



# Welcoming the stranger?

## A summary of what the Bible says about migration

This summary sets out the main areas of Biblical teaching on migration. It begins by looking at the Bible's view of humanity, before assessing the attitude towards the treatment of migrants in Old Testament Israel. Finally, it examines the perspective of the New Testament and concludes with lessons we can draw for today. Recommendations for further reading are given at the end.

### Biblical View of Humanity

The Bible teaches that all human beings have a particular dignity in God's creation because they are created 'in the image of God' (Genesis 1:27 & 9:6).

The Bible also affirms the equal dignity of all humanity in salvation, regardless of gender, race or social status (Galatians 3:28 & Revelation 7:9).

### Migration in Old Testament Israel

The experience of migration plays a significant role in the narratives of the Old Testament. Indeed, the foundational stories of Israel were established in the migration experiences found in Genesis and Exodus.

#### Key Terms:

**Gerim:** 'sojourner'; often vulnerable; integrates with Israelite society

**Toshav:** Similar to *gerim*, but doesn't integrate

**Nokrim:** Economically, culturally & religiously independent foreigner

**Zarim:** Similar to *nokrim*

Major characters such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Daniel and many more all live as migrants during their lives. These experiences are many and varied, however in this section we focus on how migrants are viewed in the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Bible, hereafter 'the Law'). There are four main words used

to refer to migrants in the Old Testament – *nokrim*, *zarim* (both adjectives), *gerim* and *toshav* (both nouns). Each has a subtly different meaning, as outlined in the box to the left.

The Law contains frequent references to how the Israelite community should live alongside and treat migrants. The most commonly used term is *gerim*, a noun often used alongside the poor and widows, emphasising that migrants were often among the most vulnerable in society. For this reason, *gerim* are often seen as broadly analogous to modern-day refugees.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are referred to as *gerim*, while the Exodus story is rooted in the Israelites' experience, first as a persecuted minority in a foreign land (Egypt) and then as a large, ethnically-mixed multitude wandering in the desert towards Canaan after leaving Egypt (Exodus 12:38 refers to other people leaving Egypt along with the Israelites). The Law therefore commands Israel to treat *gerim* with compassion, having been in the same situation themselves in Egypt (e.g. Exodus 23:9). It is important to remember that this system was rooted in the character of God, who has a particular care and concern for the vulnerable, including *gerim* (Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 146:9).

The key points of emphasis in the Law relating to *gerim* are:

- Strong prohibitions against ill-treatment or abuse of migrants, particularly given Israel's own experience as migrants in Egypt (e.g. Leviticus 19:33-34).
- Equal treatment before the law and thus equal access to justice (Leviticus 24:22; Deuteronomy 1:16).
- Inclusion in the feasts and festivals of Israel, provided that they were willing to integrate, which would have required learning Hebrew and undergoing circumcision (Exodus 12:48; Deuteronomy 31:12).
- The provisions of the 'gleaning law', which allowed them to gather a measure of food from the harvest of landowners (Deuteronomy 24:19-22).

It is important to note that the Law preserves some distinctions as well. For example, *gerim* could not own rural land in perpetuity (until after the return from Exile many centuries later), they could not become King (Deuteronomy 17:15) and their integration into the community was conditional on settling permanently in the land and self-identifying with the host nation. Nonetheless, the overriding message is that *gerim* dwelling in the land were to be given rights and responsibilities.

Despite this strong tone of welcome and inclusion, there are passages in the Law which strike a more cautious note towards migrants, particularly relating to the use of the terms *nokrim* and *zarim*. These adjectives are used to denote those who may be temporarily present in the land, but are 'outside' the community of Israel. They are not permitted to participate in the rites of Israelite worship (Exodus 12:43) and could be charged interest on a loan (Deuteronomy 23:20). They are seen as having loyalties that lay in their country of origin and to their own gods, thus the predominant attitude towards this group is suspicion.



Therefore, the criteria for acceptance as *gerim*, rather than *nokrim* or *zarim*, was a commitment to adopting the ways of life of the host nation, participating in public worship and settling permanently in the land.

The final term mentioned above – *toshav* – is used to describe those who settle permanently in the land, but choose not to integrate with the wider community, unlike *gerim*. They are excluded from participating in the Passover (Exodus 12:43-45), but as a lesser-used term it is hard to be more conclusive than placing them somewhere between *gerim* and *nokrim*.

Thus, the system of migration in Israel was largely self-selecting. Those who were willing to integrate with the Israelite community were welcomed, but those who chose not to integrate were treated with caution. As a result, Israel's borders were to be permeable to people, but not to other values.

## Migration in the New Testament

While there is no explicit teaching on migration in the New Testament, there is plenty of material that is relevant to the discussion. We see that Jesus Himself experiences forced migration as Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt to escape Herod (Matthew 2:13-18). Furthermore, many of the earliest Christians were forced to flee from persecution (Acts 8:1), while others chose to travel to spread the Gospel across the Roman world and beyond. Therefore, experiences of migration, both forced and voluntary, were common in the New Testament period.

In the Gospels, the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) is the clearest example of how Jesus' followers were to show love and grace to the 'other', even those seen as the greatest threat to their community. (Samaritans were the descendants of those who had migrated to the land during the time of the Exile). Elsewhere, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God will belong to those who welcome the 'stranger', a close parallel of *gerim* (Matthew 25:35).

Throughout the New Testament, Christians are taught to see themselves as 'foreigners and exiles' (1 Peter 2:11), living in a place that is not their ultimate home as their citizenship is now in heaven with Christ (Philippians 3:20). This eternal perspective gives Christians an added empathy for those who experience the uprooting and alienating effects of migration in the present.

## How does this help us today?

Here are three main areas to help shape our thinking:

- 1. Seeing the value and dignity of the migrant as made in the image of God** – at root, we must recognise that those we term 'migrants', 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' are people created and loved by God, and given an inalienable dignity as such.
- 2. Empathy for the vulnerable** – the teaching of the Old Testament Law and the example of Jesus demonstrate a particular loving concern for the vulnerable and the 'outsider', which Christ's followers are also called to embody.
- 3. The recognition of God's redeemed people as crossing all cultural boundaries** – the variety in our communities is to be valued, but is superseded by our identity as the people of God. This deeper identity relativises our relationships with those who seem most like us, reminding us of deeper ties to those who seem superficially very different.

## Further Reading:

- ✔ *Asylum and Immigration: A Christian Perspective on a Polarised Debate* – Nick Spencer
- ✔ *Immigration and Justice* – Jubilee Centre
- ✔ *Christians at the Border* – M. Daniel Carroll R.
- ✔ *A Place of Refuge* – Church of England Mission & Public Affairs Council
- ✔ 'Migration' – *The Bible in Transmission, Spring 2015* (Bible Society)

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