

Must also see M. Danny Carrol R book *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*

Below is Carrol's review of Hoffmeier's book:

The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible

James K. Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009. 174 pp. Paperback, \$14.99. ISBN 978-1-4335-0607-9.

As the national debate on immigration begins to heat up again, it behooves Christians to consider the contribution that the Bible might make to the discussion. Too often Christians engage topics at this level almost exclusively from the perspective of their chosen party affiliation and its ideology; if there is an appeal to the Bible, it can be cursory and limited to a few passages.

In *The Immigration Crisis*, author James Hoffmeier, professor of Old Testament and Near Eastern Archaeology at Trinity International University, responds to the need to inform Christians about biblical data that could be relevant for this immigration debate. The thrust of this work is to offer a description of what an alien (or sojourner) is in the Bible as a way to distinguish legal from illegal immigrants today. Hoffmeier builds his biblical presentation on four basic concepts: first, every nation has the right to decide who can and who cannot enter its territory; second, legal entry requires obtaining permission from the host people; third, Old Testament laws regarding the alien are for those who had come into the land legally; and, fourth, while the New Testament does add a new concept (all believers are sojourners on the earth), it adds no new teaching on immigration *per se* but reinforces the Old Testament view about the right of states to expect their authority to be respected and obeyed (Romans 13).

This thesis is developed through the nine chapters, as Hoffmeier traces data from the ancient Near East and the Old Testament (chs. 2-7) to the New Testament (ch. 8). The book is framed by a short introduction (ch. 1) and a brief conclusion (ch. 9). The application to the present day situation in the United States is clear: the U.S. government has the right to decide who can come in as an immigrant; therefore, those without proper documentation are here illegally and should not be allowed to violate the country's immigration laws.

The book progressively works through both testaments and is not a difficult read. Hoffmeier's expertise is Egyptology, and the sections on how Egypt dealt with foreigners are some of the book's strongest (pp. 38-48, 54-55, 59-65, 131-36). The Nile River and the fertile land along its banks were a constant lure for outsiders seeking food and shelter in times of drought or famine, so the Egyptians had a long history of dealing with individuals and groups trying to come into their territory. Hoffmeier cites several inscriptions and presents reproductions of reliefs that reflect Egypt's attitudes and policies towards these people. He mentions the forts (along with floor plans and photographs of excavations) built along its eastern flank, which were designed to control these movements. The survey of the legal and prophetic material in the Old Testament

(pp. 71-96 and 113-22, respectively) also is quite useful (pp. 71-96), although this reviewer comes to a different conclusion as to its modern relevance.

This reviewer is involved with immigration issues at local and national levels. I speak and write on a biblical framework for the **issue (Hoffmeier actually disagrees with my *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008] at several points)**, so I read this work with great anticipation. While the author's erudition and his desire to educate Christians are appreciated, there are problems with the overall argument. The shortcomings are both contextual and textual. By contextual is meant the realities of immigration into this country—its history and the status of contemporary legislation. By textual, is meant the biblical material. These are dealt with in turn.

National Realities

One wonders about the level of Hoffmeier's acquaintance with current immigration law. He seems to assume that this nation's present immigration laws are fair and coherent (although he might take the stance that their content is irrelevant and that the laws of the land are to be obeyed without question) and that simply to point out that countries have the right to maintain their borders is enough to refute those who advocate on behalf of undocumented immigrants. This perspective reflects an ignorance (whether unintentional or deliberate) of the very checkered history of immigration into the United States, the history of immigration law and the awful state of current legislation (local and federal), the multiple personal reasons for migration, and the devastating impact of global market forces and sociopolitical realities—and the possible complicity of the U.S. in some of these conditions (e.g., the impact of NAFTA on Mexican agriculture)—that has resulted in up to 200 million people migrating worldwide today looking for food, work, and safety.

At its most basic, immigration is largely about labor; people move to other countries if there are opportunities for work (this is called the push/pull factor in immigration studies: pushed out of the country of origin by lack of economic opportunities, pulled into the new land by jobs). This country imported black slave labor by the hundreds of thousands from the colonial period until the early 1800's. Even after the Civil War and the passing of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments, discrimination and injustice persisted for a century, at last triggering the Civil Rights Movement. The coming of African-Americans is at its root an immigrant story, one in which the majority culture wanted cheap labor but for the longest time did not desire their assimilation. At the end of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth, anti-Catholic sentiments were a prime factor in placing quotas on immigrants from Italy and Ireland. The history of Mexican labor and immigration also is complex and is connected to the ebb and flow of economic issues related to the two World Wars and hemisphere-wide social, political, and economic issues. Another case study is the Chinese, who were brought to California after the Gold Rush of 1849 to help build the railroads and fulfill other labor needs. Anti-Chinese feelings spawned race riots and led to increasingly severe restrictions on the flow of Chinese. This backlash culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigration until its repeal in 1943. This particular slice of immigration history is especially interesting, because Hoffmeier dedicates his book to the memory of his Chinese-American in-laws (pp. 16-17). He does not say when his wife's family came into the United States, but it had

to have been after 1943 (they would have been barred before that date). He seems unacquainted with this slice of the dark side of immigration history that literally strikes close to home.

The fact that the current immigration system is unworkable for those who are here without documentation and who earnestly desire to change their legal status is obvious to all who are familiar with the law and know people who have tried without success to accomplish this. To say that undocumented Christians “need to be sensitive to their obligation to this teaching of Scripture [i.e., to submit to the law] and work through what may be deemed to be imperfect government procedures to obtain legal status” is to disregard what is actually occurring. For many, there is no line to get into, no recourse to be had. The fallout has been the separation of families and all manner of hardship. The history of immigration *and its legislation* is the story of a messy intersection of labor needs, prejudices, and knotty assimilation processes—none of which surfaces in *The Immigration Crisis*.

Hoffmeier concentrates his discussion on the *legality* of immigration vis-a-vis *the nature of entry* (is permission given or not) across national borders. Yet, immigration entry deals with more than individuals acquiring permission at a point of entry at a border. The entry piece is much more complicated than he imagines. Who establishes the criteria for entry and why, and how is any of this enforced? A couple of comments (among many other possible observations) demonstrate the problematic nature of entry. First, all sides agree that the nation needs workers, but existing quota restrictions (some of which were established years ago in different economic climates), which theoretically control entry numbers, do not provide nearly enough work visas. The millions of employed undocumented immigrants are a tangible response to economic factors that expose the inadequacy of the present system. This fact explains why certain industries (in particular the agricultural sector) rarely are raided by immigration authorities; the country can ill afford to lose workers in those spheres whose very viability depends on immigrant labor. Second, there is no mention in the book of the multi-million dollar private industry of detention centers and providers for enforcement that are contracted by the government. Immigration enforcement, in other words, is big business. The discussion has to be located within the much broader backdrop of global economics and labor needs that intersect with the economy of the United States, especially in agriculture and multiple service industries. Consideration of these areas, among others, complicates and calls into question existing mechanisms and laws of entry.

More significantly, the author gives no evidence of acquaintance with or concern for the personal side of undocumented immigration. On the one hand, there are the *border realities* of contradictory enforcement practices and the deaths each year of hundreds in the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico, which clearly are connected to the issue of entry but are never mentioned. On the other hand, there is no grappling with the multiple challenges facing *immigrant communities* (the few examples that he gives are of individuals or single families). In addition to whatever personal experience one may have, anthropological and sociological work (e.g., assimilation and transnational studies) and testimony literature (in the form of fiction or documentaries), are helpful avenues into the immigrant world, where many live in the shadows and suffer unique trials. There is also the growing field of immigrant theology (Protestant or Catholic), whether Hispanic, Asian or African (not to mention reflections that are coming out of the European experience). A specific stream of this is being labeled diasporic theology; it probes the relevance of the Exile in the Old Testament for the immigrant experience of living in a land

foreign to one's history and culture. What is lacking in Hoffmeier's work, in other words, is more appreciation of *the human face* of immigration and immigrant communities.

Interaction with the material from these various vantage points might have impacted the author's perspective in significant ways. It might have yielded a different reading of Romans 13:1-7 (pp. 140-47). It is not that some, who question U.S. immigration law, treat this passage, according to Hoffmeier, "cavalierly" (p. 144). Instead, knowledge of the history and conditions of immigration cannot permit accepting so "cavalierly" a simplistic and uninformed interpretation that does not mistrust that legislation's coherence and efficiency—even its morality. One reads with disbelief the comment, "In the data amassed in these chapters, I see nothing in Scripture that would abrogate current immigration laws" (p. 146).

Biblical Data

While the lack of extended engagement with the realities of immigration "on the ground" is clear, the biblical presentation of *The Immigration Crisis* also exhibits weaknesses. Two will be mentioned here, and they are presented as methodological observations. The first point is that the tone and substance of the immigration debate are set by its starting point. That is, if the discussion begins with the issues related to the border, then attention is first and foremost on national security and preservation of the status quo (which is assumed to be good, or at least an acceptable state of affairs). The fundamental concern is *legal status* related to crossing national boundaries according to present legislation, and the argument naturally takes a defensive posture. *The Immigration Crisis* starts its presentation with borders in the ancient world and the issue of legal entry. Not surprisingly, this emphasis marks the rest of the book.

A different starting point leads to a different approach and tone. If the discussion begins with humans as creatures of value and potential, because they are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28), then the focus is primarily on immigrants as people, their value, needs and rights, and their potential to contribute to the common good. Of course, borders are important, and all who work for immigration reform realize this (notwithstanding the rhetorically charged caricatures of some of the media). What changes is how border issues are handled. If the defining concern is on immigrants as persons, who are created in the divine image and come at great personal cost for a better life, the substance and purposes of legislation change. Immigration legislation will no longer be essentially about restrictions and enforcement (although these items are not avoided), but rather about human flourishing and care. When the unavoidable matters related to the border and legal status do arise, they are couched within a new framework. Not surprisingly, Hoffmeier gives little attention to the image of God; it is treated briefly in relationship to Old Testament law and in the context of law-keeping in his discussion of Romans 13 (pp. 75-76 and 144-45, respectively).

This prioritizing of law is evident in the following words: "Therefore it is legally and morally acceptable for a government to deal with those in the country illegally according to the nation's legal provisions. The Christian insists, however, that they be dealt with in a humane manner. Expatriation (as Abraham experienced) in itself is not inhumane, but it must not be done in a heartless manner" (p. 157). This is an incredible statement, if one is at all cognizant of the government's raids on workplaces, the racial profiling of minorities who are stopped at random,

the contracting of private detention centers that make immigrant incarceration big business, the separation of families by the detention and/or deportation of one or both parents (even if children are U.S. citizens), and the fact that violation of immigration law is a civil not a criminal offense (thereby exonerating the government from providing legal counsel in deportation proceedings). “Expatriation” is the author’s synonym for deportation, which he feels is not necessarily “inhumane.” Law and legal status trump all.

This stance also results in a New Testament discussion (ch. 8) and concluding remarks (ch. 9) that are restricted almost totally to legality and supporting the government: Christians should obey the law and encourage immigrants to do the same. There should be a willingness to help the legal alien, the author contends, but little or nothing is said about the undocumented, except to criticize the sanctuary movement. The Gospel demand for compassion towards the vulnerable, irrespective of status, is nowhere developed. My experience nationally, though, has been that even those who might have qualms about the theological and political position of undocumented immigrants are willing to move into immigrant communities to help. They do not ask about legal status; they reach out with the love of Christ to those in need because of his demand that we love our neighbor. The fact that millions of these individuals are Christian brothers and sisters (with literally thousands of immigrant congregations meeting in church buildings!) adds another dimension to this service to this marginalized group. Hoffmeier does not entertain this possibility.

If the first biblical critique is that *The Immigration Crisis* begins its discussion in an unfortunate place, the second is that the presentation of the lexical material (i.e., of the noun *ger* and the verb *gwr*) is inadequate (pp. 48-56). To begin with, Hoffmeier circumscribes the meaning of the terms to a degree that they do not warrant. While he contends that the *ger* (alien/sojourner), is one who settles in a new land for an extended period of time and integrates into that society (a point with which I agree), his definition adds an element, which I believe is impossible to prove. He says, “In the Hebrew Bible the alien (*ger*) was a person who entered Israel and *followed legal procedures to obtain recognized standing as a resident alien*” (p. 52, emphasis added).

This claim is based on several incidents in the Old Testament in which permission to enter is asked for and granted. These examples are fine as far as they go, and no one disagrees that asking for entry and having this granted is the ideal and that there are cases of this in the Old Testament. One would expect as much; even today, of course, people petition for permission to come in to a new land. But there is more that must be considered, and questions arise.

(1) Where in the Old Testament (in the narratives or in the Law) does it state that such formal permission is required? It is an assumption and a generalization extrapolated from a few instances. Undoubtedly this did occur on occasion. Asking in and of itself is to be expected; it has always been so. However, one would need to demonstrate that these instances pertain to all immigrants who came into Israel throughout the Old Testament period and that the Law only concerned itself with these individuals and no one else. That, in this reviewer’s opinion, is impossible to prove. The Law never mentions some sort of legal entry requirement. What is expected is that these individuals obey the laws and participate in the religious life of Israel. In other words, there were cultural and social expectations for those dwelling within Israel; in turn, the Law was generous to them. Such is the case today. This is not to suggest that there were no

cases where some may have been refused entry or to deny that there may have been ‘checkpoints’ at some locations at some time in the history of Israel. It is Hoffmeier’s absolute generalization that is problematic. This leads to a second point.

(2) What of cases where permission was sought and then denied? For example, note that Abram lies to Pharaoh about his wife (Gen. 12:10-20). Is this not what desperate people sometimes do at the border? There is famine, and the patriarch needs to feed his (extended) family. He must leave once the ruse is discovered, but the point is that it worked for him and his family. But, what if Pharaoh had said “no”? Would Abram merely have turned away and let his family starve? What does one do, in other words, if permission is denied, but entry is the only hope for survival in the flight from famine or war? Or, like the situation of many today, what is the option if it is not even possible to petition for entry (for oneself or relatives) due to quotas or unjust rules? When governments deny official entry, human need drives people to seek it by other means.

(3) Another question to consider is, why is permission denied? Note, for instance, the negative response given to Moses by various peoples in Numbers 20-25 (cf. Judg. 11:16-20). It is not difficult to appreciate their sentiments. Moses was leading a multitude on a journey to another place. They would have to eat off the lands they were passing through or secure food from these peoples. As expected, they are suspicious and fearful; they surely looked at Israel as an economic and military threat. They had seen, too, what had happened to the Egyptians! This trek of *a people group* through foreign territory on the way to somewhere else is very different from today, where *individuals* cross borders looking for work. This biblical example does point to important issues, such as, what is the basis for decisions pertaining to entry? Are they about economics, labor needs, demographics, cultural purity concerns, or care for those who are in need? More importantly, are these arrangements morally acceptable? The fact that the laws in the United States are a problem pragmatically and even ethically is what fuels the movement for comprehensive reform of immigration legislation (for the border and within the national borders), so that it might be more efficient and, above all, more humane.

(4) What of those cases where official permission apparently was neither needed nor sought? That is, is Hoffmeier’s paradigm thorough enough to handle all the biblical material? The book of Ruth comes to mind. The account of her arrival and incorporation into the local community of Bethlehem does not deal at all with “legal procedures.” It is a tale of the slow and difficult process of Ruth gaining acceptance, from the position of not even having her existence acknowledged when she came with Naomi (ch. 1) to being wed to a local leader and praised by the women of the town (ch. 4). Her entry and assimilation process is done by cultural means, not legal ones. Another instance is that of Jacob in Genesis 33, who buys land from the city of Shechem. Hoffmeier says that the patriarch had first received permission to dwell in that region (pp. 53-54). The text, though, says only that he bought property after moving into the region (33:18-20); obtaining permission is Hoffmeier’s working assumption. Seeking property is what immigrants, those with or without legal standing, do in order to establish roots in their adopted land and make a life for themselves.

On the basis of his definition of *ger* and *gwr*, Hoffmeier holds that the Israelites did not consider themselves to be sojourners in the Wilderness, because that territory was not under anyone’s

jurisdiction (pp. 65-67). Likewise, he says, the Israelites in Exile were not aliens technically according to his definition, and for that reason *ger* and *gwr* are not used of that time either (p. 125). While these are generally accurate lexical observations, the reasoning is too limited. To begin with, it is to be expected that these terms not be applied to the Wilderness period—not because of jurisdiction, but because the Israelites do not settle down. Hoffmeier also misses that the Wilderness and the Exile are key episodes in the history of Israel; each has specific labels and value judgments (theological and ethical) placed on them.

He says, too, that those in Exile cannot be considered aliens, because aliens make their new land their home and never consider returning to their country of origin, while Israel did; here he mentions Psalm 137 to show that Israel still desired to go back to the land (pp. 125-26). Not only does this contradict immigration literature and experience (immigrants maintain their emotional ties to their homeland in multiple ways; this is the reason for transnational research), it also ignores the actions of, for example, Nehemiah, who serves the Persian king but keeps informed of home and leaves to oversee the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, only to go back to the Persian court. Mordecai reminds Esther of her roots and her obligation to help her people. Both Nehemiah and Esther were far removed from the fall of Judah and lived decades after the initial return to the land, but the blood of their homeland still beat in their hearts. The complexity of immigrant feelings does not work with Hoffmeier's tidy definition.

The point is that the verb *gwr* has the broad term meaning “to reside,” irrespective of legal standing (e.g., Judg. 5:17; Ps. 15:1; Jer. 49:18, 33; 50:4); of course, that can come into play, depending on the situation. A derivative of this verb is *magôr*, “a place of sojourning” or “sojourn.” It also is broad in meaning (e.g., Gen. 36:7; 47:9; Job 18:19; Ps. 119:54); it is applied to the exile in Ezek. 20:38.

Methodologically, it will not do to define the terminology so tightly on the basis of several examples. If one can appreciate that *ger* refers to someone who has come in to Israel and will take part in its life, *whatever the means of entry* and *whatever the mechanisms of incorporation* (cultural and/or legal) at any moment in that nation's history, then the narratives and the laws (summarized on pp. 71-96) make sense. These individuals had entered Israel, probably in several ways and at various crossing points, but all shared a commitment to incorporate themselves into that social world. The Law responded to the needs of these persons. The same can be said today: driven by acute needs, immigrants find their way into this country in many ways, and ideally the law of this land could provide helpful means for their survival and flourishing. Hoffmeier's emphasis on some form of formal procedure at the border and prescribed legal status are an unnecessary and contestable “add-on” to a more straightforward interpretation.

Conclusion

The Immigration Crisis is well written and informative, and there is much with which this reviewer agrees. Hoffmeier's analysis of the biblical material is challenging and stimulating. I have learned new things and have been spurred to ponder the Bible afresh. Notwithstanding, this book does not reflect much awareness of the history and current state of immigration and its legislation, and the biblical presentation has limitations.

I appreciate this contribution to the national discussion. Although its author and this reviewer interpret the biblical data differently and end up with different perspectives, *The Immigration Crisis* provides the careful and constructive argumentation that will serve to make the debate more substantive within Bible-believing Christian circles. For that reason, Hoffmeier should be thanked.

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