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## **Chosen People in Foreign Lands: Scriptural Reflections on Immigration and the Uprooted**

As the twentieth century comes to an end, the sheer number of people around the world currently displaced and living outside their home territory is fast approaching a staggering 100,000,000. The causes have been legion: wars, so-called ethnic cleansing, natural disasters, political and economic pressures, and, always, the hope for a better life. The tremendous human suffering underlying these statistics has prompted people of faith to look to their trusted sources of spiritual wisdom for guidance in contextualizing this global challenge within a religious worldview.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions we turn instinctively to the pages of the Scriptures for the strength, consolation, and motivation to respond in effective ways to this situation. Such a virtually spontaneous recourse to the sacred literature of our heritage is a commendable reaction. Yet many who deal with the demanding practical side of caring for “people on the move” find limited time to explore and draw nourishment from the rich contributions which the Scriptures can offer.

A number of landmark statements about Catholic teaching on immigration have been published over the last several decades by the Holy See and by the U.S. Catholic Conference. Usually the use of scriptural sources in these documents tends to be rather brief, but they do incorporate a number of appropriate, thought-provoking texts. The most frequently cited are a small number of concise exhortatory passages and a few favorite stories that turn up with a regularity which, hopefully, impresses them on our general consciousness.

The following pages will look at some of the biblical passages frequently cited in the more recent of these statements. However, we also want to consider ways this selection may be widened, suggesting some of the insights that can be drawn from continued reflection on the pastoral and theological implications of the inspired Word.

### **SEE YOURSELF IN THE RESIDENT ALIEN**

One or two verses are inevitably recalled from the following directives in the Pentateuch, with representation from all three of its great collections of law: The Book of the Covenant, The Deuteronomistic Code, and the Priestly Texts:

- You will not molest or oppress aliens, for you yourselves were once aliens in the land of Egypt. . . . You will not oppress the stranger; you know the heart of a stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exod 22:20; 23:9).
- When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. . . . He shall be to you as the native among you and you shall love him as yourself (Lev 19:33-34).
- For the Lord, your God . . . executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. So, you too must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves (Deut 10:17-19).
- You must not infringe the rights of the foreigner or the orphan. . . . Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt and that Yahweh your God redeemed you from that. That is why I am giving you this order (Deut 24:17-18).
- Accursed be anyone who violates the rights of the foreigner, the orphan and the widow (Deut 27:19).

These injunctions speak so directly to the heart of the problem and they can be understood even with a minimal understanding of the story line in the first five books of the Bible. For those with personal experience of the ubiquitous presence of immigrants in our highly competitive societies today, it is not hard to imagine individuals and small ethnic groups becoming targets for discrimination among the Israelites as their attempts to consolidate their hold on the Promised Land alternated with repeated dislocations, both internal and abroad.

The motivation included in the wording of these directives is two-pronged. The first is the reminder that God cares for the foreigner as a parent would for a member of his or her own family (Ps 146:9). This is not arbitrary or perfunctory; the compassionate Lord truly loves these foreigners. Second, the Israelites are asked to reflect on their community experiences and memory of being a minority whose daily destiny was dominated by others. In either instance, whether one appeals to empathy or rises to the standards of the divine model, the goal is clear: learn to love the alien residing among you the way you love yourselves and those closest to you.

#### JESUS CONCEALED IN THE STRANGER

Easily the most frequently cited text from the New Testament on the topic of unknown outsiders are the words which will be spoken by the Son of Man at the Second Coming:

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father. . . . For I was a stranger and you welcomed me." . . . Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you a stranger and welcome you?" . . . And the King will answer them: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me" (Matt 25:34-35, 38, 40).

This pericope demonstrates that Jesus retained and reinforced the injunctions from the Old Testament about treating strangers kindly by including them under the protective mantle of his own identity. Here, too, a double motivation is operative. For the disciple eager to concretize his or her love for Jesus, the "stranger" (the Greek word used here, *xenos*, also means "foreigner") is a window of opportunity—a window through which we see the Lord and the Lord sees us. The Last Judgment scene leaves no doubt that, in the divine design, outsiders are to be welcomed whether one has been able to recognize Christ in them or not. Those who close the door to strangers in this life are destined to become outcasts themselves in the next.

#### IMMIGRATION PROTOTYPES: THE TWO FACES OF EGYPT

From the storehouse of biblical narrative two of the immigration-related stories most frequently visited are the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt and the combined saga of the Exodus and the homecoming of the chosen people into the Promised Land.

The New Testament episode is found in Matt 2:13-21, which supplies us with a cameo of the endangered nuclear family. Elsewhere described by Luke (2:4) as forced out of their native village in Galilee to be registered in the taxation census, now Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are driven beyond the borders of their national, God-given homeland, seeking refuge from the persecution of a power-jealous provincial tyrant. Notwithstanding the valiant efforts of some scholars to keep the strands of these infancy narratives in distinct categories, the two accounts are firmly amalgamated in the popular imagination, which sees in them a case of internal, national dislocation followed by a period of refugee life in a foreign country.

None of our explicit modern labels appears in the canonical text of Matthew or Luke (exile, asylum, refugee, displaced, undocumented, etc.), but anyone who has had firsthand experience with uprooted young couples can resonate with these laconic reports. It is not hard to fill in the missing details: dealing simultaneously with a vulnerable toddler and the absence of the principal elements of an ordinary support system—the concern of caring relatives and the comforting availability of those people, foods, and customs we know and feel we can

trust. These are the folks who pay jacked up prices for second-rate goods; these are the ones viewed both with suspicion and with the lurking eye of the unscrupulous. “And, by the way, why don’t you speak fluent Egyptian?!”

#### LET MY PEOPLE GO FREE

In terms of established geographical symbols in the biblical tradition, it is ironic that the one whom Matthew likes to portray as the New Moses should experience Egypt as a haven, a place where a Hebrew family with a baby boy can find more security than in the city of David. The land of the Pharaohs and the people of the ancient Nile certainly represented a very different image in what is surely the most frequently cited immigration story in the entire Bible, the Exodus.

Like a frightening event that mars the early childhood of an individual person in some unforgettable fashion, the history of Israel in Egypt—their hunger-driven migration and subsequent enslavement, their liberation and eventual establishment in a land of their own—remains their single most significant memory as a people. The narration of this dramatic chapter of salvation history already takes up most of the first six books of the Old Testament, and it continues both to color and to give continuity to all the rest of the scriptural canon. For this experience proved to these once-degraded aliens that the one true God really loved them with a faithful love and wanted them to survive as a people.

One of the aspects of the Exodus story which makes it so valuable as a source of consolation in our contemporary concern about immigrants is precisely this national focus. Under the Pharaohs, the Hebrews ranked as chattel. Any other ethnic group in that position would have devolved into a racially diluted population with a continuously weakening grip on their culture and fading recollections of their common history. The God of the Patriarchs not only saved the children of Israel from slavery, but in linking their rescue with the Sinai Covenant, reinforced the trajectory leading back to the promises to Abraham and Sarah and leading forward to a meaningful national future. The celebration of Passover was instituted to keep these connections alive.

For Catholics, the Exodus also underscores two cornerstones of our social teaching regarding immigrants: the value of keeping family members united and the right of all who are cut off from their place of origin to preserve their culture and its historical roots. The Church speaks as an advocate on these issues because of their natural importance for all human beings, and also because of the intimate relationship that exists between both of them and a life of faith.

- Exod 1:8–2:24; 5:1–23; 12:1–17, 26–40; Josh 1:1–15; 11:1–20

#### SEARCHING THE WORD WITH A WIDER LENS

Many other biblical texts that have been brought into the discussion on the pastoral care of displaced persons are appropriate, not because they are expressly concerned with immigrants and refugees as such, but simply because they speak to our more general obligations to treat all those we meet with respect and loving concern. Unfortunately, however, for many it can be a serious call to conversion to be asked to think of foreign-looking or foreign-sounding outsiders as actually qualifying for such consideration.

Consequently, as we continue to approach the Scriptures seeking further help and enlightenment, it is natural to look for other stories, themes, and even isolated segments that more explicitly echo the experiences of modern uprooted families and individuals, and even of whole tribal and national populations. Several such passages can bring fresh perspectives to the discussion, especially if we have not previously consulted them precisely as sources of insight about the disrupted lives of immigrants and their impact on the communities where they live.

#### *In the Beginning, God Said "Migrate!"*

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in the first pages of the Old Testament sets a fitting precedent for what will be an oft-repeated tale in the chronicle of the human family. The biblical narrator leaves no doubt that the ejection of the first man and woman from the comfortable and the familiar—from the only place they had ever known—is a merited but terrible penalty. One of the useful aspects of the story is its depiction of the first home as idyllic and its projection of the future as inhospitable and uncertain. Yet the same God whose justice demands that disobedience be punished is still intertwined with this couple's lives and those of their descendants.

In the final reckoning, one may say that as prototypical "migrant parents" Adam and Eve would have to be judged as substantially successful, at least by biblical standards. They meet the challenge of survival for themselves and their offspring in the circumstances of a harsh new world, and they pass on a religious understanding of the Creator to the next generation. Down through history, this has been a significant accomplishment for any immigrant family.

- Gen 1:26-28; 2:7-25; 3:1-24; 5:1-5; Sir 49:14-16

#### *Migration as a Divine Vocation*

Genesis also presents Abraham and Sarah as important models of those who have to abandon their homeland to seek a new life. Already the son of a migrant family, Abraham accepts the divine call to leave

his father's home and lead his own household off on an odyssey, the details of which were not spelled out in anything but the most general terms. It is not a dream of "striking it rich" but faith-based obedience which guides them to distant and frequently hostile lands.

Several of the episodes included in the Abraham cycle are stories which will be repeated, with original variations, in the lives of family after family seeking to put down roots in foreign soil. Isaac is sent back to find a bride from the "old country," Abraham uses Sarah as a political pawn in his dealings with the Pharaoh, and at Sodom the family gets embroiled in physical violence over the defense of their superior, but politically unpopular, moral values. Even in Sarah's ill treatment of her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, we see elements of the kind of bullying which surfaces all too often among economically and socially stratified minorities living outside their native environment.

One of the gifts which Abraham and Sarah bequeathed to future generations is their witness precisely as migrants whose personal relationship with God determined their decision to adopt a semi-nomadic lifestyle as a kind of religious calling. Many of their spiritual descendants are immigrants, but not by choice. If reflection on the biblical accounts of their life journey can help us find common ground with that generation of faith, perhaps we can better understand how God can utilize the circumstances of displacement and relocation in unexpected ways.

- Gen 11:28–12:5; 12:10-20; 19:1-29; 21:8-21; Bar 2:27-35

#### *Friends from Across the Border*

Counterbalancing traditions which focused mainly on the patriarchs, the tale of Naomi and her daughter-in-law in the book of Ruth concentrates on the experience of women in transition. Set in the period of the Judges between the Exodus and the rise of the monarchy, the story of the great grandmother of King David reads like a novel and is poignantly pertinent to our interests here. The two heroines actually take turns, as it were, living as resident aliens in one another's country.

Many elements of their experience are repeated in today's world. Naomi's family is forced by crop failures and famine to abandon their home in Bethlehem and resettle across the Jordan River. Without surrendering their covenantal faith, her sons enter successful intercultural marriages, but both of them, and Naomi's husband Elimelech, die in Moab and the now-aging widow determines to return to her home country. She is ready to go back alone, but duty and love move Ruth to accompany her mother-in-law. "Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God."

The friendship of Ruth and Naomi remains a monument to the power of loving concern that is possible in a cross-cultural setting, notwithstanding differences in age, religion, and culture. Naomi demonstrates the potential of a woman of faith, establishes a loving relationship with her daughters-in-law which endures beyond the deaths of her sons, and attracts a pagan to embrace the monotheistic religion of Israel. In turn, Ruth's faithfulness to her husband's family leads her to a spiritual transformation and to a role in the royal line which, many centuries later, will produce the Savior of all nations.

- Ruth 1:1-22; 4:1-22; Matt 1:5-6

### *The Great Deportations*

The biblical reports of the forced relocations of the Hebrews under the Assyrians in the eighth century and the Babylonian Exile during the sixth century are rich sources for reflection on the experience of massive eviction and, eventually, of a partial return. The great demographic transfers out of Palestine and the details of daily life during the years of exile are not recounted as extensively as the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Palestine, but what the Bible has preserved supplies us with much to muse upon.

Several of the prophetic books of the Old Testament speak about the social history that led up to the deportations. While fully aware of the immediate historical causes (e.g., imperialistic designs and the hard facts of military superiority), the prophets and inspired authors are more interested in drawing attention to two theological reasons underlying these national disasters. First, they point to a decline in authentic religion, leading in turn to social injustices which cried to heaven for retribution in the northern and southern kingdoms. Second, the messengers moved by God to call for reform and conversion are frequently ignored or even persecuted, frustrating any widespread and lasting improvement that would have forestalled the divine punishment.

What might these biblical accounts suggest to us today? Of the many possibilities, two parallels with our contemporary situation are quite clear. On the one hand, we cannot help comparing the admonitions of the ancient prophets to those in our own times calling governments and international organizations to take action against the unjust causes of the rampant dislocation of families and whole ethnic groups. In the theological view of the biblical authors, Judah could have evaded exile if the kings and people had heeded the negative lesson that led to the dispersion of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Beyond the great efforts being made to care for the already uprooted, if we

hope to prevent the number of those who feel forced to migrate from growing even larger, those political, moral, and economic factors that have led to the problems we are currently experiencing around the globe will have to be addressed. Prophetic voices still sound, but who is listening?

A second obvious lesson emerges when we compare the return of the remnant from Babylonia with the practically total disappearance of those of the ten lost tribes deported from the Kingdom of Israel. The scriptural evidence is sketchy but highly suggestive. What we do know about the survivors is that they managed to preserve their sacred literature, maintained and adapted traditions of community prayer, and refused to let their children forget their religious identity.

The biblical reports of these phenomena merit an important place in modern discussions of the pastoral care offered to many whose historical and social consciousness is in danger of being swallowed up by allegedly “more advanced” secular cultures. How crucial it is that poor and sometimes illiterate Catholic immigrants be assisted, as they begin to adapt to a new culture, to preserve expressions of their cultures which are so intricately intertwined with their relationship with God and with one another.

- 2 Kgs 15:29; 17:1-7; 24:1-25:30; Tob 1:1-6, 9-22; 2:1-14; 14:1-14; 2 Chr 36:15-21; Ps 137:1-9; Esth 3:1-15; Neh 1:1-11

### *An Immigrant Christology*

The person in the New Testament with whom the immigrant may most readily identify is Jesus, for although as a first-century Galilean Jew Jesus was “like us in all things but sin,” he was also “not of this world.” He “set up his tent” in our territory by taking on our human nature, assuming the “form of a slave.” With some noteworthy exceptions, Jesus’ own people did not welcome him or understand him and yet, of his own free, divine will, he embraced the difficult circumstances of his adopted home, even death by crucifixion. In the epistle to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul uses the figure of political allegiance to describe the “foreigner” residing in every serious Christian, and this metaphor can be applied most appropriately to the incarnate Messiah himself: “Indeed, our citizenship is in heaven.”

As part of becoming like us in all things except sin, Jesus adopts the status of immigrant on earth in order to lead us to life in our real home, which is above. Paradoxically, he promises to remain with his followers until the end of time, yet he has no lasting home here; even animals in the wild have haunts of their own, but “the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Still this does not deter him from his mission for,

unlike most immigrants, he has not come to find security but to give up his life, not to seek help but to reach out to the needs of others, not to be inculturated into our human traditions but to show us how to conform ourselves to the ways of the kingdom of heaven.

- Matt 8:18-22; John 1:1-14; 4:1-42; Phil 2:5-11; 3:17-21; Heb 4:14-5:10

### *Neighborly but Foreign Aid*

The gospels and epistles do not speak about immigration problems as such, but there are some very thought-provoking lessons to be learned in Jesus' attitudes, comments, and conduct regarding one particularly maligned group of outsiders: the Samaritans. Living in the territory located between Galilee and Judea, the Samaritans were disdained by the Jews for having—centuries earlier, during the time of the Babylonian captivity—intermarried with resettled Gentiles, thus corrupting the “purity” of their religious traditions. The enmity between these two groups, who both claimed to be faithful descendants of the Patriarchs, had deteriorated to the point of reciprocal disrespect and incidents of physical violence.

A taste of just how tense these relations continued to be is captured in the astonishment of the Samaritan woman at the well, and of Jesus' disciples, when Jesus initiated a conversation with her. But Jesus did talk with the woman, who in turn brought other Samaritans to continue the dialogue. Perhaps the familiarity of this story can lead us to forget that this whole episode could easily have turned into an ugly scene. Luke gives evidence of this in the account of the village that refused hospitality to Jesus, prompting hot-headed James and John to propose getting immediate revenge by raining down balls of fire—a solution the Lord flatly rejected.

Aware of his role as universal Messiah, Jesus preferred to focus on the noble and the good no matter where it appeared. This is what we see in the case of the healing of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19: “One of them turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? Was none of them found to return and give God praise except this foreigner?’” (vv. 15-18).

The better one understands the hostility and danger that threatened Jews and Samaritans sojourning in one another's territory, the more one can appreciate the significance of Jesus' turning a xenophobic stereotype upside down in the beautiful parable of the Real Neighbor (Luke 10:30-37). One of the classic obstacles to creating a more receptive attitude in society is the cavalier labeling of “foreigners” with prejudiced caricatures. This is obviously what underlay the attack on Jesus when the Judeans taunted him: “Are we not right in saying that

you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" (John 8:48). Yet Jesus was able to overshadow the negative image and arrange for all future generations to hear the phrase "a good Samaritan" as an unadulterated compliment.

*Immigrants in the Role of Evangelists*

The Gospel of Matthew concludes dramatically with Jesus sending out the apostles to make disciples of all nations. The conversions that took place in Jerusalem on the first Christian Pentecost were the beginning of the fulfillment of this command, and the Jewish pilgrims baptized that day were able to carry the flame of their faith back to the many countries catalogued by Luke in Acts 2:8-11. But an even more radical development took place with the recruitment of Saul, the decision of the Council of Jerusalem, and the commissioning of the missionary team from Antioch to win converts from among the Gentiles (Acts 9; 13; 15). In effect, the early Church came to understand the valedictory words of Jesus as a command to institute and even institutionalize the role of migrant evangelizers.

Perhaps we do not ordinarily think of missionaries in these terms, but the Church has been in the business of sending out immigrants like this on an official basis from the very beginning. Already within the pages of the New Testament there are indications that the good news was proclaimed and received by a significant number of believers within several decades after Jesus' resurrection. On the other hand, the spread of the faith resulted from the flight of Christian refugees in the face of various persecutions. Luke tells us that "a bitter oppression started against the church in Jerusalem and everyone except the apostles scattered to the country districts of Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1).

This and other forced dispersions of the Christian population eventually enriched many locations beyond the Levantine coast with zealous witnesses of the saving message of Christ. An interesting and useful example is found in the case of Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who were expelled from Rome to Corinth. Notwithstanding the hardships created by their imposed exile, these Jewish Christians were able to help their fellow tentmaker, Paul of Tarsus, with both lodging and skilled collaboration in instructing other missionaries and new catechumens. By preserving the memory of this generous couple, the Scriptures remind us that immigrants may often play a significant role in preserving and revitalizing the faith of the communities that receive them.

- Matt 28:16-20; Luke 14:15-24; John 12:19-22; Acts 11:19-21; 18:1-28; 1 Peter 1:1, 17

## CONCLUSION

The Scriptures offer much which can instruct, admonish, and revitalize us in our struggle to understand and react wisely to the challenges generated by the immigration crisis gripping our world. The passages looked at briefly here merit much more thorough investigation, and numerous others are waiting to be discovered and brought into the conversation. May our efforts to dialogue with the inspired Word not only teach us but also bond us more closely together in our need to welcome and our need to be welcomed. "The unfolding of your word gives light, O Lord, and in your light we see light."

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