

## *Peter's Audience in Relation to Ancient Israel*

In ancient Israel, there were two categories of people who were ethnically Gentiles but dwelled in the midst of ethnic Jews in the land of Israel. The *Tanakh* (Old Testament) employs the term, *ger* (גֵר) in reference to someone whose roots were somewhere else besides Israel, but made their home permanently among the ethnic Jewish people and completely adopted their culture. That term is derived from the verb *gur* (גִּיר), translated as “sojourn,” and literally means “turn aside from the journey.” In that light, a *ger* could be regarded as a sojourner who found a new home.

In addition, in order to be considered as a *ger*, the person had to make a conscious decision to believe in Adonai, the God of Israel, and to fully accept the belief system of Israel. That meant being bound to the complete commandments of the Torah. In so doing, *gerim* (pl.) left their old national identity behind. Spiritually and legally, they were considered as newborn children of Abraham and Sarah and full citizens of the spiritual community of Israel. As a result, like Rahab (a Canaanite), they could intermarry with native Israelites. They could also enter the inner courts of the Temple to offer sacrifices. And, like Caleb (originally a Kenizzite), they were integrated into the inheritance of the tribes and could own land. That is why we continually see references in the *Tanakh* declaring: “The same law shall apply to the native as to the *ger* who sojourns with you” (Ex. 12:49; cf. Lev. 16:29; 24:22; Num 9:14; 15:15-16,29; 19:10).

English Bibles render the word *ger* as stranger, alien, foreigner and sojourner. But none of those translations fully describe the implications described above. A contemporary term that more accurately depicts the identity of a *ger* is a naturalized citizen.

The second category, called the *toshav* (תּוֹשָׁב), referred to a non-Israelite resident who legally dwelled within the borders of Israel, but did not fully adopt the Jewish culture and belief system, and thus did not have the full status of citizenship. They were obligated to renounce idolatry and to abide by universal moral standards, but not the entire Torah. They were entitled to legal protections and could glean from fields, but they could not intermarry, own land or engage in worship at the temple.

English Bibles render the word *toshav* as sojourner, stranger, and foreigner. Again, those terms fail to fully depict their identity in biblical times. So, a more precise English term would be resident alien.<sup>1</sup> Compounding that ambiguity is the way that the same English words are used to translate both *ger* and *toshav* in the Old Testament. That ambiguity carries forward to English translations of the New Testament.

Such is the case in the first epistle of Peter. In the very first verse of the letter, we are told that he was writing to believers in Yeshua who were living in the northern Roman provinces of Asia Minor. Elements of the letter show that his audience was comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, although the primary focus and cultural background of the majority of the readers were almost certainly Gentile.

With that background in mind, we encounter these words in 1 Peter 2:11 –

“Beloved, I urge you as *paroikoi* and *parepidēmoi* and to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.

The way that those two Greek terms are translated reflects the same degree of ambiguity as the Hebrew terms detailed above, this making it difficult to ascertain Peter's point. Here is how they are rendered in several English versions:

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<sup>1</sup> That is actually the term used by the IRS to designate people living and working in the U.S. who are not citizens, also called a Lawful Permanent Resident by the federal government.

Greek	<i>paroikoi</i>	<i>parepidēmoi</i>
English – NASB	aliens	strangers
English – KJV	strangers	pilgrims
English – NJV	foreigners	pilgrims
English – NIV	aliens	strangers
English – CJB	aliens	temporary residents

But we can narrow the understanding by cross-checking with the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew into Greek during the second temple period. There we see that the Hebrew term *ger* is rendered as *paroikos* (sing.) numerous times while *toshav* is always rendered as *parepidēmos*.<sup>2</sup> So, a more precise translation of this verse would be:

“Beloved, I urge you as naturalized citizens (*gerim/paroikoi*) and resident aliens (*toshavim/parepidēmoi*) to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.

When Peter calls the believers of Asia both of these discrete terms, it may appear that this is a contradiction because one is a fully integrated citizen and the other is a non-citizen outsider. This apparent contradiction goes away when we see this as a matter of perspective. In God’s eyes, believing Gentiles are like naturalized citizens (*gerim*) in the kingdom of God. And now that they have been made part of God’s Holy Nation (verse 9), their identity is no longer associated with this fallen world. Thus, a believer is simultaneously a resident alien (*toshav*) in regard to this world. Or to put it another way, that is how you can be a citizen and an alien at the same time.<sup>3</sup>

This understanding is not readily apparent in the English rendering of 1 Peter 2:11, but it is evident in the original language when considered in the greater context of Scripture. And that helps us to see why Peter exhorts his particular audience to abstain from the ways of the world and then calls upon them to keep their behavior excellent among the Gentiles so that they wouldn’t have to face even greater slander from the ones who are citizens of this world.

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<sup>2</sup> Of particular note is the way that the Old Testament authors consistently paired these words in the same order: *ger v’tohav*, as in Gen. 23:4; Lev. 25:23,35,47; Ps. 39:12. That manner of phrasing is relevant to the way that Peter, a Jewish author, uses these terms as a couplet in the same order.

<sup>3</sup> A similar duality is reflected in Genesis 23:4, where Abraham attempts to buy a burial plot from the Hittites, and explicitly states, “I am a *ger* and a *toshav* among you.”