

Praise for What Does the Bible Say About Strangers, Migrants and Refugees

There is no topic more urgent for our time, especially in the current political climate of the U.S., than migration. And there is no one more qualified to write on it than Dr. Nguyễn, himself a refugee from Vietnam and a New Testament scholar. His passion for justice and his love for migrants and refugees make the teaching of the Bible on strangers, migrants, and refugees come alive. I most enthusiastically recommend this book not only to those responsible for public policies for immigration but also to the migrants themselves.

Peter C. Phan, The Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of
Catholic Social Thought, Georgetown University

This book is compelling, informative, and challenging. Nguyễn addresses several of the tragic examples of rootlessness in today's world and thoughtfully describes the plight of the victims of such evils. He draws parallels with comparable situations found within the biblical story and then underscores how that same religious tradition called God's people in the past and us in the present to remedy such evils. This informative book lends itself to serious personal reflection as well as challenging group discussion.

Dianne Bergant, CSA, Distinguished Professor
Emerita of Old Testament Studies, Catholic
Theological Union

This book is a gem. In an accessible style, Nguyễn deftly connects the varied and complex realities of modern migration with biblical texts that reflect similar experiences. This little volume demonstrates that the Scripture can speak to the plights of today's sociopolitical and climate refugees, asylum seekers, the slave trade, and others on the move around the globe. Nguyễn also brings Catholic teaching into the discussion, but it would be a shame to limit its audience to readers of that tradition. There is much here for all Christians!

M. Daniel Carroll R., Scripture Press Ministries
Professor of Biblical Studies and Pedagogy,
Wheaton College

The book skillfully weaves migration stories and themes in the Bible with the challenges of human mobility in the twenty-first century. Its attention to the breadth and complexity of the migration experience, exploration of lesser-known biblical texts, highly-accessible language, and practical approach makes it a refreshing and rewarding read. It is most certainly a valuable contribution to the burgeoning literature on migration theologies.

Gemma Tulud Cruz, Senior Lecturer in Theology,
Australian Catholic University

What Does
the Bible
Say About... ?

Strangers, Migrants, and Refugees

“What Does the Bible Say About...?” Series

Ronald D. Witherup, P.S.S.

Series Editor

What Does
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Strangers, Migrants, and Refugees

vănThanh Nguyễn, S.V.D.


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Contents

Series Preface	7
Introduction.....	9
Chapter One: "Life is but a Sojourn"	12
Chapter Two The Tragedy of Human Trafficking.....	23
Chapter Three The Plight of Refugees and Asylum Seekers.....	35
Chapter Four Casualties of War and Violence.....	47
Chapter Five The Perils of Climate Change and Natural Disasters	59
Chapter Six Strangers in a Strange Land: The Quest for Home.....	71
Chapter Seven The Harrowing Ordeals of Women and Children	83
Chapter Eight Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?.....	96
Chapter Nine Legal and Illegal Migration: What Difference Does It Make?.....	108
Chapter Ten Migrants as Missionaries.....	122
Afterword.....	134
Notes.....	138

To Stan Uroda, SVD,
a generous confrere, dear friend,
and gracious missionary

Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about STRANGERS, MIGRANTS, AND REFUGEES.”

Introduction

Have you ever wondered what it's like to be an immigrant living in a foreign land or a refugee fleeing from war, violence, or natural disaster? I know, for I am one. Being an immigrant and a refugee was not easy, but it has taught me many lessons. One is the importance of being in solidarity with the millions of people who are displaced all over the globe. Although my parents originally came from North Viet Nam, I was actually born and raised in the South of my homeland. After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, my family and I emigrated to the United States of America as refugees, seeking religious freedom and other basic human rights that were no longer available under the communist political regime. My family certainly knows what it's like to be stripped of all fundamental human rights, especially the freedoms of expression and worship. To live under such oppressive conditions was not an option for committed Christians. We preferred to die together at sea in a flimsy boat, seeking "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1) and taking our chances with nature, rather than to live facing death from hunger and deprived of faith and hope.

The migrant and refugee crisis has erupted enormously and has become one of the major factors shaping the world today. On the highways and byways of every continent, millions of people are constantly on the move. In the last several decades, the number of people on the

move has increased exponentially. By mid-year 2020, it was estimated that approximately 3.4 percent of the world's 7.6 billion people were displaced. That's one out of every thirty people on the planet now living away from his or her homeland. From another perspective, if migrants and refugees were gathered in one place, they would constitute the fifth largest nation on earth, surpassing forty-five million more than the whole population of the country of Brazil. According to the International Organization of Migration (IOM), it is projected that by 2050 there could be as many as 405 million international migrants globally.¹

Because of the growing inequalities of wealth caused by globalization, political and ethnic conflicts, environmental disasters, virus pandemics (like COVID-19), free trade, and viable means of transportation, more and more people are migrating than ever before, causing some to call our era "the age of migration."

Migration is by no means a new phenomenon. Since the dawn of human history, wave upon wave of people have been on the move for a variety of reasons, including trade, war, persecution, natural disasters, economic opportunities, asylum, and even adventure. Interestingly, the Bible contains many stories written by, for, and about strangers, migrants, and refugees. It begins with the first human parents banished from Paradise and ends with the prophet John exiled on the island of Patmos. Encapsulated between these two bookends, namely Genesis and Revelation, are stories of God's people constantly on the move. Thus, we could correctly say that the Bible is essentially a tapestry woven

together from the stories of one huge migrant family. Since these sacred texts are written by, for, and about migrants, it is worthwhile to examine some of its key figures and events in order to draw out appropriate responses to one of the most challenging phenomena of our time—migration.

Crossing international borders, or even moving around within a country, is a major characteristic of our present age. No continent, region, or country is immune from this worldwide phenomenon. Recognizing the complexities and concerns of the plight of millions still in desperate circumstances, this book seeks to develop an appropriate response from each person and the worldwide community to this phenomenon. Since the Bible is the Word of God and the basis of our faith and practice, we will turn to the Christian Scriptures to search for inspiration and guidance. The aim is to provide a biblical basis and framework to address the issues of migration today.

Chapter One

"Life is but a Sojourn"

Plato once said, "Life is but a sojourn." There is a lot of truth in this philosophical statement. I was born into a family that was constantly on the move. Rooting and uprooting happened multiple times in my early childhood. For some people, this might sound intriguing or even idyllic. However, when you are an immigrant running away from war or natural disaster in order to survive, life can be extremely difficult and is often painful. The most heart wrenching experience for me was being on a boat drifting at sea for seven days. We were exposed to the elements of nature. Food was scarce. Drinking water was carefully rationed. Although I was only a child then, I could still feel the pain and suffering all around me. Besides being hungry and thirsty, I became homeless and stateless. I understood then that my life would never be the same again. This new reality frightened me and caused me deep sorrow, as if I had been swept over by a tidal wave.

Life as an immigrant is no joke! An immigrant is vulnerable, relying always on the generosity of others and on the whims of nature. Realizing that life is but a sojourn should cause us to be more sympathetic with those immigrants who are displaced from their home and trapped at the borders.

Israel's Ancestors as Immigrants

The Bible addresses this issue explicitly. The first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are filled with stories of forced and voluntary migration. Due to pride and selfishness, namely wanting to be like God, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commands and consequently were expelled from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:16-24). They barely had time to enjoy the fruits and sanctuary of Paradise provided by God. Interestingly, however, before the first parents were exiled to earth to secure their own shelter and till the land for food, God showed deep affection and concern for these earliest sojourners by sewing skins together to clothe them and protect them from the elements (Genesis 3:21).

The theme of alienation and displacement continues with Cain who kills his brother Abel out of jealousy (Genesis 3:8-16). As a punishment, he becomes a fugitive and wanderer on the earth. Despite Cain's hideous act of cruelty, God still cares for this criminal vagrant by placing a mark of protection on him so that no one would kill him. As the inhabitants of the earth increase, wickedness, violence, and degradation of the earth sickens God to the point of regret for having created humanity. Thus, God purges the earth and all its inhabitants with a huge flood. Noah and his family, who were righteous before God and chosen to continue the human race, were forced to flee their land because of this tragedy. Like many victims of natural disasters, they became immigrants without a known destination. Nevertheless, trusting in the covenant promised by God, Noah sails over the waves of fear and chaos to find a new

home on a distant shore (Genesis 6:18). But that is not the end! The Tower of Babel presents another tale about forced migration. In this story, the whole of humanity decides to challenge God by constructing a tower that would reach heaven. For their sin of pride, God confuses the language of all the inhabitants and scatters them throughout the face of the earth (Genesis 11:1-9).

In short, the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis recount tales of the earliest human families as migrants and refugees, moving about the earth seeking a land to settle and a home in which to dwell. They risked everything for a better life. What is most noticeable in these accounts is that God cares for and protects these fugitives, vagrants, or immigrants despite their shortcomings.

Israel's ancestral history really begins with Abraham and Sarah when they responded to God's uncertain promises and invitation to leave their familiar surroundings in Mesopotamia (literally "between the two rivers," Tigris and Euphrates) and to sojourn to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:9). While they were still wandering about searching for a dwelling, a famine broke out in the land forcing them to flee to Egypt and reside there as "aliens" (Genesis 12:10). After finding refuge in Egypt, they continued to wander about aimlessly in the Negeb (a semi-desert area located in the southern part of today's Israel-Palestine) to Bethel and then to Ai (Genesis 13:1-3). Eventually Abraham and his clan pitched their tents at Mamre near Hebron as their principal place of residence but only for a time, because their journey did not end there. As nomads, Abraham and

his kinsfolk continued to move about in Canaan searching for food and pasture for their livestock. They seemed to have finally settled in Beer-sheba (Genesis 21:33), but it is interesting to note that at the death of Sarah, Abraham had to purchase a burial place for her and for himself in the cave of the field of Machpelah (Genesis 23:19). This is a clear indication that even until the very end of their earthly existence Abraham and Sarah never ceased being strangers and sojourners in the land of promise.

The same is true with Isaac and Rebekah, as well as with Jacob and his two wives Leah and Rachel. While Isaac's primary domicile was at Beer-sheba and Jacob's at Shechem, each also moved about with his flocks and herds, not attached to any particular place. Eventually, one of Jacob's twelve sons, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt because of sibling rivalry. The dramatic epic of Joseph's displacement and rise to power in Egypt sets the stage for Israel's massive migration to the land of the Pharaohs where they are saved from a terrible famine in Palestine and eventually become permanent resident aliens.

Israel's memory of their founding ancestors is fundamentally as *gerim*,² a Hebrew designation that can loosely be translated as resident aliens, strangers, sojourners, or (more appropriately) immigrants. Abraham even described himself as an immigrant or *ger*, which is a singular form of the plural noun *gerim* (Genesis 23:4). In Exodus 6:4 the patriarchs are referred to collectively as *gerim* when God declares to Moses that he had promised to give them the land in which they were dwelling as outsiders. Even the