

Applying Mercy to the Issue of Migration

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Strangers and Pilgrims: Refugees and Immigrants

A critical issue in our time is the situation of immigrants and refugees. How can we help them? Should we? What is it that they need? How can the biblical text inspire us to attend to this opportunity? Is there room for mercy? Two of the most significant people in Scripture were themselves “strangers,” sojourners: Abraham and Jesus. Both men were at different times in their lives what we might call “homeless.”

Old Testament

Abraham was often a “stranger,” a sojourner. When he is first introduced we are told that his father Terah left Ur of the Chaldeans intending to go to Canaan, but stopped in Haran (Gen 11:31-32). (Haran is on the Euphrates River just north of the modern border between Syria and Turkey; Ur is also on the Euphrates, not far from where it empties into the Persian Gulf.) Terah’s son Abram is then instructed by God to continue the journey intended by his father. “Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Abram was then seventy-five years old (Gen 12:4)! But he and Sarai (later called Sarah) and his nephew Lot obeyed God and set out for Canaan. When they arrived they settled in the hill country of Canaan near Shechem.

This story indicates that Abram (later Abraham) and Sarah are clearly immigrants, and they do not go to a land that is uninhabited. “The Canaanites were then in the land” (Gen 12:6). Abraham is a stranger, a sojourner in *their* land. But Abraham does not stop there. He moves on to the southern desert and finally, because of famine, he goes all the way to Egypt (Gen 12:9). Eventually he and his wife retrace their journey, going back to the Negeb and finally to Canaan. In the midst of all this travel (and there is more) God keeps promising him that he will have a multitude of descendants



and that they will possess the land from Egypt to the Euphrates. So in Abraham and Sarah we see strangers whose descendants will eventually become the citizens of the land.

Abraham is not only a sojourner; he also welcomes strangers. When three men show up in front of his tent he immediately offers hospitality (Gen 18:1-5). He eases their travel weariness, giving them water to wash their feet, and feeds them. The amazing consequence is that one of them announces to him that Sarah will have a son within a year. Sarah's response, as we know, is laughter (Gen 18:9-15). But the stranger was right and Isaac was born the next year. Strangers may also bring good and surprising news!

The rest of the Old Testament is rich in stories of strangers and immigrants. Moses' parents and he himself were strangers in Egypt; his people were even enslaved (Exod 1:11-14). The story of the Exodus, the second creation of God's people, is about release from this servitude. But God's people do not immediately come into their land. They wander for forty years in the desert. They are not the only people in the Sinai desert, however; the desert is not uninhabited. Other peoples lived there who both fought with and welcomed Moses and the people he led (e.g., Amalek and Balaam; Exod 17:8-13; Num 22-24).

The wilderness/desert period was not the only time God's people were immigrants. If we move ahead about a millennium we meet more refugees. The story of Ruth, the Moabite, is a favorite of many Bible readers. Almost everyone in the story is at some point a migrant. It begins with the announcement that Elimelech and Naomi, Judahites who lived in Bethlehem, have migrated to Moab. They are refugees in search of food. Eventually their sons marry Moabite women, one of whom is Ruth and the other is Orpah. Then all the men in the family die. Naomi, having heard that the drought has ended and there is now food in Judah, travels back to Bethlehem. Her daughter-in-law Ruth goes with her and thus herself becomes an immigrant, a sojourner. She is helped by Boaz, a landowner (and the only person in this story who is not at some point a refugee) and becomes his wife. This immigrant woman becomes one of the great-grandmothers of Jesus.

Refugee families desperately seeking asylum are today's counterpart to the Bible's concern for the "stranger" and "sojourner."

***Abraham, Moses, Naomi,
David, Elijah, Mary, Joseph,
and Jesus; Paul, Prisca and
Aquila . . . the Bible is full
of refugees!***



Abraham Sees the Promised Land, anonymous, after Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, 19th century.

These are not the only stories of refugees, immigrants, and strangers in the Old Testament. There is hardly an Old Testament book that does not have some reference to the stranger. Besides stories of immigrants there is also a legal tradition that develops. Deuteronomy has much to say about the treatment of the stranger, in Hebrew the *ger*, and of the stranger's rights as well. Interestingly, the book of Deuteronomy was completed when the Jews were themselves in the Babylonian exile as strangers. Deuteronomy regards strangers (or aliens) as having equal status in the law. They are identified as the vulnerable in society along with the poor, slaves, widows, and orphans, but they also have the protection of the law. Deuteronomy again declares: "You shall not deprive the resident alien or the orphan of justice, nor take the clothing of a widow as pledge. . . . You shall not exploit a poor and needy hired servant, whether one of your own kindred or one of the resident aliens who live in your land, within your gates" (Deut 24:17, 14). A curse is invoked against anyone "who deprives the resident alien, the orphan or the widow of justice!" (Deut 27:19). The resident aliens are to keep the Sabbath along with the rest of the community and are to be relieved of work on that day (Deut 5:14). They are to celebrate the

feast days such as Pentecost and Booths and enjoy both the rest and the banqueting (Deut 16:11; 14).

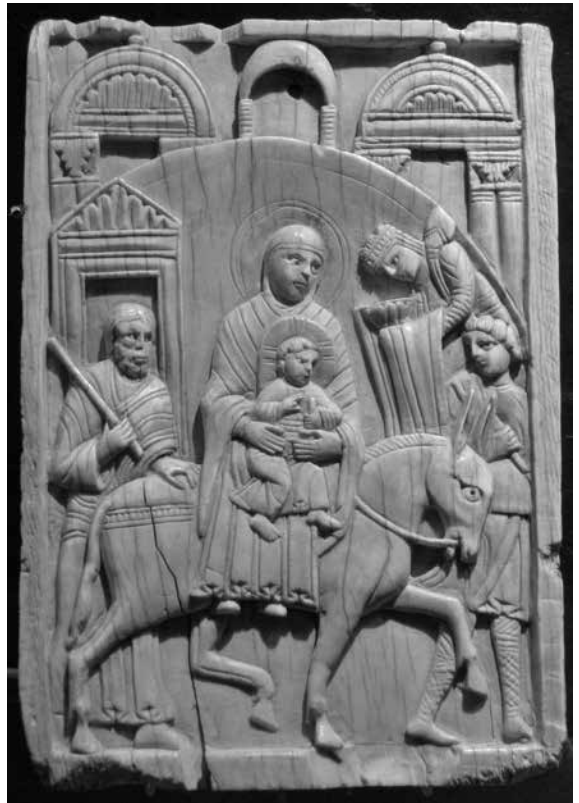
At the time of the Babylonian exile the prophet Ezekiel even declared that the land should be divided according to the tribes of Israel. Nevertheless, it is a heritage not only for the Jews but also “for the resident aliens in your midst who have fathered children among you.” The prophet goes on to say: “You shall treat them like native Israelites; along with you they shall receive a heritage among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the resident alien lives, there you shall assign his heritage—oracle of the LORD God” (Ezek 47:21-23).

The warning that strangers and aliens may be dangerous is also evident in the Old Testament. The warnings, however, are primarily against the peoples who already live in the land of Canaan when Israel arrives (see Deut 7:1-7; 9:1-5; 12:1-3) or foreign nations who threaten to attack Israel—and sometimes do, such as the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C.E. and the Babylonians in the sixth century. But the core principle still stands: God’s people must care for the stranger and pilgrim. This is a practical application of the covenant quality of mercy.

New Testament

Jesus himself was often a migrant. Even as an infant he was forced to flee with his family to Egypt in order to escape Herod’s murderous plans (Matt 2:13-15). As an adult he became an itinerant preacher, warning a hopeful follower that he had “nowhere to rest his head” (Matt 8:20). He was frequently a guest in the houses of others. His friends Martha, Mary, and Lazarus welcomed him often (Luke 10:38-42; John 12:1-8). Simon Peter’s mother-in-law also entertained him after he had cured her of a fever (Mark 1:29-31). He invited himself to dinner at the house of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2-8). Shortly before his passion and death a woman anointed his head as he ate dinner at the house of Simon the leper (Mark 14:3-9).

Escape to Egypt, Salerno School, late 11th to early 12th century.



Paul also was a wandering preacher. His travels extended throughout the Ancient Near East. He preached in Antioch, Cyprus, Alamis, Paphos, Perga, Derbe and Lystra, Corinth and Thessalonica, to name only a few. Wherever he went, he also worked as a tentmaker to support himself (Acts 18:3). After one harrowing sea journey he arrived at Malta, where he ob-

erved that the “natives showed [him] extraordinary hospitality” (Acts 28:2). Other Christian missionaries were also welcomed and supported by the local communities (3 John 5-8).

Throughout the letters in the New Testament, Christians are encouraged to be hospitable to one another and to others, even strangers. In his instruction to

“. . . you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:34).

Christians Paul exhorts them to “contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality” (Rom 12:13). Other writers reinforce this instruction. Bishops are specifically told to be hospitable (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8). This gracious welcome, however, is not demanded only of those in leadership. All Christians are warned not to “neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels” (Heb 13:2). They are also exhorted not to complain about the need to be hospitable to others (1 Pet 4:9).

Care for the stranger and guest is a characteristic demanded of all God’s people. Jesus warns in the Gospel of Matthew that this is the way Jesus’ followers will be judged: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt 25:35). Placing ourselves in the scene, when we ask how this happened, we are told: “whatever you did for one of those least ones, you did for me” (Matt 25:40). On the other hand, if we have neglected or refused hospitality to the stranger, we hear a terrifying judgment: “what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me” (Matt 25:45). If we do not welcome the stranger, we will not be welcomed into the kingdom of God.

The Present Time

Almost seventeen years ago the American bishops issued a call to welcome the stranger and immigrant: *Welcoming the Stranger among Us: Unity in Diversity* (NCCB/USCC, November 15, 2000). The issues they raised are even more critical today. Many families are fleeing the dangers in the war-torn Middle East. Our own country is fearful of refugees, concerned about the possibility of violence here, prompting a new statement from the administrative committee of the USCCB. Their pastoral reflection, *Living as a People of God in Unsettled Times* (March 22, 2017), acknowledges the powerful



Often refugees who risk their lives seeking a place to live in peace and freedom can be met with fear and suspicion.

biblical tradition of welcoming the stranger as well as the fear that many feel in uncertain times. Specifically, in the American experience, public policy debates raise the profiles of both fear and hope. The following passages from the reflection serve as an encouragement to people of faith to embrace the merciful stance provided in the biblical tradition.

- “To live in Christ is to draw upon the limitless love of Jesus to fortify us against the temptation of fear.”
- “Let us not lose sight of the fact that behind every policy is the story of a person in search of a better life. They may be an immigrant or refugee family sacrificing so that their children might have a brighter future. As shepherds of a pilgrim Church, we will not tire in saying to families who have the courage to set out from their despair onto the road of hope: ‘We are with you.’ They may also be a family seeking security from an increased threat of extremist violence. It is necessary to safeguard the United States in a manner that does not lose sight of our humanity.”
- “Intense debate is essential to healthy democracy, but the rhetoric of fear does not serve us well.”

Finally, the American bishops encourage us to *pray* for an end to the root cause of violent hatred that forces people to flee their homelands, *meet* with newcomers and hear their stories as well as those who disagree with the church's stance, and *contact* elected representatives to encourage solutions that guard both our security and our common humanity.

Living in a complex world does not release us from the responsibility to act with mercy, experienced in hospitality to strangers. In the biblical stories may we find courage to open our hearts to those in need.

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