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Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world

# Immigration and the Bible

By M. Daniel Carroll R.

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James R. Krabill, series editor

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# Immigration and the Bible

By M. Daniel Carroll R.

Today, millions of people around the globe are on the move. Migration has been a human reality throughout history, but the sheer numbers of those who are seeking a new life is unprecedented. The reasons are many. Desperate situations can drive people from their homes—displacement caused by war, political or racial persecution, natural disasters, local economic hardships, or global market pressures. The lure of tales of quick fortune and a more comfortable life also prompt individuals to leave their place of origin. For some, the departure is forced and the way is treacherous, while others are able to secure safe passage. Each story is unique, and the variety of experiences is endless.



## **We live in a world of “people on the move”**

The labels that are assigned to these people reflect their circumstances. The term “refugee,” for example, refers to those who have been forced to migrate and seek asylum in a new land, either by their own efforts or by the intervention of international agencies like the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Agencies like these work with specific countries and local organizations to resettle victims suffering from unfortunate circumstances of this nature.

In contrast, “immigrants” are individuals who have left their native home of their own accord. They seek short- or long-term residence

somewhere else and cross borders according to set protocols at established ports of entry or, if that is not possible, attempt entry outside of that legal framework. A third and final category is “internally displaced persons.” These are people who migrate for the same reasons as refugees or immigrants, but who remain within their national boundaries.

Today’s huge demographic phenomenon of “people on the move” is having repercussions at all levels in countries everywhere. For communities that have members emigrate, that loss can result in the decrease of available labor, a brain drain, and the disruption of family life. For receiving communities, the influx of newcomers brings unforeseen pressures on



Immigration brings people from different cultural expressions.

job markets, educational institutions, health care facilities, and law enforcement. Different languages and cultural expressions rub against the grain of settled cultural identities, which in turn can spark ethnocentric feelings against outsiders.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, those who have recently arrived face a host of difficult challenges. They wrestle with their own identity and self-worth as they try to survive economically and integrate into strange surroundings.

Immigrants bring their religions, Christian and otherwise. In the United States, millions of Latino immigrants come from either Roman Catholic or some sort of Protestant background. Thousands of immigrant churches with Latin American, African and Asian roots are being planted across the 50 states. Every major denomination has launched outreach to these groups, and the Catholic Church is witnessing resurgence in attendance. Publishing houses, radio stations, family and youth seminars, and training institutions are focusing on these groups. Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and adherents of other faiths are also arriving and having an impact.

Sectors of national and local media can be quite negative toward those from other lands. How are Christians to respond to such a bewildering array of realities? Where can those who claim to follow Jesus Christ find counsel for engaging the immigrant phenomenon? This booklet makes the claim that Christians should respond self-consciously *as Christians* to immigration, and that *the Bible* should be their fundamental resource. To

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<sup>1</sup> The technical term in immigration literature for these negative feelings toward outsiders is “nativism.”

state it another way, our conversations about immigration should—both in tone and in content—reflect our faith. Christians need to consider how to provide a truly informed Christian perspective to the broader national debate. This should begin with the Bible. Does the Bible have anything to say about immigration? Indeed it does!

## Biblical terminology relating to immigration<sup>2</sup>

It may surprise many that migration and its effects are a major theme throughout the Bible. And, just like today, there were various reasons during biblical times why people migrated. Not a few who migrated would be classified as refugees today; some went to other lands looking for food and shelter; others were forcibly deported after Israel and Judah were defeated in war. There is much, too, in the Old Testament that describes life in a foreign place, and its pages contain the rich theological reflection that those situations generated. What these people experienced is similar to what “people on the move” today go through, and can teach us much about migration.

A helpful place to start the discussion is to examine the words the Bible uses to refer to migrants. Some might say, “This is too technical for me!” There may be something to that hesitancy, but remember that *we* have a variety of terms, too! And if immigration is such a serious and complex topic, then it is necessary to appreciate what the Bible has to say about it in a serious and detailed way. We owe this to our faith communities, to the newcomers in our midst, and to our Christian testimony in society.

Each term for outsiders in the Bible carries a bit of a different nuance. Sometimes, these distinctions are difficult to discern. There is a lot of biblical data to sift through, and the English versions—as well as those versions in other languages—are not always consistent in their translations. The same English word can be used for several Hebrew and Greek terms, and a Hebrew or Greek term may be translated by different English words! The most common translations of these words are “alien,” “resident alien,” “foreigner,” “stranger” and “sojourner.”

**If immigration is such a serious and complex topic, then it is necessary to appreciate what the Bible has to say about it.**

<sup>2</sup> Much of what follows is from M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2013). The first edition was translated into Spanish and appeared as, *Cristianos en la frontera: La inmigración, la Iglesia y la Biblia* (transl. L. N. Sáez; Lake Mary, FL: Casa Creación, 2009).

The Hebrew terms in the Old Testament that are most relevant for our study are the two nouns, *nekar* and *ger*,<sup>3</sup> and the two adjectives, *nokri* and *zar*. The fact that there are several terms indicates that Israel made distinctions among those who came from elsewhere. *Nekar* /*nokri* and *zar* refer to something or someone who is foreign to Israel. They often have a negative connotation of being a corrupting influence or threat (*nekar* /*nokri*—Joshua 24:20; 1 Kings 11:1-8; Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13:23-27; Psalm 144:7; and *zar*—Deuteronomy 32:16; Proverbs 22:14; Isaiah 1:7), although there are some exceptions (for example, *nokri* in Ruth 2:10 and 1 Kings 8:41, 43). The *nekar* /*nokri* are excluded from participating in certain festivals (Exodus 12:43) and could not be named king (Deuteronomy 17:15). Perhaps these individuals had no plan to stay for a lengthy period and were not interested in integrating themselves into Israelite life. They might have been, for example, merchants, mercenaries or traders.

The most important term in the Old Testament is *ger*. It occurs 92 times. This noun is related to the verbal root *gûr*, which means “to take up residence.” Consequently, the *ger* is someone who has come to settle down on a short-term or permanent basis. We will refer to these people as “sojourners.” The Old Testament Law stipulates a series of provisions for those who had made a commitment to become part of the community of Israel. There is no way to know if there were formal procedures that they had to go through to be accepted as a sojourner, or whether their integration into the community simply was part of a natural process over time. Ruth is a wonderful case study in this regard.

**A variety of terms are used in the Bible for people or things from “elsewhere.”**

The New Testament Greek words are *xenos*, *paroikos* and *parepidemos*. These terms refer to people or things that come from elsewhere and can appear to be out of place and have no status. *Xenos* occurs five times in Matthew 25:31-46, a passage that many connect to the immigration discussion and to which we will return later. *Xenos* and its verbal root *xenizo* can refer to something that is alien and not welcome (Acts 17:20; Hebrews 13:9). The English term “xenophobia,” which is the fear or dislike of someone foreign, comes from this Greek word. *Xenos* appears in parallel with *paroikos* in Ephesians 2:19 to refer to the relationship to God and God’s people that individuals have before they

<sup>3</sup> There is a third noun, *toshab*, but it is harder to define. It does not occur nearly as often as the other two terms and is not treated here.

come to faith. It occurs with *parepidemos* in Hebrews 11:13 to express how Old Testament saints viewed themselves in the world. *Paroikos* and *parepidemos* occur together in 1 Peter 2:11.

It is interesting to see that a variety of terms are used in the Bible for people or things from “elsewhere.” Some can convey negative connotations (*nekar /nokri* and *xenos*); others do not (*ger*). This kind of differentiation is to be expected in any society. Part of the debate today is to sort out whether immigration is a good thing or not, and what kind of immigrants might be accepted or rejected. At the same time, our survey is not limited to these words. There is much to be gleaned from other biblical material as well!

## Old Testament narratives of “people on the move”

Discussions on immigration frequently start at one of two points—the importance of maintaining the integrity of national borders, or the assertion that the immigration laws already in place should not be violated. If the primary concern is the *border*, then the debate usually focuses especially on issues of national security and the right of nations to protect their sovereignty. If it is existing *legal procedures*, then the discussion is reduced to the notion of legality, seeking to answer questions surrounding the legal status of immigrants.

National security and the legal framework are crucial items that must be addressed, but are they the best place to *begin* the discussion?<sup>4</sup> The problem with starting the discussion with borders and legality is that it sets a defensive tone before any consideration is given to immigrants—whether they are here with or without necessary documentation—as persons in need, as individuals who seek a better life for themselves and their families.<sup>5</sup>

**The image of God.** A more suitable place to ground the discussion is the creation account in two opening chapters of Genesis. The key point is that all human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis

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<sup>4</sup>These and other issues also require information on the history of immigration, of immigration legislation, of the border and its institutions of control, and of the development of immigration law and the international agreements that are part of such decisions. It is important to also understand the causes that lead to immigration, including, for example, the effects of economic globalization, war, and natural disasters. We will concentrate here, however, on the biblical material.

<sup>5</sup>This perspective appears even in presentations of the biblical data. Note, for instance, James K. Hoffmeier’s *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009).

1:26-28). The concept of the image of God is understood in several ways. One interpretation is that the image of God concerns what humans are and what they possess—an intellect, will, emotions, and a spiritual component. This is called the *ontological* or *substantive* view. A second perspective is that the image is best understood *relationally*, as referring to the unique communion with God available through Christ, the supreme embodiment of the divine image (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15).

A third option arises from biblical theology, and argues that the image is *functional*. It is humanity's special task to serve as God's vice regents on earth, to rule and subdue it as God's representatives (1:26, 28). In chapter 2 of Genesis, humans exercise this dominion by taking



All human beings are made in the image of God.

care of the garden (2:15) and by naming the animals (2:19-20). This functional view finds echoes in the worldview of the ancient world. Kings sometimes set up images of themselves in lands under their control as a visual reminder of their lordship. What is more, in some cultures, the king himself was thought to be the image, or representative, of the gods on earth. By announcing that all humans are made in the image of God, the Bible is saying that this privilege is not limited to certain individuals or to an elite social class.

No matter which of these three alternatives one might choose, all affirm that every person has special worth. The implications for immigration are immense, because it makes plain that outsiders also are created in the divine image. They, too, are valuable in God's sight and worthy of regard. Their giftedness as humans means that they, like all other people, have great potential and can, if given the opportunity, contribute to the common good.

At the same time, newcomers are reminded that they are not inferior because of their race, country of origin, educational background, or social status. Knowing they are created in God's image can empower them as individuals and families to continue growing into the persons God created them to be, and to live responsibly as God's representatives in their adopted land.

In sum, the image of God allows the conversation to be framed around a core belief in immigrants as people, created with value and with the capacity to impact society positively. This starting point is constructive and respectful and avoids the demeaning rhetoric that surfaces in discussions on immigration.

**People on the move.** The book of Genesis has many accounts of individuals and groups who are forced to move, either out of concrete need or for less-than-worthy reasons. As an act of judgment, Cain is condemned to wander for murdering his brother, Abel (Genesis 4:10-14). Humanity gathers in rebellion against God at Babel, but then is scattered, a dispersal that yields the multiplication of nations (Genesis 10-11).

Terah leaves Ur and goes to Haran, and Abram subsequently migrates from there to Canaan (Genesis 11:31-12:5). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, along with their families, leave their homes to settle temporarily in different places because of the lack of food, in Egypt (Genesis 12, 42-46), the Negev (Genesis 20), and Philistia (Genesis 26). In other words, the history of Abram and his descendants is one born of migration (Genesis 23:4; Deuteronomy 26:5).

Other Old Testament figures are forced from their homes. Jacob flees Esau and lives for a time in Aram with Laban and his family (Genesis 27-31). Joseph is betrayed by his brothers and is sold into slavery (Genesis 37). Moses escapes from Egypt to avoid prosecution for killing someone. He marries a Midianite and gives their son the name Gershom, which is a word play on *ger* (Exodus 2). Centuries later, thousands are taken into exile to Mesopotamia when Israel falls to Assyria in the eighth century B.C. (2 Kings 17), and Judah to Babylon in the sixth century (2 Kings 24-25).

The Bible contains amazing stories of immigrant grit and resourcefulness. Joseph overcomes unjust circumstances in Egypt, rises to become second to Pharaoh, and helps save that land from



The tower of Babel, the beginning of the dispersal of human beings all over the world.

**The Bible contains amazing stories of immigrant grit and resourcefulness.**

starvation (Genesis 39-41). He prepares the way for his father, Jacob, and the rest of his clan to settle in Goshen (Genesis 47:1-12). Naomi and her family leave Bethlehem because of famine and emigrate across the Jordan River to Moab. Ten years later, by then a widow and with both her sons dead, Naomi moves back to Bethlehem with Ruth, her daughter-in-law. Ruth in this new setting is the immigrant. She goes to the fields to glean alongside the harvesters of Boaz and earns everyone's admiration (Ruth 1-2).

Life in other lands was often difficult. Centuries after Joseph's death, the Pharaoh forgot Joseph's contributions and exploited the Israelites as slave labor for building projects (Exodus 1, 5). Scriptural evidence indicates that some captives in Assyrian exile became domestic servants, while others were put to work on farms or in construction. Psalm 137 voices the anger and melancholy of those taken from Judah by Babylon.

Other immigrants, however, enjoyed a measure of success. Joseph rose to prominence in Egypt, and Moses was raised in the palace (Exodus 1-2). Daniel served several kings with distinction. Esther's uncle, Mordechai, seems to have been a man of means, and this young woman became queen of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah was cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes, a post requiring absolute loyalty (Nehemiah 1:11). Even those best treated, however, still endured the stigma of being foreigners. Moses fled to save his life (Exodus 2), Daniel was indicted for his faith and later mocked at a banquet (Daniel 5-6), and the Jews in Persia were set to be killed before Esther's intervention (Esther 3-9).

**Assimilation.** One dictionary defines "to assimilate" as "to absorb into the cultural tradition of a population or group."<sup>6</sup> Questions arise about to what degree immigrants and refugees should forsake their past to accommodate themselves to the host culture. Is "assimilation" the best term to use? Does it assume that newcomers must erase their past as they are absorbed into the new culture? There always will be a level of integration by the mere fact of living among others, but which values and habits of home will be lost or modified? What about language—does acquiring a new language require forgetting a mother tongue? What of dress? Nonverbal language? Religion? Diet? All of these come into play when people move into new surroundings.

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<sup>6</sup> *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1979).

Biblical narratives reflect a spectrum of assimilation processes. Some individuals do not appear to acculturate much at all. Ezra, for example, a scribe committed to the Law, shows no interest in making himself at home in Persia. His goal is to return to Jerusalem and reestablish life there in careful observance of the mandates of the Mosaic covenant.

Others assimilate to a significant degree, but do not abandon their roots in Israel. Naomi goes back to her home in Bethlehem in hope of securing the support of friends and kin after the death of her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons. Jeremiah advises those who had been taken away to Babylon to settle in for a long stay and to invest in the place where they find themselves, all the while trusting in God for a future return to Israel (Jeremiah 29:1-14). Daniel and his friends are given new names and are trained for service to the Babylonian empire, yet keep the dietary laws and refuse to compromise their faith (Daniel 1-6). Even though Nehemiah is an important figure in the Persian court, he remains informed about the situation back in his ancestral land (Nehemiah 1). He leaves Persia with the king's permission and support to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but eventually, upon completion of the assignment, Nehemiah returns to his post.

Other immigrants become highly assimilated. Joseph, for instance, receives an Egyptian name and marries an Egyptian woman by whom he has two sons (Genesis 41:45, 50-52). He is so acculturated in appearance that his brothers do not recognize him. Clearly, Joseph speaks Egyptian, but he had not forgotten his mother tongue and understands their conversation, even though he employs the ruse of using an interpreter (Genesis 42:23). Joseph follows Egyptian custom and embalms his father, Jacob; the same is done to him upon his death (Genesis 50:2, 26). Moses is, of course, another Israelite who becomes very Egyptian, and the women at the well in Midian take him as such (Exodus 2:19).

Ruth leaves her homeland of Moab to accompany Naomi to Judah. Ruth declares her intention to take on the identity of her mother-in-law's people, but it is interesting to note that Naomi does not respond to that gesture nor does she introduce Ruth to the townspeople when they arrive in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:16-22). As a recent arrival, Ruth must be coached by Naomi on how to navigate new cultural situations, yet throughout the book she is constantly referred to as "the Moabitess."

**Biblical narratives reflect a spectrum of assimilation processes. Some individuals do not appear to acculturate much at all.**



Ruth, the hard-working immigrant woman who was finally accepted by elders of the community.

When Ruth marries Boaz, this hard-working immigrant woman is accepted by elders of the community and is applauded by the women who had originally ignored her (4:11-15). Surely, life would be easier for her son, Obed (4:16-17). The closing lines of the book disclose that Ruth, through her son, Obed, would be a part of the genealogy of David, Israel's greatest king (4:18-22)!

Esther is generations removed from the fall of Judah (586 BC). Like many who lived in exile, she had both a Jewish and a Persian name (Esther 2:7). Her relative, Mordechai, must have done well financially and socially, since he was able to sit at the city gate where the important individuals of the city congregated (3:2; 5:9). What infuriated Haman was that this well-to-do foreigner did not give him the respect that he believed his position deserved.

Haman plots to have all the Jews killed, telling the king that these people were different and so were dangerous and not to be trusted (3:1-11). But Mordechai uncovered an assassination plot, proving his loyalty to the crown (2:21-23), and worked through Esther to save their people (chapters 4, 8-10). Neither Esther nor Mordechai appear to have given any thought to returning to the land of their ancestors.

These narratives also reveal a spectrum of responses of the host peoples to these outsiders. Abimelech is ambivalent about Abram (Genesis 12:10-20; 26:6-11), whereas Bethlehem eventually celebrates the presence of Ruth. Egypt becomes alarmed by the large numbers of foreign workers and takes drastic measures to contain that population—even as they continue to take advantage of their labor (Exodus 1-2, 5). Haman's pride led him to hate the Jews, but Artaxerxes trusts Nehemiah, just as Nebuchadnezzar and Darius do Daniel. The treatment of immigrants was also, therefore, an issue in the ancient world.

Finally, mention should be made of the ancient practice of hospitality toward strangers. The people of God were hospitable toward others (see Abraham in Genesis 18:1-8) and also were dealt with generously by others (for example, Jacob in Genesis 29, and Moses in Exodus 2:15-20). Kindness toward the outsider reflected righteousness before God (Job 31:32).

The more one studies this topic, the more it becomes evident that the Old Testament is in part a collection of the stories of migrants and displaced peoples. It demonstrates that migration is not a new thing, but very much a reality in the ancient world as well. Second, in the biblical accounts, we discover the same reasons that we have today for migration—hunger, war, and political conquest. In addition, we also find in these narratives a similar variety in the processes of assimilation by immigrants, as well as in the reactions by host cultures.

The Old Testament is helpful, too, for those of us who have migrated. In these stories we discover people and situations with which we can identify as immigrants. We witness individuals who live faithfully and with integrity before God, even in the most difficult circumstances (Joseph, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel and his friends). And we encounter those whose life among others is sometimes questionable (Abraham, Jacob).



## The Old Testament Law

The sojourner (*ger*) in the Old Testament, whether from another country or as an internally displaced person, was a vulnerable individual, classified with widows, orphans and the poor as Israel's most at-risk persons. In the ancient world there were no governmental assistance programs, so often the extended family had to be the primary resource in times of need. The difficulty for outsiders was that they were separated from these kinship networks. They also were not able to participate in the local land tenure system. Property in Israel was passed on within the family through the male heirs, which obviously excluded the foreigner. In an agrarian peasant society like Israel's, the sojourner, then, was at the mercy of others for provision, work and protection.

Sojourners were dependent on others. They could be overworked and underpaid—or not paid at all. As outsiders, they could quite easily be taken advantage of in legal matters. The Old Testament laws respond to these potential challenges. Sojourners qualified, along with the widow, orphan and the poor, for gleaning privileges at harvest time (Leviticus

19:10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22; Ruth 2-3) and the triennial tithe (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). They were to be granted rest along with everyone else on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14), and were to be paid a fair wage on time (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). There was to be equal treatment before the law (Deuteronomy 1:16-17; 27:19), and the oppression of the sojourner was condemned by the prophets (Jeremiah 7:5-7; 22:2-5; Malachi 3:5). Even more extraordinary was the fact that the sojourner was allowed to take part in the most precious core of Israel's culture and identity—the rituals of its religious life (Exodus 20:8-11; 12:48-49; Leviticus 16:29-30; Deuteronomy 16:11, 14).

In this legislation, two motivations are given to the Israelites for demonstrating openness toward the sojourner. The most important and fundamental reason is simply that God loves the sojourner (Deuteronomy 10:14-19; Psalm 146:6-9; Jeremiah 7:4-8; Zechariah 7:8-10). But reinforcing this understanding is the historical reminder that the Israelites were once themselves despised foreigners in Egypt. In those difficult circumstances, Israel had been oppressed as cheap labor, but God had redeemed them. Now, as the descendents of those immigrants, they were to be gracious to the sojourners in their midst. In fact, some non-Israelites were actually part of that exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12:38). The dramatic liberating experience of migration out of Egypt was to define Israel as a people, and the treatment of the outsider would be a measure of their faith in God (Leviticus 19:34; Exodus 23:9). What was more, the Israelites were reminded that in some sense they remained, even in the land, sojourners and tenants before God (Leviticus 25:23).

While the laws directed at the sojourner were generous, there would also have been expectations of accommodation as well. The sojourner would have had to learn the laws of Israel (Deuteronomy 31:10-13; Joshua 8:34-35), and penalties for violations were the same for Israelite and outsider alike (Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 15:29). For sojourners to participate in the religious feasts, they would have had to convert to the faith of Israel, learn how to perform the rituals, and have the ability to speak Hebrew. There must have been, in other words, some level of assimilation of the sojourner into the local community. The prophets saw a future day of a more shared life with outsiders (Isaiah 56:1-8; Ezekiel 47:21-23).

**The dramatic liberating experience of migration out of Egypt was to define Israel as a people.**

This Old Testament legislation is relevant, even though it comes from a different time and place and was designed for an ancient theocracy. To begin with, it is Scripture; it is part of God's revelation to the church. Deuteronomy 4:5-8 states that Israel's laws—including the laws regarding the sojourner—were to be a witness to the other nations of the character of God and the fundamental values that make for a healthy society. That is, there are enduring principles to be found in this legislation. The laws were to help sojourners survive and have a sustainable life. At the same time, life with immigrants, then and now, is a reciprocal relationship of give and take so that a society can function in a healthy and respectful way. In the modern world, legislation for those who have migrated obviously will take a different shape, but God's ideals and demands remain.

**Israel's laws—including the laws regarding the sojourner—were to be a witness to the other nations of the character of God.**

## The question of national borders

Many who are reticent about the presence of immigrants, particularly those arriving without documents, point to the fact that border security and control are absolutely essential. This is a prevalent concern and one that must be addressed. It is questionable, however, whether border-related issues are the *best* place to begin the discussion on immigration. To concentrate there engenders a defensive posture whose natural tendency is to establish reasons for and categories of exclusion. Starting with the image of God, on the other hand, shifts the debate to human need and potential, which in turn can lead to a different tone about how the border should be cared for and who can enter and how.

The Bible demonstrates an awareness of geographic borders from early on. The list of nations in Genesis 10 mentions that territories pertained to the different peoples of the world (verses 5, 20, 30-31). The promise of land to Abraham cites limits to its breadth (Genesis 15:18), and the land assigned to each tribe is given with precision (Joshua 13-19). The boundaries of several of the surrounding nations also are cited (Numbers 21:10-20). There is a constant concern to establish the nation's boundaries (see 1 Kings 4:21; 2 Kings 14:25), and the historical books cite a number of wars with Aram (Syria), for example, that had to do with conflicts about where to mark territory. In some Old Testament passages, the judgments of God on the people of Israel include the loss

of land (2 Kings 10:32-33; 15:29). This sense of bounded space comes from God, the Bible says (Deuteronomy 32:8; Acts 17:26).

Some who oppose the influx of newcomers emphasize that these passages teach the importance of protecting national borders. They will point to passages in Numbers 20-25 or Judges 11:16-20 where the people



U.S.-Mexico border

of Israel ask permission from Edom, the Amorites, Moab and Ammon to pass through their land. The argument is that nations have the right to decide who can come into their territory, and that even Israel acknowledged this. The lesson to be drawn, it is claimed, is that those who do not obtain permission to enter have no right to be here.

There are problems, however, with this position. To begin with, in ancient times, borders, citizenship and nations functioned differently. There were city-states, nomadic peoples, empires of various sizes, coalitions of small states with varying degrees of shared governance, and individual nations. Democracy, as we know it today, did not exist. Governments were in some measure authoritarian and deeply bound up with religious ideologies and rituals. People were concerned about borders, but one should be careful not to project back how modern states control borders to political conditions millennia ago.

Archaeology has uncovered evidence of fortifications that countries set up to protect their borders from those deemed to be threats. This fear of invasion or infiltration by dangerous elements explains the reaction that Moses receives from the peoples whom Israel encountered on the way to Canaan (see the story of Rahab in Joshua 2). Moses was leading *a people* on a long journey that required going through the territory of other nations in order to reach their destination. Israel would have had to eat off the lands they traversed or secure food from those who lived there. The peoples they encountered surely considered Israel to be a military and economic threat. They were aware, too, of what had happened to the Egyptians. And for obvious reasons, they were wary! This scenario is very different from what is happening today, where *individuals* cross borders looking for work and a new start.

Those who are advocating immigration reform are cognizant of the need to better organize the national borders, and to develop functional processes that can properly coordinate humane concern for those who come for a better life with labor needs and the like. Borders are important, but the issues need to be handled with wisdom, justice and compassion.

## Lessons from the New Testament

We now turn to the New Testament. Are the same concerns for the outsider, present in the Old Testament, visible in the New? On the one hand, there is no direct teaching on the topic like one finds in the Old Testament. On the other hand, there is *much* that is relevant.

**Jesus' life and teaching.** This is the most appropriate place to begin the investigation of the New Testament, especially for the Mennonite tradition. In the *Missio Dei* publication, *What is an Anabaptist Christian?*, Palmer Becker proposes that the first core value for Anabaptists is that "Jesus is the center of our faith."<sup>7</sup> What, then, can Jesus teach us about the matter of immigrants and outsiders?

First of all, Jesus began his life as a refugee. He and his family were forced to flee to Egypt when he was a small child to avoid Herod's rampage (Matthew 2). It is not possible to know with certainty how long they sojourned in Egypt, but it is well documented that at that time there was a large Jewish community there. In other words, life in another place as a displaced person was part of Jesus' personal experience.<sup>8</sup>

In his teaching, Jesus does not engage this topic directly. It is important to appreciate, however, that Jesus constantly involved himself with those who were different and despised. Of special importance is his interaction with the Samaritans, a people loathed by the Jews. Jesus speaks with a Samaritan woman in John 4, and in Luke 10 he uses a Samaritan as the model of



Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

<sup>7</sup> Palmer Becker, *What is an Anabaptist Christian?* in the *Missio Dei* series, No. 18 (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2008; revised edition, 2010).

<sup>8</sup>Some suggest that the move of the Son to earth to live as a human being was a migration across borders to a very different kind of existence.

righteousness in his response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” This teaching is consistent with Jesus’ reaching out to the marginalized—Gentiles, women, the poor, the sick, and those classified as sinners.

The meaning of the admonition in Matthew 25 to care for the stranger is disputed (verses 35, 38, 43-44). Advocates for refugees and immigrants often appeal to this passage. The problem is that the occurrences of the qualifications “the least of these” and “brothers” (verses 40, 45) in the Gospel of Matthew may restrict these individuals to Jesus’ disciples (10:42; 12:48-49; 18:6, 10, 14; 28:10). If this is, in fact, a more accurate interpretation, then “strangers” are a more specific group—they are followers of Jesus who suffer for his sake.

This becomes reality in the book of Acts. Many early believers are scattered by persecution (8:1-5; see also Revelation 1:9), and itinerant preachers were a common phenomenon in the early church, as perhaps best illustrated by the missionary journeys of Paul (1 Corinthians 16:5-18; Galatians 4:13-14; Philippians 2:19-30; 3 John 5-10). These missionary efforts eventually produced multiethnic churches with believers from various backgrounds and places of origin (Acts 13:1)—a mix that produced tensions within the community of faith (Acts 15; Galatians 2; Ephesians 2).

**The epistles.** The epistles declare that *all* Christians are sojourners in a spiritual sense. The citizenship of believers ultimately lies elsewhere (Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 13:14). Christians should not then cling too closely to earthly loyalties, and should be open to others who have come from elsewhere and respond in God-honoring ways. 1 Peter speaks of believers as “aliens and strangers” (1:1; 2:11). These words reinforce the notion of another citizenship, though it is possible that the addressees of this letter were literal exiles who had been displaced by the empire. If so, their legal standing mirrored their spiritual status as Christians.

Hospitality toward others, whether fellow believers or unfamiliar persons, is a Christian virtue. Christians are to be charitable to others (Luke 14:12-14; Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9), and this quality should be a distinguishing mark of the leadership of the church (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8).

Clearly, the attitudes and actions of Jesus and the teaching of the epistles lead to a more open stance toward immigrants. But . . . what about

Romans 13 and the call to submit to the authorities? This passage must be put into proper perspective. To begin with, Christians should recognize that *their* agenda is set forth in chapter 12 of Romans, where it says that believers are not to be molded by the “pattern of this world” (12:2). Their lives should be characterized by service and compassion—even toward enemies (12:3-21)! The authorities, however, have a different purpose and way of doing things (Romans 13). While Christians are called to respect the government, this does not mean agreeing with everything that it might legislate or do.

Citizens of the United States have the constitutional right to disagree with the government, and Christians do this in multiple ways—with their vote, through publications, by establishing organizations that defend other points of view, and by participating in peaceful protests for a variety of causes. Immigration is an example of another issue over



Christians should seek constructive change with humility, charity and justice.

which believers might diverge from the goals and enforcement of current laws. Leaders from across the political spectrum recognize that the present immigration system is broken and needs to be changed. A look at the history of immigration and immigration law reinforces this perception of a complicated, nonfunctional legal framework.

Thus, to make Romans 13 the sole foundation of a discussion on immigration will not do. A surer, more comprehensive basis is the entirety of Scripture. With that underpinning, Christians then move forward to thinking about legal issues. Discussion on legality cannot be limited to questions about complying with current laws—laws that all agree are impractical and will be replaced. If these laws are problematic—*theologically, humanely and pragmatically*—then the implications of Romans 13 must be rethought in fresh ways. Ideally, laws should embody the best moral values of a nation.

But what of undocumented immigrants who are Christians? They

are aware that they violate the law by living and working here. But they also have experienced the law's inequities. The government permits employers to hire immigrant workers because the country needs inexpensive labor, but then does not grant access to social services. Many immigrant believers admire the legal system and many do their best to obey the laws in every area that does not threaten their jobs, homes, and children's welfare. Many want to be model "citizens" as part of their Christian duty. Overwhelmingly, immigrants fervently want a fair legal resolution to the situation.

Christians should seek constructive change with humility, charity and justice. This can be done with respect for the authorities, yet also with a commitment to the higher calling of God's people to be a blessing to the world. Jesus and the rest of the New Testament point us to a better way as those who are part of God's kingdom on earth.

## Conclusion

This survey of the relevant biblical material has shown that immigrants are made in the image of God, that migration has always been part of the human experience, that many biblical heroes were displaced persons, and that Old Testament laws helped the vulnerable in concrete ways. The life and teachings of Jesus stress that believers need to consider the possibility that those who are different are the very ones to whom they should turn. And the epistles call the church to have a hospitable spirit toward the outsider.

The Scriptures should influence the attitudes and actions of Christians. How the biblical perspective takes shape in personal behavior, church initiatives, and legislation is still to be seen. But the Bible *can* and *should* make a positive difference in these difficult times.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. When you hear the word “immigrants,” what kind of people most quickly come to mind: Germans, Italians, Irish, Eastern Europeans, Muslims, Guatemalans, Chinese, Nigerians, Indians, Somalis, Koreans, Mexicans, Vietnamese, Cubans, others?
2. What attitudes toward immigrants do you find most commonly expressed among friends and neighbors with whom you live and work: fear, openness, disdain, curiosity, anger, frustration, excitement, anxiety, eagerness to experience diversity, xenophobia, other?
3. Do you find the attitudes of fellow churchgoers regarding immigrants any different from those not associated with faith communities?
4. The author of this booklet believes that “Christians should respond self-consciously as Christians to immigration, and that the Bible should be their fundamental resource” (page 2). Do you agree? What have you found in these pages that would help you to do that?
5. The author also states that national security and the legal framework are crucial issues to address, but that the beginning point for God’s people should be the affirmation that all human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28). Do you believe that starting with this affirmation changes the debate about immigration? If so, in what way(s)? If not, why not?
6. “Assimilation” is defined in this text as “absorbing into the cultural tradition of a population or group.” Is this how you would describe what immigrants should do? If not, how would you characterize what should happen to new arrivals in a culture?
7. How does your answer to the last question shape your view of what should happen within the church when differing cultural traditions and patterns meet or collide? How does Paul’s counsel to Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians 2:11-18 inform our understanding of God’s will for Christ’s body?

## For further reading

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\*Available in Spanish.

# Immigration and the Bible

By M. Daniel Carroll R.

For most people, including many members of the Christian community, foundational understandings of immigration come from the news, their neighbors' opinions, from national security needs, or the country's legal framework. M. Daniel Carroll R. firmly believes that God's people can and *must* do better than this. "Christians should respond self-consciously as *Christians* to immigration," he claims, "and *the Bible* should be their fundamental resource."

Does the Bible have anything to say about immigration? Indeed it does, claims Carroll, and he sets out to amply demonstrate it by walking readers through the lives and times of Abraham, Ruth, Daniel, Esther and Jesus himself, whose own life began as a refugee "in another place as a displaced person."

Readers of this booklet will find Carroll's writing insightful, yet easy to read—a fine beginning for sermons, Sunday school lessons, and small-group conversations.

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