

Aliens, Immigration, and Refugees

Migration has been a human reality throughout history. People move for many reasons, and the various labels assigned to them reflect these circumstances. The term *refugee* refers to those who are forced to abandon their place of origin because of a natural disaster or to escape a war zone or the threat of violent persecution. These persons seek asylum in a different place through their own efforts or through the intervention of international agencies such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which works with governments and local organizations (often religious institutions) to resettle them. Ideally, treatment of refugees should follow internationally agreed conventions.

The term *immigrant* is used of those who leave home willingly and desire short- or long-term residence somewhere else. Most migrate in an effort p 54 to find employment and to provide their family a suitable life and future. Entry into a new land can be done according to proper protocols at established ports of entry or outside of that legal framework. Another category is “internally displaced persons,” referring to those who remain within their national boundaries but change locations for the same reasons appropriate to refugee or immigrant status.

The twenty-first century is witnessing the movement of millions across borders. This demographic phenomenon impacts local and international economies, brings unforeseen pressures on law enforcement and the integrity of national borders, can strain educational and healthcare infrastructures, and is raising concerns about cultural identity in receiving countries. Living in a different culture creates challenges for the recently arrived populations as well. They wrestle with their own identity as they engage the complex problems related to their

economic survival and accommodation to strange surroundings. Another affected sphere is religion. Refugees and immigrants around the world are revitalizing their traditions, Christian and non-Christian, and bringing fresh perspectives on the practice of their faith to their new lands.

Migration and the Bible

Migration and its effects are a major topic in both the OT and the NT. Then, as now, the reasons for migration vary. Many of those in the Bible who migrated would be categorized technically today as refugees or as forcefully displaced, but the descriptions of life and the theological reflection that those situations generated mirror the experiences of migrants everywhere. Scripture can offer distinct but interrelated messages to those who take in the outsider and to the newcomers. The majority culture that accepts refugees and immigrants learns that God loves the vulnerable. This divine concern should shape attitudes and orient actions on behalf of the stranger. Also, those who come from another place can be encouraged and empowered by God's commitment to the weak and by the biblical accounts of others of similar fate.

Biblical terminology. Several terms are used to refer to outsiders in the Bible. It is possible that each carries a discrete nuance. These distinctions are difficult to discern, however, because of the complexity of the biblical data and because of inconsistencies in the English versions. The same English word can be used for various Hebrew and Greek terms, and a particular Hebrew or Greek term is translated by different English words. The most common translations of the words in question are *alien*, *stranger*, *resident alien*, *foreigner*, and *sojourner*.

The relevant Hebrew terms in the OT are the nouns *nēkār*, *tôšāb*, and

gēr, and the adjectives *nokrî* and *zār*. This variety in terminology implies that Israel differentiated among the outsiders in their midst. The terms *nēkār/nokrî* and *zār* can refer to something or someone who is foreign to Israel. These can be neutral designations (e.g., *nokrî* in [Ruth 2:10](#); [1 Kgs. 8:41, 43](#)), but frequently they carry a negative connotation of being a corrupting influence or a threat (*nēkār/nokrî* in [Josh. 24:20](#); [1 Kgs. 11:1–8](#); [Ezra 9–10](#); [Neh. 13:23–27](#); [Ps. 144:7](#); *zār* in [Deut. 32:16](#); [Prov. 22:14](#); [Isa. 1:7](#)). Those who are *nēkār/nokrî* are excluded from participating in certain rituals ([Exod. 12:43](#)) and from office ([Deut. 17:15](#)). Perhaps these were outsiders who did not seek to stay and integrate themselves into Israelite life and faith. The term *tôšāb* is harder to define. In the few places where *tôšāb* occurs, it often is in parallel with “hired servant” ([Exod. 12:45](#); [Lev. 25:6, 40](#)) or *gēr* ([Gen. 23:4](#); [Lev. 25:23](#)). In the latter case, some argue, the combination is to be construed as “resident alien” ([Lev. 25:35, 47](#)). The most significant term in the OT is *gēr*. The *gēr*, as its verbal root *gûr* suggests (“to take up residence”), is someone from elsewhere who settled down on a temporary or permanent basis. There are a series of provisions in the OT law for these individuals, who had made a commitment to become part of the community of Israel. It is impossible to determine whether this incorporation into national life was simply part of natural processes or if at some point formal procedures were established to make it official. As will become evident, the OT’s contribution to discussions on refugees and immigrants is not limited to passages where these terms appear.

The relevant NT words are *xenos*, *paroikos*, and *parepidēmos*. These refer to people or things that may come from elsewhere and so appear to be out of place and have no status. The word *xenos* occurs four times in [Matt. 25:31–46](#), where [Jesus](#) identifies the stranger with himself. *Xenos*

and its verbal root, *xenizō*, can indicate something that is alien and unwelcome (e.g., [Acts 17:20](#); [Heb. 13:9](#)). This word is the source of the English term *xenophobia*, which is the fear or dislike of someone foreign. It occurs in parallel with *paroikos* in [Eph. 2:19](#) to refer to the relationship to the household of God that people have before they come to faith, and with *parepidēmos* in [Heb. 11:13](#) to describe how past saints viewed themselves in the world. *Paroikos* and *parepidēmos* appear together in [1 Pet. 2:11](#). They may point to the legal standing in the p 55 Roman Empire of the recipients of the letter as well as to their new spiritual reality in the world (cf. [1 Pet. 1:1](#)).

Old Testament narratives. The place to ground discussion on refugees and immigrants is the creation of humankind in the image of God in [Gen. 1:26–28](#). There are several interpretations of the meaning of the image. The ontological view holds that the image of God concerns what humans are and what they possess (an intellect, will, emotions, and a spiritual component). Some argue for a relational perspective, which holds that it refers to the unique communion with God available to humans through Christ, the supreme embodiment of the divine image ([2 Cor. 4:4](#); [Col. 1:15](#)). A third view contends that the image is functional. It is humanity's special task to rule as God's vice-regents on earth. All three options assert that every person has worth. Outsiders also are created in the divine image. They too are valuable in God's sight and worthy of respect. Their giftedness as humans signifies that they have great potential. For these newcomers, the image communicates that there is no warrant to feel inferior as second-class persons. At the same time, there is a claim on their lives. The image can be a motivation for them to develop skills for the common good and to live responsibly as God's representatives in their adopted land.

The movement of individuals and groups begins in the opening chapters of Genesis. Cain is condemned to perpetual wandering for murdering Abel ([Gen. 4:10–14](#)). In the biblical narrative humanity is scattered at Babel, and this dispersal yields the multiplication of nations ([Gen. 10–11](#)). Nations have geographical boundaries ([Gen. 10:5, 20, 30–31](#); cf. [Deut. 32:8](#); [Acts 17:26](#)), but peoples have migrated across these for millennia. The story of the chosen people begins with Terah’s move from Ur to Haran and Abram’s subsequent pilgrimage from there to Canaan ([Gen. 11:31–12:5](#)). In other words, the history of the patriarch and his descendants is one born of migration ([Gen. 23:4](#); cf. [Deut. 26:5](#)).

Many move to survive. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (and his sons and their families) sojourn temporarily in different places in their search for food (Egypt [[Gen. 12; 42–46](#)]; the Negev [[Gen. 20](#)]; Philistia [[Gen. 26](#)]). Jacob goes north to Aram to flee the wrath of his brother Esau and lives for a time with Laban and his family ([Gen. 27–31](#)). Moses leaves Egypt for many years to avoid trouble for killing someone; he marries a Midianite and names their son “Gershom,” a word play on the term *gēr* ([Exod. 2](#)). Naomi and her family leave Bethlehem in a time of famine and cross the Jordan into Moab. Ten years later, now a widow and with both her sons dead, she moves back with Ruth, her daughter-in-law. Naomi the immigrant has returned home, and now Ruth is the immigrant. Survival is still the issue, however, and Ruth goes to the fields to glean alongside the harvesters of Boaz. Others are removed forcibly from their homes. Joseph is betrayed and sold into slavery. He overcomes difficult circumstances in Egypt, rises to become second to Pharaoh, and helps save that land from starvation ([Gen. 37; 39–41](#)). He prepares the way for his father and the rest of his clan to migrate to the Nile Delta and settle in Goshen ([Gen. 47:1–12](#)). Centuries later, thousands are taken into exile

into several regions of Mesopotamia when Israel falls to Assyria in the eighth century BCE (2 Kgs. 17), and Judah to Babylon in the sixth century BCE (2 Kgs. 24–25).

Life in other lands could be harsh. After a time, the ruler of Egypt forgot Joseph's contributions and exploited the Israelites as slave labor for building projects (Exod. 1; 5). Egyptian sources describe measures (e.g., building a line of forts along the eastern frontier) to keep out certain groups seeking pasture and employment in the fertile regions of the Nile River. Inscriptional evidence indicates that some in Assyrian exile became domestic servants; others were assigned to work on farms or in construction. Psalm 137 voices the anger, shame, and homesickness of those forcibly removed from Judah by Babylon. Not everyone, though, endured such harsh fates. In Egypt some foreigners rose to prominence (Joseph [Gen. 41]; Moses [Exod. 1–2]). Daniel lived in the royal precincts, where he served several kings with distinction. Esther's uncle Mordecai seems to have been a man of some means, and this young woman became queen of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah was cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes, a post that required absolute loyalty. Ezra and Ezekiel apparently ministered freely among their people in exile.

Another key issue, pertinent to both the host culture and migrant populations, is the accommodation of newcomers to their new situations. The OT narratives reflect a spectrum of assimilation processes and their effects. Some desire little acculturation. Ezra, for example, as a priest deeply committed to the law, seems to have assimilated little. He desires instead to return to his homeland and to reestablish life there according to the demands of the Mosaic covenant.

Others assimilate to a significant degree but do not totally forget their roots. Naomi goes back to seek the support of friends and kin in

Bethlehem after the death of her husband and sons. Jeremiah ^p 56 instructs those in exile to plan for a long stay and to invest their lives in the place where they find themselves. This advice is accompanied by an exhortation to continue to trust in the God of Israel in light of a possible future return (Jer. 29:1–14). Daniel and his friends receive Babylonian names and are trained for service to the empire. Yet, even as they fulfill their duties, they maintain the dietary laws and openly testify to their faith, even at great personal cost (Dan. 1–6). Nehemiah is cupbearer to the king but still is attentive to news from his ancestral land. He leaves with the king’s permission and support to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He revitalizes Jewish society as governor but after a time returns to his post in the Persian court.

Still others evidently experience almost total assimilation. Joseph is given an Egyptian name, marries an Egyptian, and has two sons by her (Gen. 41:45, 50–52). He is so acculturated that his brothers do not recognize him. Interestingly, Joseph had not forgotten his mother tongue and understands their conversation (Gen. 42–45). Following Egyptian custom, he embalms Jacob after his death, and the same is done to him (Gen. 50:2, 26). Moses is thought to be an Egyptian by the women at the well (Exod. 2:19). Ruth leaves her homeland and declares her intention to take on the identity of her mother-in-law’s people (Ruth 1:16–17). Yet, as one who has recently arrived, Ruth must be coached by Naomi on how to navigate the different cultural mores and institutions (Ruth 2–3). Ruth marries Boaz and is fully accepted into the Israelite community. The closing lines of the narrative reveal that this immigrant woman is a key piece in the genealogy of David (Ruth 4:13–22). Esther is generations removed from the fall of Judah. Like many exiles, she had

both a Jewish and a Persian name ([Esth. 2:7](#)). Mordecai, her relative, must have done well for himself financially and socially in order to have the right to sit at the city gate (e.g., [Esth. 3:2](#); [5:9](#)). That this prosperous foreigner did not do him homage infuriated Haman and motivated him to seek the destruction of all the Jews. Mordecai demonstrates loyalty to the king by uncovering an assassination plot ([Esth. 2:21–23](#)), even as he works through Esther to save their people ([Esth. 4](#); [8–10](#)). There is no indication that either contemplated returning to the land.

From these same narratives it is possible to reconstruct a continuum of responses of the host peoples: from Egyptian anxiety of being overrun by large numbers of foreign workers (and their violent effort to halt the growth of that population) and Haman’s hatred of the Jews, to the ambivalent reception of Abraham ([Gen. 12:10–20](#); [26:6–11](#)), to the inclusion of Ruth by the Bethlehemites and the deep trust that Artaxerxes has in Nehemiah, and Nebuchadnezzar and Darius in Daniel. These diverse emotional reactions are accompanied by diverse political decisions and social arrangements. The treatment of immigrants, however they arrived, was an issue in the ancient world.

Finally, mention should be made of the ancient practice of hospitality toward strangers. The people of God practiced this openness toward others (e.g., Abraham [[Gen. 18:1–8](#)]) and also were beneficiaries of gracious treatment when they traveled elsewhere (e.g., Moses [[Exod. 2:15–20](#)]). Kindness toward the outsider reflected righteousness before God ([Job 31:32](#)).

The OT narratives can orient discussion about immigration and refugees in several ways. For example, they demonstrate that migration was a fundamental reality for many peoples of the Bible, even as it is today. It is not a recent or isolated phenomenon. Moreover, the kinds of

forces that drive contemporary migration, such as basic human needs and military conflict, and the mistreatment that strangers sometimes endure are present in the biblical accounts. The different assimilation experiences in these accounts also mirror modern variations. An appreciation of the Scriptures as in large measure a collection of the stories of migrant and displaced peoples can sensitize today's receiving communities to the presence and plight of these persons in their midst. That the Bible contains migration accounts is helpful too for those who have migrated. In its pages the displaced discover individuals and circumstances with which they can identify. They are exposed to examples of how to live faithfully in potentially adverse situations (e.g., Joseph, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel) in full confidence that God is with them no matter where they are on the assimilation spectrum and irrespective of the kind of welcome they experience in their new land.

Old Testament law. Sojourners (the term *gēr*), whether from another country or internally displaced, were especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life. This is evident in that they are classified with widows, orphans, and the poor as being most at risk. There were no governmental assistance programs such as we have today. The extended family was to provide a safety net in times of need. The difficulty for these outsiders was that they were separated from those kinship networks. Moreover, they were outside the local land tenure system, where property was passed on within the family through male heirs. In an agrarian peasant ^{p 57} society such as Israel, these outsiders, without family and land, were at the mercy of the Israelites for sustenance, work, and protection.

The provision of food was a constant concern because sojourners depended on others for day-to-day living. They were at risk of being

overworked and underpaid (or not paid at all). As outsiders, they might find themselves at a disadvantage in legal matters. Legislation in the OT responds to these challenges. Sojourners qualified, along with those other needy groups, for the gleaning laws at harvest time ([Lev. 19:9–10](#); [Deut. 24:19–22](#)) and the triennial tithe ([Deut. 14:28–29](#)). They were to be given rest on the Sabbath ([Exod. 20:10](#); [Deut. 5:14](#)) and be paid a fair wage on time ([Deut. 24:14–15](#)). No one was to take advantage of them in the courts ([Deut. 1:16–17](#); [27:19](#)). The prophets denounced those who oppressed the sojourner ([Jer. 7:5–7](#); [22:2–5](#); [Mal. 3:5](#)).

The law does not stipulate specific penalties for not showing compassion toward the sojourner. Instead, it makes a moral appeal rooted in two primary motivations. First, the Israelites must never forget that they had been despised foreigners in another land. At one time, they had been workers in Egypt's oppressive system, but they had been redeemed by God's gracious, powerful hand. That is, as descendants of immigrants, they should be generous to the sojourners among them. That saga of migration was to define them, and the treatment of the outsider served as a measure of their faith in God ([Lev. 19:34](#); [Exod. 23:9](#)). From the very outset of their escape from Egypt, outsiders had lived among them ([Exod. 12:38](#)). The Israelites themselves were sojourners still in that land of which God was the owner ([Lev. 25:23](#)). The second and more important reason to love the sojourner is that God does. God demands charity toward the weak, including the outsider ([Deut. 10:14–19](#); cf. [Ps. 146:6–9](#); [Jer. 7:4–7](#); [Zech. 7:8–10](#)).

The legislation related to sojourners was generous, but mutuality was assumed as well. With these benefits came the expectation of accommodation by the outsider. The sojourner was expected to learn the laws of the land ([Deut. 31:10–13](#); cf. [Josh. 8:34–35](#)). Penalties for

violations were to be the same for native and outsider alike ([Lev. 24:22](#); [Num. 15:29](#)). Participation in religious feasts (e.g., [Exod. 12:48–49](#); [20:8–11](#); [Lev. 16:29–30](#); [Deut. 16:11, 14](#)) required conversion, an awareness of procedures, and the ability to speak Hebrew. These laws point to a degree of assimilation into the local community. The prophets spoke of a future day when there would be a shared life with outsiders ([Isa. 56:1–8](#); [Ezek. 47:21–23](#)).

This legal material remains relevant for the contemporary situation. As Scripture, the law is part of the divine revelation to the church, which must discern guidance from its demands. Even though these laws indeed were designed for Israel—its time, place, and culture—their significance reaches beyond that ancient people of God. [Deuteronomy 4:5–8](#) states that Israel’s legislation (and thus their laws regarding the sojourner) was a witness to the other nations of the character of God and the fundamental values that can make for a healthy society. Then and now, other nations will have their own particular legislation and socioeconomic configurations for outsiders, but the divine insistence on their care remains.

The New Testament. An examination of relevant material in the NT starts with [Jesus](#) himself. When he was a small child, [Jesus](#) and his family fled to Egypt to avoid Herod’s rampage ([Matt. 2:13–15](#)). No information about the length of their sojourn in Egypt is provided, but at that time there was a large, long-standing Jewish community there. [Jesus](#) lived as a refugee in a foreign land, and so life in another place as a displaced person was part of his personal experience.

In his teaching [Jesus](#) never deals directly with the topic of migration. Nevertheless, at least two items are relevant. First, [Jesus](#) involved himself with those who were different and despised by the broader community.

On several occasions he engaged the Samaritans, a people loathsome to many Jews. Jesus spoke with a Samaritan woman ([John 4:7–26](#)), and he uses a Samaritan as a paragon of righteousness in his response to the question “Who is my neighbor?” ([Luke 10:29–37](#)). This teaching is consistent with his call to reach out to the marginalized—gentiles, women, the poor, the sick, and those classified as sinners by the religious authorities.

The second point concerns Jesus’ pronouncement in [Matt. 25:31–46](#) about caring for the stranger (vv. [35](#), [38](#), [43–44](#)). Advocates for refugees and immigrants often appeal to this passage to defend the rights of outsiders. This interpretation is possible but faces the problem that the referent is disputed. The occurrences of the qualification “the least of these” and “brothers” ([Matt. 25:40](#), [45](#)) may restrict these individuals to Jesus’ disciples (cf. [Matt. 10:42](#); [12:48–50](#); [18:6](#), [10](#), [14](#); [28:10](#)). If this latter interpretation is the better one, then the “strangers” are followers who suffer for Jesus’ sake at the hands of others.

The forced displacement of believers due to persecution is recorded in Acts. Many are scattered by the persecution headed by Saul (later called p 58 “Paul”), himself a Diaspora Jew ([Acts 8:1–5](#); cf. [Rev. 1:9](#)), and itinerant preachers apparently were a common phenomenon in the early church (cf. the missionary journeys of Paul; [1 Cor. 16:5–18](#); [Gal. 4:13–14](#); [Phil. 2:19–30](#); [3 John 5–10](#)). There also are multiethnic churches with believers from various backgrounds and places of origin (e.g., [Acts 13:1](#)), a mix that produced tensions ([Acts 15](#); [Gal. 2](#); [Eph. 2](#)).

The NT Epistles reveal that all Christians are sojourners in a spiritual sense; their citizenship ultimately lies elsewhere ([Phil. 3:20](#); [Heb. 13:14](#)). In [1 Pet. 1:1](#); [2:11](#) the author speaks of believers as “aliens” and “strangers.”

The addressees of this letter may have been literal exiles who had been moved by the empire. If so, that legal standing reflected in unique ways their spiritual status as Christians. In addition, hospitality toward others, whether fellow believers or unfamiliar persons, is a Christian virtue. All Christians are to be gracious to others ([Rom. 12:13](#); [Heb. 13:2](#); [1 Pet. 4:9](#); cf. [Luke 14:12–14](#)), and this quality should distinguish the leadership of the church ([1 Tim. 3:2](#); [Titus 1:8](#)).

Migration, Theology, and Mission

Both the OT and the NT have much to teach concerning the migration of people. This survey has pointed out that refugees and immigrants are made in the image of God, that migration is part of human experience, that many biblical “heroes” were displaced persons, and that OT legislation was benevolent to the vulnerable in many concrete ways. The life and teachings of [Jesus](#) demonstrate the need for believers to consider the possibility that those who are different may be the very ones who can lead them to a deeper faith, while the NT Epistles call the church to care for the outsider. After all, every Christian is an outsider—a stranger—in the world. This extensive scriptural material should shape attitudes and actions toward outsiders. Today, many believers need to be reminded that they are descendants of immigrants and displaced people, and that to follow the God of the Bible means being gracious toward those whom he loves. How these biblical perspectives and moral demands take shape in personal behavior, church initiatives, and civil legislation that can promote human flourishing and the common good depends on the impact of the Christian ethical voice and involvement.

These multiple challenges for migrant populations, which contain many Christians, have spawned creative theological reflection. As in the

days of the Jewish exile and during the early years of the church, displaced believers are wrestling in fresh ways with the person of God and the nature of faith. New ways of thinking are attempting to move beyond traditional theological categories and limited interpretations of the Bible that have not given enough attention to the views and experiences of marginalized peoples. Theologians and pastoral workers are turning to postcolonial studies, international law, the histories of migration, and sociological and anthropological work on ethnicity, hybridity, and transnationalism to better comprehend the situation of immigrants and refugees—that is, the modern-day human diaspora in an era of globalization. This diaspora theology seeks to speak from and for these people, whether to encourage those who suffer as victims of their circumstances or to orient those who see their displacement as an important moment in the worldwide work of the sovereign God. Inevitably, these efforts are leading to new appreciations and understandings of the character and mission of the church that will enrich theology and Christian practice.

See also [Exile](#); [Globalization](#); [Hospitality](#); [Image of God](#); [Nationalism](#); [Population Policy and Control](#)

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M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas)