the street, for my door was always open to the traveler¹⁶). But not all people behaved like Job. The prophetic criticism of oppression and abuse of foreigners gives witness to this and calls into question the faithfulness of people who do not respect foreigners, widows and orphans.

The Bible expects from the foreigners the willingness to become valuable members of the society where they live. This does not mean **assimilation**.

Jeremiah encourages the displaced people of Israel to lead a normal life in the foreign land of Babylon, to seek the best of the new place and to expect God's help. Faith is the main identity in a foreign place.

Since the Promised Land is seen as God's own land, which can't be sold, its inhabitants experience themselves as **guests** and foreigners who depend on **God's grace and mercy**. This is true even more in regard of the short duration of human life.

11 Hospitality in the Bible

Sach 7:9-10

⁹ *“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. ¹⁰ Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.’ ¹⁷*

In the original languages of the Bible the word for “guest” can mean “foreigner” as well. Offering hospitality towards a foreigner is therefore a **key** element of the Bible. This hospitality is motivated by the experience of the people of Israel as foreigners in Egypt as well as by **God's love** towards the strangers. **Hospitality is offered in a spontaneous way.** Encounters with foreigners are quite often turning into a **blessing for both parties**. A number of Bible stories tell about experiences with hospitality.

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Among the most famous is the encounter of Abraham with the three visitors. He invites them to a generous meal and provides them with a safe place to rest from the journey. It is God himself who visits Abraham and the encounter turns into a blessing for Abraham and his wife Sara: The visitors announce to the couple the birth of a son.

Abraham's nephew, Lot, offers hospitality towards two foreigners at Sodom. However, the inhabitants of Sodom heavily criticize his behaviour. When Sodom is destroyed, **Lot is saved by his hospitality** (Genesis 19,1-11).

Hospitality marks the beginning of a love story: Abraham sends his servant to his homeland in order to seek a suitable wife for Abraham's son, Isaac. Upon arrival the servant meets a young woman at a well, **Rebecca**. She offers the foreigner water and helps to feed his camels. On behalf of her father she is inviting the foreigner to her home. Later she accompanies the servant back and gets married to Isaac.

¹⁶ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ij 31,31-32

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Sach 7,9-10

[12 Blessed encounters]

Rahab welcomes the two spies of the people of Israel and helps them to flee secretly out of the city of Jericho. When Jericho is captured, Rahab and her family are spared (Joshua 2 + 6).

Boaz offers hospitality to the foreign young widow who is picking up the heads of grain in his field.

The prophet Elijah is escaping the persecution of King Ahab and his wife. A poor widow at Zarephath welcomes him in her home despite the period of draught and the lack of food. A handful of flour and a bit of olive oil will feed the widow, her son and the guest for many days. When the son of the widow dies, Elijah makes the son return to life (1 Kings 17,8-24).

A similar story is told by the disciple and successor of Elijah, Elisha. A wealthy woman at Shunem offers him hospitality. Elisha not only promises her that he will have a child, but also brings the child, after its untimely death, back to life (2 Kings 4,8-17).

One can also read of blessed encounters with strangers in the New Testament. The two disciples on their way to Emmaus welcome the stranger who walked with them. They recognize the risen Jesus Christ in the stranger when he breaks the bread. Lydia, herself a foreigner at Philippi, welcomes Paul and his fellows in her house. It is the beginning of the Church at Philippi (Acts 16,14-16).

12 Conclusion: Foreigners among us

Foreigners among us

Today many people are living far away from their native country. For some of them their choice was voluntary to move to another place for better job options or private reasons. Others are forced to leave their home country: Refugees and asylum seekers. Worldwide 250 million migrants and 15 million international refugees are counted. Approximately 15 million people are living displaced in their own countries. The reasons for leaving are many. Of course, economic reasons force people to seek another place, but also war and violence, persecution due to a lack of freedom of religion or freedom of opinion as well as natural disasters. After a long and difficult journey people arrive finally in one country.

And then, the problems seem to increase. By what means is it possible to stay in the new place or to make a living? The experience of not being welcome is adding to the problems – prejudices and fears of native people make the situation worse. On the other hand, sometimes foreigners have nothing to lose.

What they want to avoid in any case is a – voluntarily or forced – return to their homeland.

In the best case this would make their failure obvious. But in many cases prison, persecution or torture are awaiting them.

People from many different countries, with many different languages and different habits, cultures and backgrounds are coming to Europe. Refugees and asylum seekers are often heavily traumatized. Many hope for a better future, others were victims of human trafficking. Many are escaping persecution. Not all of them arrive at their destination. Some are dying of famine, heat or exhaustion. Some drown in the Mediterranean. Some are just stranded at the shores and borders of Europe.

Foreigners are living among us and challenging our Christian tradition: Where can refugees and asylum seekers today experience the **love** of God or Christian **hospitality**? Can migrants feel that it is true that they are human beings created by God and therefore respected, valued or even loved?

This bible study is meant to raise questions by listening to the Bible and its view of foreigners. Hopefully these days of reflection can contribute to reflection and change of attitudes. For the Glory of our God – who lead us into encounters in a tent – sometimes.