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The Bible and Borders

Hearing God's Word on Immigration



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BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Introduction

The numbers on migration are staggering. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees publishes up-to-date data and tracks monthly trends concerning the numbers and needs of refugees around the globe.¹ Other organizations provide statistics for the total number of people on the move (both within and across international borders), the percentages of those who are foreign-born in host countries, the impact of gender and human trafficking, and more. The International Organization for Migration, drawing from United Nations data, puts the total number of international migrants in mid-2019 at over 270 million.² Still other resources are more regionally focused, such as those that concentrate on the situation in the United States.³ The magnitude of realities connected to migration—economics, health care, education, local and national security, cultural and demographic changes, and more—and their corresponding legislative challenges now dominate political debates around the world. Human history always has been characterized by migration, but at no time on this scale.

These tectonic changes raise questions for Christians. In a world where over 270 million people are on the move, what does it mean to be the church? What does the weight of this human need mean for Christian mission? How might all of this impact what it means to be a Christian today?

Even as more universities launch programs to study immigration law and migration and refugee matters, as the academic fields of diaspora studies and related fields flourish, as significant journals and other resources appear, and as the media do investigative reporting and present the human face of these dilemmas, the Christian church worldwide is responding. Church bodies are producing official documents to establish theological frameworks for processing these phenomena and to offer pastoral guidelines.⁴ Theologians of various Christian traditions are doing the requisite historical work and careful reflection to address these issues.⁵ Biblical scholars from various latitudes are looking afresh at the Scripture to gain insights into God's heart for migrants.⁶

This volume seeks to contribute to these Christian efforts. In the broader treatment of an earlier book, *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*, I prefaced the biblical discussion with a survey of the development and current state of immigration law in the United States, relevant economic questions, and the history of Hispanic immigration.⁷ Today others are treating those technical matters, and the heart-wrenching tragedies related to migration are being brought to light more and more through print and visual media. Accordingly, this book limits its gaze to the biblical material. It will explore the surprising amount of the Scriptures that reflect migration experiences and the Bible's teaching on dealing with outsiders. Truly, migration permeates the entire canon. My hope is that the native-born Christian will be able to better appreciate how central the topic of migration is to our faith. My desire, too, is that Christians who are immigrants, refugees, and asylees will find encouragement in the truth that they are dear to God.

Defining Terms

Serious consideration of migration matters requires becoming acquainted with an array of potentially unfamiliar terms. At this juncture, I mention only a few of the most basic categories.⁸

Other terms will surface in the course of the biblical exposition. To begin, it is important to distinguish between the terms *refugee*, *asylee*, and *immigrant*.

Refugees are persons who have fled their country of origin (1) out of fear of persecution because of their race, religion, social standing, or political views; (2) to escape an armed conflict; or (3) because of an ecological disaster (such as prolonged drought or a devastating hurricane).

For example, due to the brutality of the civil wars in Central America from the 1970s to the 1990s and now because of drug and gang violence, large numbers from those nations have sought asylum or refugee status in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. Other major sources of refugees looking for a new home are Africa and the Middle East. Millions are fleeing hostilities from countries such as the Sudan, Congo, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The massive flooding and infrastructure damage due to record hurricane winds and rain in Haiti and elsewhere are increasingly motivating factors for migration of large population groups. In Africa and the Middle East, millions now are housed in large camps, where they can be confined for years, waiting for sanctuary. The United Nations coordinates aid to these camps and tries to place these refugees in host countries through its Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. The number of refugees who can be resettled is governed by agreements with each of these host countries, which dictate how many they will accept each year. In the United States, once a refugee arrives, the government works with other agencies (often religious organizations) to help integrate them into their assigned communities.

Whereas the refugee process is directed by the United Nations, *asylees* present themselves at international borders and ask for permission to enter for their protection and well-being. Each country has its own profile of who can qualify for asylum. *Immigrants*, in contrast, are those who of their own volition move to another country for any of a host of reasons and usually

petition for lengthy or permanent residence. Immigrants can enter legally—through official ports of entry and according to the rules of the admissions policies established by the host country—or not. Those who have come into the United States by other means are frequently called illegal aliens.

I prefer the word *undocumented* (or *unauthorized*) rather than *illegal* for several reasons. *Illegal* can have a pejorative connotation, suggesting by definition that the person is guilty of some act, has few scruples, and is prone to civil disobedience. This is not the case, of course, with the overwhelming majority of immigrants. Most would gladly regularize their status with the government, but the existing system simply does not provide appropriate avenues to do so. What these people have lacked is the proper documentation required by Washington and the workplace. They are not criminals. At the same time, the common label *alien* can evoke the sense of someone unchangeably foreign and other, without hope of reconciliation or mediation. In English, *alien* also is used for creatures from outer space, for nonhumans! Thus, the term *illegal aliens* is unhelpfully prejudicial. *Undocumented immigrants* is a better label to represent the current reality.

Other relevant terms for this book are *Hispanic* and *Latino* and *Latina*.⁹ The word *Hispanic* originally comes from *Hispania*, an ancient name for the Iberian Peninsula. In more formal Spanish, *hispano* can still refer to things related to Spain. For example, Latin America (Mexico, Central and South America) is also called *Hispanoamérica*. The term *Hispanic* came into common parlance in the United States as a category designation of the Census Bureau for people of Spanish or Latin American descent. *Hispanic* is the word most people are familiar with and is regularly used in the media. Problematically, this very broad category lumps together those from many different countries, races, national histories, and even languages. For this reason, many academics and activists eschew the term as too imprecise and an unjust government imposition. They prefer the term *Latino* (feminine *Latina*). I certainly echo this concern, but in

this book I will use *Hispanic* and *Latino/Latina* interchangeably because of common usage.

How I Came to This Discussion

My involvement with speaking and writing on the Bible and immigration stretches back over a decade. This engagement has very personal roots. I am the son of a Guatemalan mother and an American father. I was born and raised in Houston, but our family was very intentional that our home would be bilingual and bicultural.

I grew up speaking both English and Spanish, enjoying piñatas at our birthday parties, and celebrating *noche buena* (Christmas Eve) with Guatemalan tamales and black beans. Family and friends from Guatemala often stayed in our home, and my parents developed friendships with Cubans in the Houston area (my brother married a Cuban woman). Summers were spent in Guatemala, and during those times we got to know that wonderful country intimately and participated in Latin American culture in many ways.

From the early 1960s until December 1996, Guatemala was in civil war, and the rest of the Central American isthmus was in turmoil as well. My wife and I moved to Guatemala in August 1982, amid that fascinating yet tragic time. We raised our family in Guatemala City, where I taught Old Testament at El Seminario Teológico Centroamericano (SETECA). After fifteen years, we returned to the United States to assume a similar position at a seminary. Several years ago, we moved to “Chicagoland” and Wheaton College. During all this time, I have continued as an adjunct at SETECA and periodically return to Guatemala to teach and to spend time with family and friends.

That terrible war, which lasted over thirty years, and the current drug-related violence have generated a sizeable migration to the United States and elsewhere. Of course, many thousands from other countries have sought to come too. Today millions

of undocumented individuals live in our communities, working and raising their families.

In many ways, I stand between the majority culture and Hispanic culture and can move comfortably between both. I must admit, though, that my deepest roots lie in my Guatemalan background. This is the primary impetus behind my interest in immigration reform, my experiences in Latino churches, and my work in Hispanic higher education. It also explains the motivation for my research on the Bible and immigration and for my accepting invitations to speak and write on the topic. Immigration realities play an important role in Latino and Latina biblical reflections because of their impact on identity and other sociocultural and political concerns.¹⁰ So, when I am asked why I do what I do on behalf of Hispanic immigrants and why I study immigration, the answer is simple: *porque son mi gente* (because they are my people).

The Purpose of This Book

Immigration is a massively complex issue that has any number of facets and dimensions.¹¹ This book deals with one slice of the larger discussion: the scriptural basis for an informed Christian perspective. A better grasp of the amazingly rich contribution of the Bible to the national and global discussion can spur us all to seek a deeper wisdom that lies beyond the purview of the national media and political positioning. The goal of this book is to offer a solid foundation for a truly self-confessing Christian perspective on immigration.

Chapters 1 and 2 present the pertinent material in the Old Testament. Chapter 1 argues that the most appropriate starting point for approaching immigration biblically is the concept of the image of God. This is followed by a look at the many accounts of migration in the Old Testament. Chapter 2 explores the theme of hospitality in the ancient world and the Old Testament and then turns to the impressive legislation in the Law

(Pentateuch) dealing with outsiders. Chapter 3 attends to the New Testament: the life and teaching of Jesus and the concept that all Christians are sojourners in the world. I return to the matter of hospitality in the New Testament and close with observations on Romans 13, a passage to which those who are less open to immigration often turn. Each biblical discussion is followed by a section titled “Implications for Today.” These are designed to stimulate thinking about how the biblical material might speak to contemporary realities.

1

“My Father Was a Wandering Aramean”

Stories of Migration in the Old Testament

How we see the world determines the values we hold, our understanding of life, and thus our attitudes and actions. Let me illustrate this with a mundane example. I have poor eyesight. For many years I wore bifocals. I cannot see either close up or far away without help. The computer age complicated my situation. For a while I had a separate pair of eyeglasses for working with my laptop, because the screen sits in that intermediate space that neither part of the bifocals handled well. Now I use progressive lenses. What is worse, if I want to read the small print on a label, I have to take off my glasses altogether and bring the writing up close to make out the words! Without my glasses I can still see—even if everything is a bit blurred. I am not blind. Once I put on my glasses, things become clear.

In a similar way, each one of us has an individualized set of lenses through which we interpret the reality in which we live and our identity and role in that context. These lenses are

calibrated according to our background and experiences. For the Christian, the Bible can serve as a unique and fresh set of lenses. As the Word of God, it should profoundly shape our vision of life. The Bible is the set of lenses that brings us and everything around us into focus as God would want us to perceive it. This view of the world may be at odds with the way others interpret life, but the important point is that through the Bible we as believers gain proper perspective—the angle that God desires us to have on important issues.

In this book I present what the Bible has to say about matters related to immigration. This information can be part of the lenses that enable Christians—both those of the majority culture and those who are sojourners here—to process issues related to immigration in the United States today. This survey is not exhaustive, nor is it a technical exercise in biblical scholarship.¹ My goal is to demonstrate the breadth of relevant material in the Bible as a reminder that God has much to teach all of us on these issues.

This overview of what the Bible has to say about immigration begins at the beginning, in the book of Genesis, with the creation of man and woman in the image of God. What it means to be a human must be the foundation for any conversation about immigration. I then go on to discuss the many people of God in the Old Testament who, for all kinds of reasons, had to leave their homeland and settle somewhere else. Migration is not a new phenomenon; it is as old as time.

The Image of God

Genesis 1

Above all else, immigration is the movement of *people* across borders. The bottom line in any discussion on immigration should be that it concerns humans: their worth, destiny, rights, and responsibilities. The Bible gives great prominence to the

creation of humans. Their creation is the climax of the creation account in Genesis 1. It is the last step in the divine movement to organize the chaos and fill the emptiness of the earth (1:2). In the narrative, the first three days of creation involve dividing darkness from light; separating the land, water, and sky; and preparing the earth for habitation (1:3–13). On the fourth, fifth, and sixth days, God places celestial bodies in the heavens, fish in the sea, and birds in the sky (1:14–25). The final piece of his handiwork on that sixth day is the creation of man and woman (1:26–31).

Six times the text says that God saw what he had made and that it was “good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Everything is in its proper place and functioning as it should under the gracious sovereignty of the Creator. The scene teems with sanctified life. With the creation of humans, however, the text declares, “and it was *very good*” (1:31, emphasis added). Fittingly, this is the seventh occurrence of the term *good*. Seven is a special number in the Bible and regularly represents perfection. The qualifier “very good” and the number *seven* together emphasize that humans are the pinnacle of what God has made. They are special indeed.

What is unique, though, about humans? Verses 26 and 27 provide the answer: every person is made in “the image of God” (cf. 9:6). But what does it mean that humanity is created in the image of God? How might this truth inform the immigration debate?

There are three primary views as to what it means to be created in the image of God.² The first argues that the image concerns what humans *inherently are or possess*. The idea is that every person has a will, intellect, emotions, and a spiritual component, all of which distinguish a human from other creatures. Others take the position that the image should be considered *relationally*. According to this view, the only person who ever truly incarnated the image of God was Jesus (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), because of his direct relationship with God the Father. Individuals who are reconciled to God through faith in Jesus

can participate in the image and thus regain the relationship with God that was ruptured with the rebellion of Genesis 3.

A third perspective explains the concept of the image within its ancient Near Eastern context. Other cultures at the time believed that humans were created to serve the gods by fulfilling stipulated ritual obligations and providing them food and drink. However, the only individual whom people could consider to be in the image of the deity was the king; he was the gods' representative and intermediary on earth. Genesis 1–2, however, reveals the “democratization” of the divine image; every person is made in the image of God, not just a select and elite individual. Nor were humans created as slaves to satisfy the whims of the gods. The biblical God has no such needs. In fact, he created humans to share in his rule! As God's vice-regents, men and women have been created to exercise dominion (1:26, 28) and to care for the created order as co-laborers (2:15). This privilege and responsibility require wisdom and creativity, and God has equipped every human being for this great task. In contrast to the other two views regarding the image, this perspective highlights its *functional* dimension.

Each of these three perspectives has a biblical basis (although the last seems to be the one most in line with Gen. 1). In its own way, each perspective underscores the special value of all persons: what they intrinsically are, their potential relationship with the Creator, and their capacity as rulers. Everyone is made in God's image and therefore has a singular standing before God and in the world. This truth can help us understand at least one potential reason for why the Decalogue prohibits the making of images (Exod. 20:4–5; Deut. 5:8). God has already provided an image of himself in humanity! Through humans and in relationship with them, God is present and involved in creation and history. Not surprisingly, the psalmist declares his amazement at the special role that God has bestowed on humans (Ps. 8; cf. 144:3–4). Sadly, the first sin outside the garden of Eden is fratricide and disregard of the brother (Gen. 4:5–10; cf. 4:14b, 23–24). Humans are quick to accuse and exclude (even

eliminate) others made in the image of God. This, too, is an intrinsic characteristic of humanity.³

There is one other phrase in the biblical text that might be relevant. In Genesis 1:28 humans are mandated to “fill the earth” (cf. 1:22). This happens as humanity moves across the planet. Perhaps migration is part of the human DNA! Migration, then, for whatever motive, forced or voluntary, for good or for ill, is an *expected* human phenomenon. In the United States, many people change where they live to seek a better neighborhood, a new job opportunity and economic stability or advancement, education, to be closer to family, to have a new start in life or relationships, or the like. They move across town or cross state lines. Americans are a mobile people! For less fortunate foreigners, these moves, which can be motivated by similar reasons, are more desperate and require crossing international borders.

Implications for Today

Value as persons. The creation of all persons in the image of God must be the most basic conviction for Christians as they approach the challenges of immigration today. Immigration should not be argued in the abstract because it is fundamentally about *immigrants*. Immigrants are humans, and as such they are made in God’s image. Each and every one of those who have come to the United States is God’s creation and is worthy of respect. Because immigrants are made in the divine image, they have an essential value and possess immense potential to contribute to society and to the common good through their presence and work.

Human rights and the image of God. If one takes what the Bible says in Genesis 1 seriously, as revelation from God, then what it communicates about humans becomes a divine claim on Christian attitudes and actions toward those who come to this country—irrespective of whether they are here with or without the documents the government might mandate. To turn away

in a disinterested manner or to treat badly one made in the image of God is ultimately a violation against God. As a result, the topic of immigration at some level needs to be considered from a human rights perspective and not be defined solely in terms of national security, cultural identity, or economic impact. For example, from the standpoint of national security, the primary concern is to control the border. Those trying to enter the country in a manner not permitted by law, then, are categorized logically as (and reduced to) intruders to be kept out. In contrast, a human rights perspective has as its particular focus the needs and fate of the immigrants themselves. This perspective can enrich discussions on border matters. In fact, immigration has been treated as a human rights issue within legal theory and international law for quite some time.⁴

Human rights language raises red flags for some people. On occasion it has been used arbitrarily by some special interest groups, and this can make some people suspicious of any reference to human rights. Whatever the ideological basis of those organizations, the point here is a biblical one. Immigrants are made in the image of God. Believers must examine their hearts for possible contrary allegiances that may lead them to ignore this foundational understanding of all people and its inescapable relevance for the treatment of immigrants. Misconceptions also can arise from a tendency to generalize. For example, some assume that all Hispanic immigrants are the same. Yet they actually come from different countries, each with its own history, customs, food, and religious traditions; nor do all come from the same racial, social, economic, educational, or even linguistic backgrounds. An image-of-God perspective should lead to an appreciation of the cultural richness, worth, and potential of those arriving from somewhere else.

At the same time, each person of the majority, or host, culture is also made in the image of God. This fact can add an interesting element to attitudes toward those from other countries. In the Old Testament, God is portrayed as limitlessly compassionate, not only toward his own people (Exod. 34:6–7;

Joel 2:13) but also to those beyond the community of faith. In the book of Jonah, the prophet admits that the God of Israel is merciful even to the Assyrians, the cruelest empire of that time (Jon. 4:2; cf. Ps. 145:8–9). His grace knows no bounds (Jon. 4:11). One way those of the majority culture can reflect the divine image is to demonstrate that same compassion to others—in this case, to immigrants who have come to seek a better life or to escape the violence in their countries of origin. Citizens also can correlate their own “migrations” within this country with the very same desires that those from other places have for themselves and their families. Moving is what humans do.

It must be made clear at this juncture that this conviction does not imply that there should be no controls on immigration or no order at the country’s borders and ports of entry. What the image-of-God premise does, though, is establish a basic mind-set from which one can formulate policy and evaluate pragmatic decisions that must be made in the many spheres of national life. It should also inform the tone of Christian participation in the national debate. Ultimately, immigration is about people. This is where the discussion should begin, not with disputes over legal status. Legality is a topic that certainly must be dealt with, yet it is not the place *to start* discussions of immigration. In fact, this new starting point of the image of God greatly affects the nature of any legislation that will be formulated. An appreciation of immigrants as people can lead to laws that are compassionate and empowering for the immigrant and for the common good, instead of laws that at bottom are exclusionary and largely punitive—perhaps even xenophobic.

Expectations of the image. This word about the image of God has important things to convey to immigrant believers as well. First, it can be an encouragement. For many reasons, immigrants can feel inferior. They may have less schooling, come from a more deprived economic background (or have left significant socioeconomic and cultural status to migrate), have a

hard time learning English or speak what they do know with an accent, and be of a different skin color than those in their host neighborhoods. They may not know the laws or handle cultural cues well; many live with perpetual fear of the authorities and are intimidated by their new surroundings and negative stereotyping and reception. The fact that they are made in God's image should generate a more edifying appreciation about who they are and what they can become, about what they can add to their new context and to the well-being of their communities. Whatever their previous or present condition, they are valuable before God and, therefore, valuable to the United States.

Not surprisingly, this theme of the image of God and Hispanic identity and worth is a major topic in Hispanic theological writing. What these authors try to convey is that Latinos and Latinas have significance not only as humans in a general sense but also, importantly, as *Hispanic persons*. It is at this point that the theme of *mestizaje* comes into play theologically and pastorally.⁵ Their ethnicity is no longer something to be ashamed of. *Mestizaje* can be embraced as a gift from God and is inseparable from being a valued human being, a unique person, one from a special people with a matchless history and culture. Immigrants have intrinsic dignity as humans and as Latinos and Latinas.

The image of God makes a claim on immigrants as well. The fact that immigrants are made in God's image should cause them to reflect on what divine expectations of them may be. Their divine endowment has profound implications for the way they develop their capabilities in education and at the workplace; it should impact how immigrants carry out their responsibilities as potential citizens, raise their families, work at their jobs, handle their money, and engage the world in which they now live. They are more than victims.⁶ In addition, immigrants should also value the host country's people as made in God's image. It is easy to be critical of things American as a defensive reaction to prejudice or in order to extol the mores of their own cultures at the expense of other

cultures. But that contradicts what they themselves seek: appreciation for their backgrounds and abilities. For immigrants, as for the host culture, being God's representative is both a *privilege* and a *responsibility*.

Through its instruction on the image of God, the Bible can mold the attitudes and actions of the majority culture and immigrant Christians. For those in the majority culture, it can yield fresh appreciation of the immigrants' value and promise; for the immigrants, its message is an encouragement to forge ahead and an exhortation to live well as God's representatives.

Experiences of the People of God

A second way in which the Old Testament can inform immigration discussions is through its accounts of the many people of God who moved across borders. These movements involved individuals, families, and large groups. Sometimes it was voluntary. In other cases, the move was forced by famine or war or personal threats. The Old Testament is full of stories of people on the move. This is not surprising. In many ways, human history is the history of migration. So, too, is the history of God's people.

Some might contend that the Bible does not present details of the lives of immigrants but rather of refugees or deportees; therefore, it is not appropriate to appeal to the Scriptures for a study on immigration *per se*. This observation may be true in a strictly technical sense with respect to some biblical passages. Nevertheless, it ignores the fact that not all the migrations recorded in the Old Testament were of refugees and deportees. This argument overlooks the reality that immigration is not only about the reasons and mechanics of the move *to* another place; it is also about life *in* that new setting. In this regard, there are lessons to be gleaned from the Old Testament regardless of *how* these persons understood themselves and how they lived outside of their land.