

SPECTRUM

Andrew Buttress

# BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION ON IMMIGRATION

---

## PART 1: THE OLD TESTAMENT

Has the Old Testament anything to say about the subject of immigration? If we are to do a Bible study using Old Testament texts what are we to expect? Is it possible to lift situations and circumstances which happened two to three thousand years ago in the Middle East and overlay them neatly onto our contemporary situation here in the West? These are three valid questions which Christians should ask before bringing the pages of the Old Testament to the subject of immigration.

No doubt the Old Testament has something to say. However, it might be wise not to try and provide a comprehensive immigration policy for your MP based on the Old Testament alone! It was a very different world then: people were in a very different situation; they thought differently, communicated differently and lived differently. This said we can expect to discover principles, signposts and inspirations which may help us think through some of our questions, at least. These will hopefully reflect the heart and mind of God who has seen the migration of all people throughout the world's history.

1. Have you ever been a migrant? Share your experiences with the group.
2. What is your experience of immigration? Is it a positive or negative one? Would you say that you lean towards caution and concern or consider the benefits of immigration to outweigh the downsides? Share your experiences briefly with the group.
3. From what you know of the Bible already discuss what relevance you think the Bible has to contemporary issues regarding immigration, asylum seeking and other forms of migration. Can you think of any particular people or passages which involve migration?
4. Read Gen 1:26–27. How might our attitude to foreigners and immigrants be affected by these verses? Read the words below by Christopher Wright and discuss them.

'The image of God is not so much something we possess as what we are. To be human is to be the image of God. It is not a feature added onto our species; it is definitive of what it means to be human.' Christopher Wright *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*

5. The exodus is a major event in Israel's history – it is a large migration. Read Exodus 12:37-38. Who do you think all these 'other' people were?

To help answer this question note that Judah and Simeon, two of Jacob's sons had already married Canaanite women (Gen. 38 and 46:10), and Joseph married the daughter of an Egyptian priest (Gen. 41:50). Over a period of four hundred years in captivity the group of seventy men and their wives (Gen. 46:27) who entered Egypt and who increased to a people of tens of thousands are likely to have had offspring who inter-bred with the local population. Other people must have also decided to leave with the Israelites. Thus the people who came out of Egypt and became the nation of Israel were probably not all pure Israelites with family trees going back to Abraham!

6. Israel was not a pure race when they became the nation of Israel. Do you think there is such a thing as a pure race? Is there such a thing as pure British person?

7. Israel is knit together in the Old Testament by their sense of being the people of God. Having a land with borders and boundaries was very important but always secondary.

'The central unifying and identifying feature of this people is the covenant relationship that YHWH will form with them.' J. Daniel Hays *From Every People and Nation: A Theology of Race*

As the people of God today, what knits you together with other people in your church?

8. Read Exodus 23:9. What reason does God give for being caring of the migrant?

9. Read Psalm 24:1 and Leviticus 25:23-24. In these verses who is the landlord and who is the tenant? How might this arrangement affect the way Israel treats the foreigner?

10. In the Old Testament different words are used for foreigner. Two key words are *gerim* and *nokrim*. The *gerim* were foreigners and immigrants who were often needy, vulnerable and non-threatening. They were expected to abide by the moral and ethical values inherent to Israelite society and were encouraged to integrate into this society. To these people God commands the Israelites to show compassion and mercy. Read Leviticus 19:33-34 (the word 'alien' or 'foreigner' in these verses is the Hebrew word *ger* - singular). Does this surprise you that God is so loving and compassionate to these foreigners in the Old Testament?

'This [term] covers a range of immigrants but they all are associated with other dependant groups: the hired worker, the poor, widows, orphans and the Levite. These are people without their own land and property who are disproportionately vulnerable; the Law and Prophets warn repeatedly against mistreating them.' Guy Brandon, *Votewise 2015*

11. The *nokrim*, on the other hand were foreigners who were economically independent, had no real link, interest or concern with the people or land and who stayed in Israel temporarily, for whatever reason. They were often seen as a threat to the well-being of the country.

'Between the lines of almost every mention the *nokrim* are assumed to be abusive, exploitative and untrustworthy...' Guy Brandon, *Votewise 2015*

Read 1 Kings 11:1 and 11:9-10. What does this passage suggest?

In an attempt to offer a modern day equivalent, Brandon suggests that 'multi-national companies which operate in the UK but are domiciled elsewhere or have arrangements in place to avoid paying tax here,' might be a good example of *nokrim*. Do you think this is a good example?

12. It is very difficult, and not advisable, to try and evaluate our immigration context in the light of the Old Testament in too much detail. The UK in the twenty-first century is a very different context to the Old Testament. Having said this is there anything from this study that offers any kind of principle which we might apply to the subject of immigration today?

## LEADERS NOTES

## Question 1

The word 'migrant' could include an immigrant, refugee, asylum-seeker, foreign student or someone who is an extended visitor to these shores. This question will hopefully help people to realise that the word 'migrant' is much wider than we initially think. Anyone who is in a country not their own for over twelve months is statistically considered as a migrant.

## Question 2

This question is designed to help people express their presuppositions and perceptions. To be able to state how one feels about immigration in a positive, non-aggressive environment is an important part of being open to learning about new things. The leader will obviously need to keep control of this question, ensure that several people are allowed to speak for a short time rather than one person speak for a long time! The leader might also want to put some 'ground-rules' in place to ensure that nothing offensive is said!

## Question 3

Some well-known examples include:

- Abraham leaving his home and going to the land of Canaan
- The exodus
- The journey of Israel to the land of Canaan
- The story of Ruth
- Israel's exile into Babylon and their return
- Jesus' family going to Egypt as refugees for fear of persecution
- The persecution of Christians in Acts 8 and their dispersal

## Question 4

If we all have equal value and worth as human beings we are not in a position to de-humanise others because they are migrants. Indeed if we all share God's image our motive for helping immigrants is to respect and honour that image of God in them.

## Question 5

Contrary to many people's thinking the people who left Egypt were a mixed bunch!

## Question 6

This question opens up the debate as to what it means to be English or British? Our history shows that many Brits are not indigenous but originally from Europe anyway. In the same way many who comprised the nation of Israel would not have been able to trace their ancestors back to Abraham.

### Question 7

What should knit us together, primarily, is our identity in Jesus Christ not our colour or nationality. In the same way Israel was formed as the people of God rather than a pure ethnic race. This identity as the people of God formed the basis of their covenant with God: that they were chosen and cared for by him.

### Question 8

The fact that the Israelites had suffered oppression as a vulnerable people with no human rights was to be the motive for their care of the immigrant.

### Question 9

Even though Israel was to settle and possess the land the ultimate ownership of the land still belonged to God. As 'land-lord' God could say how the land was to be used and who was to live in it. Thus, Israel was not to use their land selfishly but to treat the immigrant fairly.

### Question 10

God is depicted by some in the Old Testament as cruel and heartless towards foreign peoples. These verses do not support this view. To those who are vulnerable and needy he is compassionate and caring. As long as the *gerim* do not pose a threat to the well-being of his people, God is compassionate and keen that they integrate as much as possible into society.

### Question 11

One question that discussion about the *nokrim* might raise is whether people who threaten the economic, political and Christian well-being of this country (the UK) might also be described in this way. It is, however, difficult to extend the Old Testament's description of *nokrim* to justify anti-immigration policies largely because the *nokrim* were not really 'immigrants' in our understanding of the term. They were people outside the country who were seen to be a negative influence inside the country. In addition, Israel in the Old Testament was very different to the UK today. Israel was a people founded on a covenant relationship with God whereas England, for example, is not a religious state but a nation-state and structured quite differently.

### Question 12

Principles which we might consider are, for example

- Care and compassion for those who are vulnerable through poverty, persecution and forced migration.
- Caution towards people or bodies from outside our borders who might threaten to exploit or destabilise people/situations within them.