

The following is a work in progress by Joan M. Maruskin, Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program, Washington Representative. Parts have been presented in churches and national conferences since 1994. Please contact jmaruskin@churchworldservice.org with questions or for more information. Copyright 2003 – All rights reserved.

The Bible as the Ultimate Immigration Handbook: Written by for and about migrants, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers

The Bible begins with the migration of God's spirit and ends with John in exile on the Isle of Patmos – between those two events the uprooted people of God seek safety, sanctuary and refuge.

In the beginning all was darkness and void and the spirit of God moved (migrated) over the face of the chaos. **(Gen. 1:1)** To move is to migrate. The Biblical story is a migration story. The Bible begins with God's spirit migrating over the face of the water, followed by God, who after creating the birds, fish, and animals (all who migrate) moved throughout creation looking for a caretaker for this world?

We are all migrants on the face of this earth. Take a moment and consider your personal migration. Are you where you were born? Have you moved and if so for what reason? How many times have you moved? Many of us move by choice others by necessity and others by force. Humankind's story is a migration story. We all are, or have been migrants, immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers.

The Creator God brings Adam and Eve into being, as caretakers of creation, and thus begins the human migration story. Adam and Eve are eventually exiled **(Gen. 3:22-24)** but not before God sews skins together to cover them and protect them from the elements. God's concern for the sojourners in the world begins at this point and continues throughout the Bible.

This theme of caring for the stranger continues throughout the Bible and becomes the central theme of Biblical hospitality. Adam and Eve's son Cain kills his brother Abel. **(Gen. 3:8-16)** As punishment, God makes him a wanderer on the earth. But before sending him away, God puts a mark of protection on Cain – so that no one will kill him. The criminal migrant was protected.

(Today very few migrants [criminal or not] are protected. If they are undocumented, they are arrested and deported. Asylum seekers, who have been persecuted in their homelands, are routinely placed in immigration detention and must defend themselves or seek legal help from behind bars.)

The population of the earth continues to increase until it becomes corrupt and filled with violence. Noah is chosen to continue the human race and with the help of his wife, sons and their wives, builds the ark, and fills it with two of each kind of living creature **(Gen. 6:5 – 8:22)**. Forced to flee their land because of the flood, which was perhaps the greatest natural disaster in the course of human history, they become migrants without a known destination. Eventually their ark lands several thousand miles from Ellis Island, and the inhabitants are blessed by God and told, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." **(Gen. 9:1b)**

(It is important to note that, in today's world, victims of a natural disaster are not considered eligible for refugee resettlement. Many of them spend the rest of their lives stranded in a strange country or displaced in their homelands.)

Genesis 10 gives an accounting of the migration of Noah's sons and their descendants as "from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood." Note there was freedom of movement. As the Church of the Brethren teaches: "God made people – people made borders."

(It is theorized that if people were free to migrate anywhere in the world, the world's population would balance out and everyone would be able to meet their physical needs in God's economy. Much of the world is starving; however, the world would be able to sustain us all if the products and produce of the world were shared more equitably.)

The whole earth spoke one language as the family of Noah migrated. **(Gen. 11)** As they had a common language, they built a tower to the heavens. This did not please God, who "scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth...Therefore it was called Babel." The migration story continues.

(It also causes one to wonder about the wisdom of those calling for a national language at this time.)

The generations continue on the earth, the Biblical story picks up with Abram, his father, Sarai, and Lot settling in Haran. It is there that God speaks to Abram and says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." **(Gen. 12:1)** Abram, Sarai, and Lot become migrants going into and out of Egypt and eventually separating with Lot settling near Sodom and Abram in Mamre.

(The voice of God continues to direct people to paths of migration and immigration.)

In **Genesis 14**, we see the first of many, many Biblical battles. It is important to remember that whenever there is a war, there will be refugees and internally displaced persons. War NEVER takes place without both of those populations being coming into being because of the violence. Although this brief summary will not go into the wars, victims, and results; note, wherever there is a war there is a migration story, a refugee story, and an asylum story.

(Note also, that in previous centuries, the majority of victims of wars were the warriors. In the 20th and 21st century, the majority of victims are civilians and the majority of civilians are women and children. Eighty percent [80] of the world's refugees are women and children.)

In **Genesis 15**, God tells Abram of his role in the migration story. It is stated, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs." **(Gen. 15:13a.)** In fact God states that they will come back to the land of Abram in four generations.

The story continues in Abraham and Sarah's desire for children. At Sarah's insistence, Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl, the foreigner, bears Abraham a child, Ishmael. Eventually they are exiled into the wilderness and God promises to make Ishmael a great nation – the same promise given to Isaac. **(Gen. 21)**

(His offspring become the Muslims and populate much of the Middle East. It is important to remember the geographical location of Biblical history, to look at the ethnicity of the patriarchs and matriarchs, who are the foundation of the Christian faith. Their descendants are presently being targeted and imprisoned because of their ethnicity.)

Prior to this, we are first exposed to the Biblical mandate to care for the stranger, as one never knows when the stranger might be God. In **Genesis 18:1-8**, God appears to Abraham as three strangers near the oaks at Mamre. He offers the three men, the strangers, hospitality. He offers them the best of what he has.

The Biblical concept of hospitality is based in offering hospitality to the stranger, the sojourner, the alien, the migrant, and the foreigner. It can be verified in **Deuteronomy 6:10-12** and many other passages in Deuteronomy which will be included later.

(The Biblical concept of hospitality is to the stranger. Entertaining friends and relatives is a different type of hospitality. As disciples of the Christ, it is important to ask ourselves how many strangers have felt our hospitality. And to ask, how are we welcoming the stranger?)

The importance of this concept of hospitality is seen in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot welcomes the angels, but the townspeople do not. Their lack of hospitality to the stranger brings about their destruction. "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy." (**Eze. 16:49**). This story also shows the importance of listening to God and moving when told to move – without looking back. Lot's wife looks back and becomes a pillar of salt. The refugee story is one of not being able to look back, because there is often only death and destruction behind. The refugee seeks refuge and safety and sanctuary. Those of us in safer lands are mandated and blessed to welcome them with open arms.

(Building a fence around the borders of this country to keep out the strangers in need will not / has not stopped migration. Instead, it takes away the blessings we would receive by welcoming the strangers.)

The migration story continues with famine causing Isaac to settle in the land of Gerar as an alien. (**Gen. 26:2**) It picks up with Jacob traveling to another land for a wife. Later he is forced to flee because of his sons' violence. God directs him to Bethel. We eventually learn that Jacob settles in "the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan." (**Gen. 37:1**)

This moves us into the story of Joseph being sold into slavery, and being transported to Egypt and rising to power. It comes full circle, when famine strikes over much of the world and Joseph's brothers come to Egypt seeking grain. The circle is complete when Joseph's father and brothers, their families, flocks, and all they possess leave Canaan and migrate to Goshen, where there is food. (**Gen. 37-47**)

(Starvation is not grounds for asylum, refugee status, or immigration. United States' immigration laws do not allow persons to enter this country simply because they are starving and need to feed their families. This economy needs the migrant workers, who come to feed their families, but it forces them to lived undocumented lives, and work in sub-standard conditions.)

The book of Exodus begins with a story of persecution of infant boys. They are all to be thrown into the Nile. However, one, who would in today's language be referred to as an "Unaccompanied Alien Child", is rescued from the river and raised in Pharaoh's palace.

(If discovered at a U.S. border today, he would be placed in a juvenile detention facility. If he were very lucky, he would then be placed in foster care.)

This child, Moses, grows up to witness the oppressive treatment of the Hebrews by the Egyptians. He kills an Egyptian, and becomes a criminal alien, fleeing for his life to a strange land. He is taken in and given sanctuary in Midian.

(Today, in the USA, he would be put in prison, serve his sentence, and eventually deported back to Egypt, to be imprisoned there if that country would accept him. If it would not, he would spend the rest of his life in prison.)

In Midian, Moses marries Zipporah and is eventually called by God to return to Egypt because, in God's words, "The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Moses wonders how he could possibly do this and God replies, "I will be with you." (**Exodus 3:1- 3:12**) The key phrase is "I will be with you." In the Exodus, God migrates with the Hebrews.

(God is a migrant moving with the people! Both then and now.)

Moses, returns to Egypt, and facilitates the Hebrew Exodus through a series of plagues and dialogues with Pharaoh. When his people are finally permitted to leave, they leave as most refugees leave, with not enough time to pack, but with God leading them.

(Ask yourself, what would you pack if you had less than 15 minutes to pack to leave your home forever?)

In **Exodus 14:7** we read, "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines...God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea...The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day.... and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel by day and night. Neither ...left its place in front of the people." God was migrating with the people. God was, is, and always will be a migrant, migrating with the migrants of the world, seeking to protect them and find safe haven for them. And it is important to remember that this migration pattern also included care of the refugees. God provided manna and water and all they needed to survive.

(A compass might have taken a few years off the 40-year journey, which is an eleven-day walk.)

Eventually they reach Canaan and prepare to enter the Promised Land. It is important to note that the joy of the Hebrews on entering the Promised Land resulted from the Canaanites having their land taken away from them and their becoming refugees and internally displaced persons. The joy of the Hebrews was the destruction of the Canaanites. There can not be victors without victims.

(Details in Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)

Along with the details of entering the Promised Land, the Bible also contains advice on how the people are to act once they are in that land and one of the first instructions is found in **Deuteronomy 10:17-19**, "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

(Do we show impartiality in our present immigration laws? If not, why not? How many churches have ministries of hospitality to the strangers, the aliens, the sojourners?)

Deuteronomy includes numerous statements of how God's people are to care for the alien in the land. **14:19**, "The Levite, because he has no portion of inheritance among you, and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do."

(Our blessings from God are directly dependent on our welcoming the stranger.)

23:7, "You shall not detest and Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not detest and Egyptian, because you were an alien in his land."

24:17, " You shall not pervert the justice due and alien or an orphan, nor take a widow's garment in pledge.

25:19, "When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

All of **Deuteronomy 26** is important, as it shows the relationship between each and every person's ancestry and the responsibility that is placed on the people of God to care for the alien. One example is **Deut. 26:5b**, which reads, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien...." We are reminded that we all spring from wanderers on the earth. And that same chapter in **26:11**, continues, you shall set down the first of the fruit of the ground and bow before the Lord. "Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and your house." The chapter continues to express the importance of caring for others and in **26:12**, during the third year, which is the year of the tithe; it is to be given "to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows." The sacred portion is given to these groups at God's command.

(Once again the mandate is affirmed and it foreshadows the New Testament mandate to care for the most needy.)

In fact care of the alien is so important that Deut. **27:19** states, "Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow. And all the people shall say Amen.

(There is a translation that reads, "Cursed is the nation...." Perhaps a prophetic warning for governments to consider closely.)

Along with Deuteronomy and Leviticus, in the Hebrew Bible giving guidance for treating refugees, we also find advice in Psalms. It is important to note that refugees will often refer to the Psalms that they read and recited to themselves as they were fleeing and seeking a safe haven. One that is used very often is **Psalms 91**, which begins: "You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust." For God will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge..."

As well as giving hope to the uprooted people of the world since Biblical times, the Psalms also define the refugee experience. This is best seen in **Psalms 137**: "By the rivers of

Babylon—we sat down there and we wept when we remember Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

(This remains the question for all persons who are uprooted in this century. How can they sing a foreign land, especially one that does not welcome them and in fact seeks to expel them and treat them as less than second class citizens?)

The uprooted story continues throughout the Hebrew Bible and the story of the exile of the Israelites. This can be followed in Kings, Chronicles, Esther, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Amos.

*(It is Amos in **Am.5: 24**, who calls for justice to roll down like water and righteous like and ever flowing stream. In God’s economy – all people are sisters and brothers and share equally and are welcomed. The stranger is cherished and welcomed.)*

Literally every one is on the move and most are going into exile. This includes the prophets, the priests, and the people. Exile shows no mercy, however there are persons who did not and do not go into exile. **2 Kings 24:14** explains, “Then he led away into exile all Jerusalem and all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land.”

(This situation continues to this day, it is not uncommon for the poorest to be left behind, those who simply are not able to pick up and move and must remain in horrific conditions. At times they are referred to as the internally stuck – things are so bad; there is no possibility of their fleeing.)

The migration story is key to Biblical ancestry. In the book of **Ruth**, one family is the focal point. It begins with Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, who take Moabite wives, having to leave Judah and move to Moab because of a famine. Eventually all the men die, and the women are left alone. Naomi is a stranger in a strange land, who learns that there is no longer famine in Judah, so she exercises her right to return. However, she does not go alone, Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law, says, in **Ruth 1:16**, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God!” The rest of the story is the story of Boaz adhering closely to God’s requirement to offer hospitality to the stranger. He permits her to glean, protects her, and eventually marries her bringing the sojourner into the fold and making her part of the family.

(Fortunately for him, there were no I-130 family petitions to sign or other immigration regulations to make life difficult. Also, she did not have to leave the country for three to ten years before being allowed to return begin life as his wife.)

Job also knew the importance of caring for the stranger, in **Job 31:32**, he states, “The alien has not lodged outside, (for) I have opened my doors to the traveler.

(How many of us can say that? However, we may have the opportunity to do just that. The present xenophobic culture of the United States and targeting of undocumented workers and immigrants and asylum seekers of certain ethnicities is providing an opportunity for churches to renew and reinstate the Biblical concept of hospitality.)

The Hebrew Bible closes with an admonition from God through the prophet Malachi, who in **Malachi 3:5**, repeats the words of the Lord of Hosts, “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

(This is a very strong statement against exploitation of undocumented workers and day laborers and people and governments, who mistreat the strangers in our land. It is an appropriate precursor to the New Testament and the ministry of Jesus.)

The New Testament begins with a migration story, and perhaps the only real “alien” story. Alien is a term that is offensive to many, as it brings to mind a vision of someone from outer space. Looking at it in that manner, one might say that perhaps Jesus was truly an “alien.” He came from heaven (the outer limits of space – although he did tell us the kingdom is within) and took the form of a human being to become for us the Refugee Christ. The reality is that all Christians owe their salvation to a refugee.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, to which his parents traveled because of the taxation. He was born in a manger, a stable, a shed like the children of many of today’s migrants, who are born along the road, as their parents seek work and a place to call home. The news of his birth was given first to the shepherds, the group of people lowest on the social scale at that time, and a group of migrants, who moved with their flocks.

We know that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph settled for about two years in Bethlehem, until after the Wise Men’s appearance. Once the three kings left, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him. Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” **(Matt. 1:13-15)**

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph become asylum seekers in Egypt. Without travel documents, they cross the border, looking for safety and sanctuary. Someone takes them in. Someone welcomes them and protects them.

(Keep ethnicity in mind, it is very hard to hide in Egypt if you are white.)

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