

Asbury Theological Seminary

SOJOURNER:  
A WORD STUDY OF נָסַח AND ITS USE IN DEUTERONOMY

Submitted to Dr. Sandra Richter  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
OT710 Exegesis in the Pentateuch: Deuteronomy

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The concept of a sojourner serves as vivid imagery in the life of Israel. This idea of a person who resides in a land that is not their own is significant at all stages of Israel's development. In the Old Testament, this idea occupies a nominal sense with the word גֵר and in a verbal sense with the word גִּיר. This paper focuses on the nominal use and seeks to present a coherent and unified understanding of how the term is used in Scripture, especially in the book of Deuteronomy. A survey of its word usage throughout scripture accomplishes this task through careful consideration of contextual clues. This is coupled with research into the usage of the verbal form of the word and placed within an understanding of Israel's history. Many words such as "alien," "stranger," or "foreigner" convey this idea; however, for this paper, the term "sojourner" is preferred because of its connection with the English verb "to sojourn." Whatever term is used, the picture it must paint is one of an outsider among a foreign people who at times is a part of the culture and at other times is on the margins.

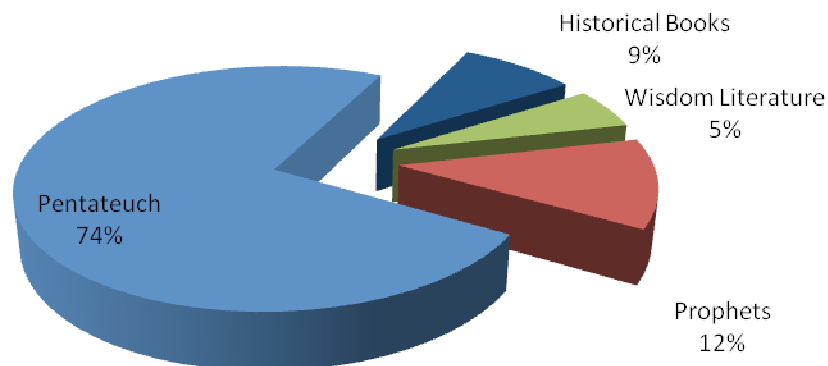
### **Usage in the Old Testament**

The noun גֵר occurs 92 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Of these uses, a majority (68) are found in the Pentateuch; Deuteronomy accounts for 22 of these occurrences – more than any other book. The following charts visually display the distribution of the term:<sup>1</sup>

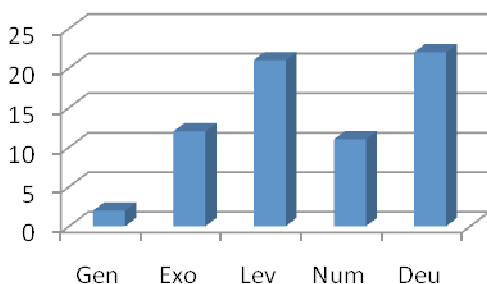
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<sup>1</sup> Information from *BibleWorks*. Version 7.0, 2007. Hermenueitika, Big Fork, MT. Results derived from morphological search of גֵר. Isa 27:9 was removed from the results due to unique vowel pointing and clear divergent meaning. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* in *BibleWorks*. Version 7.0, 2007. Hermenueitika, Big Fork, MT. Print ed.: 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001. lists the same results.

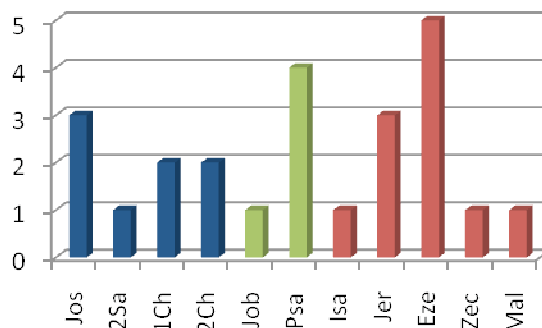
## Distribution in the Old Testament



### Occurrences in the Pentateuch



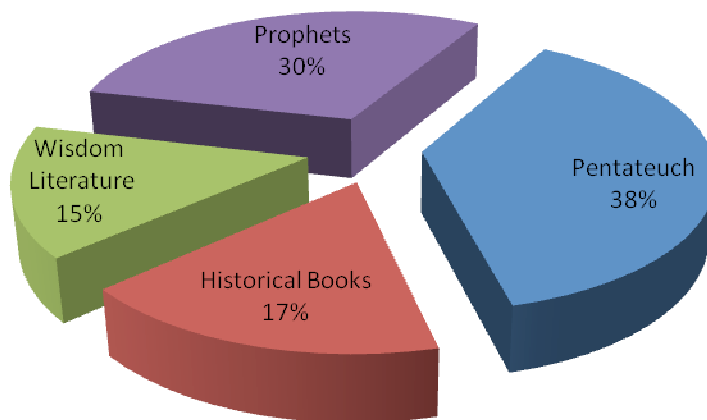
### Occurrences in Other Books



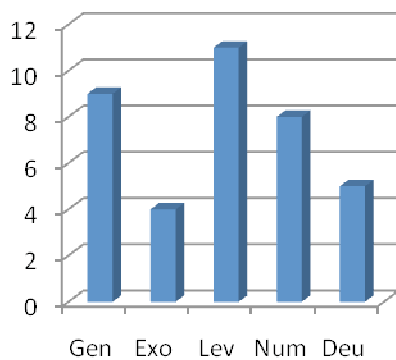
The verb **נִיר** is found with a similar frequency, but the distribution is different. It occurs 98 times in the Old Testament. Once again, the largest share is found in the Pentateuch; however, the distribution is more even. The verb occurs in 22 books compared to 16 books for the noun; within these, Jeremiah contains the greatest number of occurrences with 14. Whereas Deuteronomy contains the noun more than any other book, the related verb is only used 5 times. These charts detail the distribution of the verb:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Information from *BibleWorks*. Results derived from morphological search of **נִיר**.

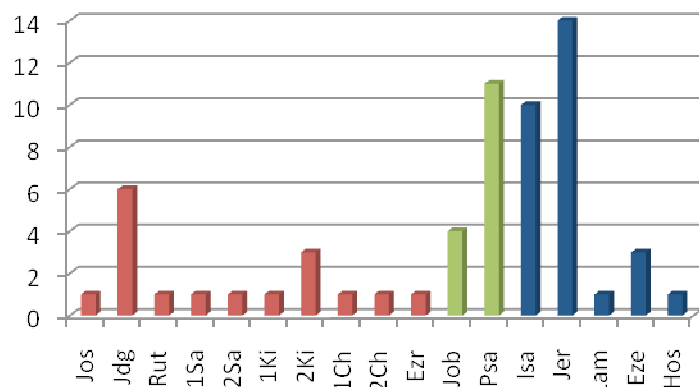
## Occurrences in the Old Testament



Occurrences in Pentateuch



Occurrences in Other Books



## Comparative Semantics

The word גַּר has cognates in a number of other languages from the Ancient Near East. It shares a common root with words in Egyptian, Phoenician, Ugaritic, Old South Arabic and Aramaic. These cognates share a meaning that is generally agreed upon. As a noun it refers to someone not from a particular area, while as a verb it refers to travelling, sojourning or staying in

a foreign place.<sup>3</sup> Possible translations of the noun could be sojourner, foreign resident, stranger, foreigner, immigrant, client or resident alien.<sup>4</sup> Within Hebrew, a similar meaning is conveyed through the word תושב. This word occurs in thirteen verse,<sup>5</sup> seven of which also use the word גר.<sup>6</sup> If a distinction is to be made, גר would describe people with semi-permanent status, while תושב would refer to a person less connected or assimilated within the host country.<sup>7</sup>

### Semantic Range of the Noun גר in the Old Testament

The first task in understanding the meaning of the word גר is to assess the variety of contexts the word occupies. Most commonly, the Biblical authors use the word when referring to the relationship between Israel and those called sojourners. In many cases these people are addressed in the same way Israel as a nation is addressed. Exodus 12:49 is an example where this similarity is explicit: "there shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you."<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 19:34 goes as far as to say these aliens are to be treated as citizens. The practice of addressing sojourners either as part of Israell, or as equals with Israel can be found in the Historical books<sup>9</sup> as well as the Prophets.<sup>10</sup> At least 24 of the uses of גר point to verses either

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<sup>3</sup> John R Spence. "Sojourner." David Noel Freedman, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* in *Logos Library Software*. Version 2.1g 1995. Logos Research Systems, Bellingham WA. Print ed.: New York: Doubleday, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gen 23:4; Exod 12:45; Lev 22:10; 25:6, 23, 35, 40, 45, 47; Num 35:15; 1Kings 17:1; 1Chron 29:15; Ps 39:12.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 23:4; Lev. 25:23, 35, 47; Num. 35:15; 1 Chr. 29:15; Ps. 39:13.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles Briggs *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon* in *BibleWorks*. Version 7.0, 2007. Hermenueitika, Big Fork, MT. Print ed.: Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> All Scripture references are from the NRSV.

<sup>9</sup> Josh 8:33, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Is 14:1; Ezek 47:22.

extending the same rights to aliens, or holding them to the same standard Israel enjoys.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, another seven verses address Israel's customs, festivals and rites and provide a place for the alien in these.<sup>12</sup> Altogether, a full one third of the references to גֵּר occur in contexts that emphasize the connection between Israel and the sojourners.

After coming to an understanding of the interconnectedness of Israel's citizens and sojourners, the distinction between the two should be explored. This distinction is clearest in discussions of oppression. Nine verses serve as clear commands to the nation of Israel to avoid persecuting and oppressing sojourners.<sup>13</sup> An additional six verses are used to command Israel to leave resources specifically for these people;<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy in particular goes as far as directing a portion of the tithe to go to these sojourners.<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that many verses portray the sojourner on par with the Israelite, many verses also list them among the marginalized<sup>16</sup> and this group is shown favor by YHWH.<sup>17</sup> These usages point to an understanding of the sojourner as one at risk of being oppressed and in need of special care. This imagery is essential for grasping the full understanding of the concept.

The remaining usages found in the Old Testament deserve to be explored as well; many of these are general references. We find Abraham as a sojourner in Canaan,<sup>18</sup> the son of Moses

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<sup>11</sup> Exod 20:10; Lev 16:29; 17:8; 10, 12, 13, 15; 23:12; 18:26; 24:26, 22; Num 15:15, 16, 29, 30; 19:10; 35:15; Deut 1:16; 5:14; 24:14; Josh 20:9; Jer 14:8; Ezek 14:7; 47:23.

<sup>12</sup> Exod 12:48; Num 9:14; 15:14, 26; Deut 16:11, 14; 26:11.

<sup>13</sup> Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:33; Deut 10:19; 24:17; 27:19; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Zech 7:10.

<sup>14</sup> Lev 19:10; 23:22; Deut 14:21; Deut 24:19, 20, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Deut 14:29; 26:12, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Deut 14:29; 26:13; Ps 94:6; 146:9; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Ezek 22:7, 9; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5.

<sup>17</sup> Deut 10:18; Ps 146:9.

<sup>18</sup> Gen 23:4.

takes his name from the idea,<sup>19</sup> the Amalekite who killed Saul refers to himself in this way,<sup>20</sup> the poor are said to live as sojourners in Lev 25:35 while sojourners are described as prospering in the land in Lev 25:47-55 and Deut 28:43. Job describes them as living on the street<sup>21</sup> and the Chronicler refers to them as a distinct group within the political structure.<sup>22</sup> Within these minority uses, two stand out as particularly distinct. First, the Old Testament uses the term נָכַר to refer to Israel when they were in Egypt. This is explicit in a few places<sup>23</sup> and frequently implied. A common formulation of this implied connection is found in Deut 24:17-18: "You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there." These examples of Israel in Egypt do not represent the only times the people of God are referred to as sojourners. The second significant minority usage is that of Israel being referred to as sojourners within God's land. This occurs both corporately and individually.<sup>24</sup> The idea conveyed is that even when Israel is in the Promised Land, the land still belongs to YHWH.

Pulling the concepts presented through these contexts together, a reader of the Old Testament can grasp a general understanding of the attributes pertaining to a sojourner. This is a person who is counted among a specific people, but does not themselves belong to that people. They are required to obey the laws of the land, and can even participate in some of the customs, but in the end, they are still outsiders. This status threatens to lead to oppression, even though oppression of the sojourner and other marginalized people is expressly prohibited. In the case of

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<sup>19</sup> Exodus 2:22; 18:3.

<sup>20</sup> 2Sam 1:13.

<sup>21</sup> Job 31:32.

<sup>22</sup> 1Chron 22:2; 2 Chron 30:25.

<sup>23</sup> Gen15:13; Lev, 19:24 Deut 23:7; 26:5.

<sup>24</sup> Lev 25:23; 1Chron 29:15; Ps 39:12; 119:19; Jer 14:8.

Israel, they must go as far as taking care of these people. At times, the nation of Israel is viewed as sojourners themselves, and at other times, Israel addresses aliens within their boundaries. This synthesis paints the picture of a people who exist within the nation, but occupy the margins; they are in, but not included.

### **Semantic Range of the Verb גִּיר in the Old Testament**

Because the noun גֵּר and the verb גִּיר are based on the same root, a study of the various usages of the verb can shed light on the larger meaning of the noun. By far the most common use of the verb is to describe a person who is dwelling in a foreign place. A person can sojourn in a place<sup>25</sup> or with something<sup>26</sup> or among a people.<sup>27</sup> When found in the hitpoel stem it conveys the meaning of staying in a place as an alien.<sup>28</sup> At other times, although not nearly as frequently, the verb describes the act of being afraid. This construction is most common in the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>29</sup> Finally, this verb describes an attack as we find in Is 54:15. Frequently the verb occupies the same verse as the noun.<sup>30</sup> The idea conveyed here is often of an alien living in a foreign land. Thus, we find a relatively straightforward semantic range. In the contexts studied for the word גֵּר it is obvious the connection lies most with the first possible meaning for גִּיר: to sojourn or live outside one's country.

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<sup>25</sup> Gen 21:23, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Iss 33:14.

<sup>27</sup> Lev 20:2.

<sup>28</sup> *HALOT*. 1Kng 17:20

<sup>29</sup> Deut 1:17; 18:22; 32:27. It is also found in Num 22:3; 1Sam 18:15; Ps 22:24; 33:8; 38:19 Job 41:7; Lam 2:22; Hos 10:5.

<sup>30</sup> Exod. 12:48, 49; Lev. 16:29; 17:8, 10, 12, 13; 18:26; 19:33, 34; 20:2; Num. 9:14; 15:14, 15, 16, 26, 29; 19:10; Josh. 20:9; Ezek. 14:7; 47:22, 23.



Earlier charts showed the difference in distribution between the noun and the verb. Whereas the noun is concentrated in the Pentateuch, the verb's usage is more evenly distributed. Of particular note is the high concentration in Isaiah and Jeremiah. If context is a clue, this could point to a further development in the application of the idea "sojourner." Isaiah and Jeremiah both served in the southern kingdom as prophets during key transitional periods. Isaiah prophesied during the fall of the northern kingdom, while Jeremiah prophesied during the fall of the southern kingdom. Their emphasis on sojourning can be attributed to the fact they are speaking to a people who are about to be taken into a foreign land as resident aliens. The significance of this shift needs to be addressed in light of the canon as a whole.

### **Canonical Progression**

So far, the context of the noun נָכַר has been explored contextually, but not canonically. An intriguing pattern emerges when all the occurrences one reads these verses in order from Genesis to Malachi. In the beginning we find the people of God are themselves aliens in a foreign land – first voluntarily as Abraham wandered and then involuntarily through the bondage of slavery. When Israel is established as a nation, the focus on sojourners moves to those among the nation – these outsiders are protected and included. As the biblical narrative progresses, there is more emphasis on the alien as being oppressed and less on them as being among Israel. In the accounts of the Chroniclers, these people are in slavery and required to work for the King. The wisdom literature pulls this narrative flow together by reminding Israel that they too are aliens. Finally, as the prophets speak to a soon to be exiled people, we find Israel is once again about to become a literal nation of sojourners. Here we see Israel moves from being sojourners to housing sojourners, and back again; furthermore, they move from being oppressed to oppressing and back to being oppressed. This imagery carries with it major theological themes.

Additionally, it brings to light a concept not yet discussed: the presence of an alien in a foreign land is often due to events beyond their control.<sup>31</sup>

### **גֵר and נָכַר in Deuteronomy**

Within the book of Deuteronomy, the usage of the noun גֵר is quite consistent with the larger canon. The first occurrence of the word is in Deut 1:16 where the opening address of Moses sets the stage for how sojourners are viewed. Here, aliens are promised a fair hearing in the same manner as citizens. As you read Deuteronomy, apart from a few general comments about sojourners,<sup>32</sup> one finds the majority of the references fall into two broad categories. First, and less significant, sojourners are allowed to participate in the customs and rites of Israel.<sup>33</sup> Second, and much more frequent, we find mention of sojourners in the context of requiring care, or being extending special treatment.<sup>34</sup> Here we find a common description of sojourners as ones who are set apart and significant. This emphasis is important as we look to unravel one of the more difficult references in the book. Of all the verses in Deuteronomy, the passage that sends the most mixed signals is Deut 5:12-15. Here sojourners are promised the same Sabbath rest as citizens, an indication of equality. However, when viewed in a slightly different manner we notice they are listed after children, slaves and livestock, which could indicate they were viewed no higher than the beasts of burden.<sup>35</sup> While both arguments have valid cases, the larger context points to the former option. We find after the listing of those who enjoy the Sabbath, a reference

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<sup>31</sup> HALOT states a גֵר is "a man who (alone or with his family) leaves village and tribe because of war 2S 43 Is 164, famine Ru 11, epidemic, blood guilt etc. and seeks shelter and residence at another place, where his right of landed property, marriage and taking part in jurisdiction, cult and war has been curtailed.

<sup>32</sup> Deut 26:5; 28:43.

<sup>33</sup> Deut 16:11, 14; 29:11; 31:12.

<sup>34</sup> Deut 10:18-19; 14:21, 29; 23:8; 24:17, 19, 20, 21; 26:11-13; 27:19.

<sup>35</sup> Spruce, *ABD*. makes this argument.

is made back to YHWH's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. As has been established, the Old Testament often uses the story of the exodus as reason to care for the sojourners. It is more than reasonable to conclude that the sojourner is listed last, not because they are valued least, but because it allows the author to segue into the story of God's redemptive acts. This view is enhanced when understood alongside the majority of verses in Deuteronomy that require special care for the aliens.

The verbal use of the word גֵּר is much harder to pin down in Deuteronomy. It occurs five times; however, three of those times convey the idea of fear<sup>36</sup> while only two convey sojourning.<sup>37</sup> This is a break from the overall distribution of semantic meaning found in the Old Testament. One could overanalyze this connection and conclude that the author sees sojourners and ones to be feared, or they are a fearful people. This however, would not be consistent with the portrayal of aliens throughout the book. Therefore, the safest conclusion is to simply say the author of Deuteronomy understands גֵּר in one way, and is willing to use the word גֵּר in its fuller range of meanings without artificially tying it to its nominal counterpart.

A quick note needs to be made concerning how the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy translates the word for sojourner. Two words convey the idea of גֵּר. The first is παροικος and the second is προσηλυτος. In the Septuagint, these words carry similar meanings: "sojourner" and "resident alien, stranger" respectively.<sup>38</sup> Within a New Testament context, the word προσηλυτος reveals an interesting correlation. This is the word for proselyte and refers specifically to a

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<sup>36</sup> Deut 1:17; 18:22; 32:27.

<sup>37</sup> Deut 18:6; 26:5.

<sup>38</sup> J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint in BibleWorks*. Version 7.0, 2007. Hermenueitika, Big Fork, MT. Print ed.: 2 vols. Stuttgart: Dt. Bibelges, 2003.

group of people who have converted to Judaism.<sup>39</sup> Here too we find the imagery of a people who are within a group, but remain distinct.

## **Conclusion**

The use of נָכַר in Deuteronomy is straightforward and direct. Within the text, there are no hidden meanings for the word. This in no way makes the term insignificant. In the final book of the Pentateuch, as well as the Old Testament as a whole, we find the imagery of the sojourner to consistently portray a displaced people who are in, but not fully a part, of the land they occupy. When understood within the larger biblical narrative a significant theological theme emerges. Israel's roots lie in understanding themselves as sojourners – this is why they are called to care for sojourners in their midst. However, even when they occupy the land promised to them, they still must understand themselves as resident aliens, expect this time the land they occupy belongs to YHWH. As Israel is formed as a nation, a threat always looms: if they become disobedient, they risk once again becoming a displaced people. This becomes a reality with the coming of exile. As the Old Testament draws to a close, the people of God must once again learn to live in a foreign land while keeping their identity. Deuteronomy may focus on the literal definition of a sojourner in its law codes, but woven within Israel finds their own story and character.

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<sup>39</sup> See Acts 2:10-11; 13:43.

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