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# Biblical Perspectives on the Role of Immigrants in God's Mission<sup>1</sup>

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**KEY WORDS:** *Immigrants, strangers, migration, mission*

## Introduction

We know that throughout history we have seen great movements of peoples and groups from one place to another. This includes the Latin American con-

tinents where the history of many peoples, ancient and modern, tells the stories of periodic migrations of peoples from north to south, from east to west, from rural areas to the cities, from small towns to large cities, and so forth. There are immigrants who have fled very negative socio-economic and political situations. There are hundreds of thousands of people who have fled dictatorships, civil wars, and international conflicts. There are immigrants who have been transported from one place to another by force as slaves. Many immigrants voluntarily have left their homes seeking better living conditions. Some immigrants have been forced to leave because of natural disasters. And many of these immigrants have contributed in remarkable ways to the new nations to which they have gone, in terms, for example, of technology, science, industry, new cultural forms, the arts, education, and agriculture. The missions established by the missionary orders of the Roman Catholic Church in California during the nineteenth century are an example of the impact that immigrants can have

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on their new environments.

In Los Angeles, where I live, we are all immigrants and/or descendents of immigrants. I am an example of this phenomenon. My grandparents emigrated as young people from the Netherlands to the central plains of the United States, to the states of Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa. My parents immigrated from the U.S. to Chiapas, Mexico. And I emigrated from Mexico to Los Angeles. I am an immigrant and the descendent of immigrants who in our history represent at least three cultures and languages.

### Biblical perspectives

The Bible offers us various perspectives concerning the stranger and the alien.

#### 1. The stranger as enemy

There are occasions when the Bible presents the stranger as an enemy of the People of God. See, for example, Is. 1:7; 2:6; 5:17; Mt. 17:25,26; and Heb. 11:39. More dominant is the perspective of the stranger and 'the nations' (meaning all those peoples and cultures that are not a part of the People of God) as being unclean, sinful, unholy, those who could cause the People of God to lose their true faith in YHWH. At times 'the nations' are represented as those who will take possession of the land and belongings of Israel as God's punishment for the unfaithfulness of the People of God.<sup>2</sup> It

would seem that this perspective is affirmed over a long period of time in spite of the fact that in both testaments one finds an even stronger emphasis on the role of the People of God as special instruments of God's mission to impact and bless the nations.

#### 2. The stranger is to obey the law of God

Alongside the perspective mentioned above, another viewpoint is strongly affirmed in Scripture: that the stranger who lives in the midst of the People of Israel is to obey the same norms and keep the same commandments that the Israelites were to keep.<sup>3</sup> For example, Leviticus 24: 21-22 says,

Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a man must be put to death. You are to have the same law for the

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9:12; Job 15:19; Ps. 69:8; Prov. 2:16; 5:10, 17, 20; 6:1; 7:7; 11:15; 14:10; 20:16; 27:2, 13; Eccles. 6:2; Is. 1:7; 2:6; 5:17; 61:5; 62:8; Jer. 2:25; 3:13; 5:19; 51:51; Lam. 5:2; Ezek. 7:21; 11:9; 16:32; 28:10; 30:12; 31:12; 44:7,9; Hos. 7:9; 8:7; Joel 3:17; Obad. 11, 12; Mat. 27:7; and Jn. 10:5. In John 10:5, for example, the stranger is the foreign shepherd whose unknown voice the sheep do not recognize and will not heed. See also, Acts 17:21; Heb. 11:39.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gen. 17:12, 27; Ex. 12:19-49; 20:10, 20; 23:12; 30:33; Lev. 16:29; the entire chapter 17; 18:26; 19:33; 20:2; 22:10, 18; 24:16, 21-22; 25:6; Num. 9:14; 15:15, 16, 26, 30; 19:10; 35:13; Deut. 1:16; 5:14; 14:14, 17, 21, 29; 16:11,14;24:14,17; 18:43; 19:11, 22; 26:11; 27: 19; 29: 11, 22; 31:12; Josh. 8:33,35; 20:9 (with reference to the cities of refuge); I Kgs. 8 (the prayer of David); 2 Chr. 15:9; 30: 25 (the prayer of Solomon); Ps. 18:44,45; Ezek. 14:7; and Acts 2:10.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Gen. 31:15; Lev. 22:12, 13, 25; Num. 1:51; 3:10, 38; 16:40; 18:4,7; Deut. 17:15; 31:16; 25:5; Judg. 19:12; Neh.

alien and the native-born. I am the LORD your God.

### 3. The care of the stranger who lives in the midst of the People of God

God does not only require that the stranger who lives in the midst of the People of Israel be treated fairly and equitably, but God also commands that the immigrant / stranger is to receive the care and compassion of the People of God. In many texts the Bible couples the idea of the immigrant / stranger with that of the orphan and the widow. And compassion and intentional care are required, especially for the orphan, the widow and the stranger who lives in the midst of the People of God.<sup>4</sup>

### 4. Biblical perspectives of the instrumental role of the immigrant in God's mission

Generally speaking, we think of the immigrant / strangers as recent

arrivals in our midst, ones who have come with 'only the clothes on their back', so to speak. So we associate the immigrant / stranger with the marginalized, the needy, with minority groups, and those who are under-represented in social, political, and economic arenas. In the Bible there exists a clear emphasis on compassion toward, and care for, the immigrant / strangers as receptors of just and compassionate treatment on the part of the People of God, by other folks in general, and on the part of governments. These biblical perspectives concerning the immigrant / strangers are well known and important.

However, the Bible offers us other and different perspectives of the immigrant / strangers as partners, co-labourers, co-participants in the mission of God to the nations. In this short essay, I will focus on the composite of viewpoints that see the immigrant / strangers as active agents of God's mission, God's instruments who contribute to the creation of human history and participate in the mediation of the grace of God to the nations.<sup>5</sup> It is not my intention to present an exhaustive biblical theology of the immigrant / strangers as found in the Bible, nor do I intend to present a detailed study or

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Lev. 19:18; 19:33; 25; Deut. 10: 18 (reference coupled with the orphan and the widow); 14:21; 16:14; 26:12, 13 (reference coupled with the orphan and the widow); 19:11; 27:19 (reference coupled with the orphan and the widow); Ps. 94:6 (reference coupled with the orphan and the widow); 146:9 (reference coupled with the orphan and the widow); Prov. 3:19; Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Ezek. 22:7,29; 47:22,23; Zach 7:10; and Mal. 3:5. The New Testament emphasizes the love of neighbour and of one's enemy. See, for example, 'you shall love your neighbour' in Mt 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mr. 12:31; Lk. 10:27; Rom.12:20 (ref. Prov. 25:21, 22; Ex. 23:4; Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6:27); Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; 1 Tim. 5:10; Heb. 13:2; James 2:8; 3 Jn. 55.

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<sup>5</sup> Here I follow the spirit of Paulo Freire who taught us the important transformational dynamism of conscientizing the people such that the poor and marginalized begin to catch a glimpse of the possibility that they may themselves be active agents of their own history and creators of their own destiny. See, for example, among other related works, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

a minute examination of all the narratives or all the biblical passages having to do with this theme. Rather, I want to offer here a wide panorama by following a thread of the tapestry of the Bible<sup>6</sup> that will serve as a kind of outline signalling the way in which God uses the immigrant / strangers in God's mission to the nations.

This emphasis begins already with Abraham whose story is the story of all immigrants / strangers, including our own stories.

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labour. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me (Deut. 26:5-10).

When the Bible first introduces us to Abram, he is presented as an immigrant / stranger.

This is the account of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth....Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran. The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.' So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there (Gen 11: 27-12:5).

The People of Israel recognized that an important aspect of their self-understanding, their identity as a special people, derived from being strangers, sojourners, aliens, immigrants. (See, for example, Job 19:15; Ps. 69:8; Eph. 2:12; and Col. 1:21.) God himself says to Abram, 'Know for certain that your

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<sup>6</sup> In relation to reading the Bible as a tapestry that presents the *missio Dei* in narrative form, see Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 17-43.

descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure' (Gen. 15:13-14; see also Gen 23:4; 28:4; Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2-4.).

Thus an integral aspect of Abraham's missionary call to be an instrument of God's mission to the nations implied that he and his family would be strangers, aliens, sojourners, immigrants.<sup>7</sup> Sharing this vision, Luke, for example, presents Jesus as a 'stranger' in Jesus' encounter with the two who were walking to Emmaus after the passion week (Lk. 24:18).

Thus in what follows I will examine the place of the immigrant / stranger in relation to four of the classic categories of missiological reflection: the motivations, agents, means, and goals of the mission of God to the nations.

### 1. The motivations of the immigrants / strangers in the mission of God to the nations

There are numerous indications in the Bible that demonstrate how God used the very history of the People of Israel

as pilgrims, immigrant people, to motivate them to participate in God's mission to the nations. For example, in Exodus 22:21, God says,

Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.

In Exodus 23:9 God repeats,

Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.

In 1 Peter 2:9-11 the writer offers an echo of this same motivation to be instruments of God's mission to the nations, drawing his vision from Deuteronomy.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

In addition to participating in God's mission to the nations, the People of God were to treat the stranger who lived in their midst with compassion and justice precisely because they had themselves once been strangers and aliens in Egypt. Thus in Leviticus 19:33-34 we read.

When an alien lives with you in

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Gen. 12:10; 15: 13; 17:8; 21:23,34; 23:4; 28:4; 36:7; 37:1; Ex. 6:4; 1 Chr. 29:15; 37:1; Job 19:18; Ps. 39:12; 69:8; 119:19; Obad. 11; Acts 13:17; Eph. 2:12, 19; Col. 1:21; Heb. 11:13; and 1 Pet. 1:1.

your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

Having experienced the life of the pilgrim and sojourner, the People of Israel should also care for the land with a special sense of stewardship because the land belongs to God and not to Israel (Lev 25:23).

The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants.

The judges were to judge the stranger on the same basis as the Israelite (Deut. 1:16) and Israel was to love the immigrant / stranger for two reasons: (1) because God loves the stranger and the alien; and (2) because Israel was also a foreigner and stranger in Egypt (Deut. 10:17-22).

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky.

In Deuteronomy 23:7 Israel is commanded,

Do not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. Do not abhor an Egyptian, because you lived as an alien in his country.

This aspect of Israel's self-understanding of Israel as a pilgrim people had profound spiritual and existential implications. In his prayer for the temple that his son Solomon would build, David recognizes the fact that the People of God are immigrants and strangers (1 Chron. 29:14-15).

But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope.

The psalmist also emphasizes that precisely because they are immigrants and strangers God will hear their cry (Ps. 39:12; 119:19. See also Jer. 35:7; 1 Pet. 1:1 y 2:11).

How powerful could this motivation be to move our churches to participate in the mission of God locally and globally, participating in the movement of the Holy Spirit in mission because we too were and are immigrants / strangers? It seems to me a great shame—and I consider it a sinful omission—that many immigrants and descendants of immigrants in southern California, for example, have forgotten who they are, that they themselves are also immigrants / strangers, a forgetfulness that appears to produce an attitude such that those of us who are early-arrival immigrants / strangers

and/or descendants of early arrivals should demonstrate little or no compassion, nor receptivity, much less hospitality, for the new immigrants / strangers who have recently arrived in our neighbourhoods and communities.

## 2. The immigrants / strangers as agents of God's mission to the nations

A second aspect of this missiological and instrumental perspective of the immigrants / strangers role in the mission of God has to do with the form in which various personalities are presented in the Bible as agents of God's mission precisely because they are immigrants / strangers. Let me highlight a few examples.

Abraham would participate in God's mission to the nations as a response to his call to leave his homeland and his extended family clan and begin a pilgrimage to a new land that God would show him. God would bless the nations through Abram precisely through his being a stranger, pilgrim, foreigner and immigrant. To be a stranger and an alien was such a fundamental aspect of the self-understanding of Abraham's family that Isaac also understood this quality as being an integral part of God's vision for him, a self-portrait that Isaac sees as fundamental to his being an instrument of God's mission to the nations. Thus God tells Isaac in Gen. 26:1-6.

Now there was a famine in the land—besides the earlier famine of Abraham's time—and Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar. The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, 'Do not go down to

Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws.' So Isaac stayed in Gerar.

This biblical perspective of the immigrant / stranger as an agent of God's mission acquires deeper roots and broader significance throughout the history of Israel. We can see how the story of Joseph sheds light on this missional viewpoint. Sold as a slave and sent to Egypt, Joseph is forced to become an alien, stranger, immigrant. Joseph lives through deceit, mistreatment, false accusations, undeserved imprisonment, and utter loneliness in being forgotten in prison, a situation which many of today's immigrant / strangers have also experienced. But precisely as an immigrant / stranger, Joseph saves his family from famine, saves all of Egypt, and feeds all the peoples surrounding Egypt. Egypt grows in its international influence and power because of the work of this immigrant in the halls of power in Egypt. Joseph adapts to the Egyptian culture to such an extent that when his own brothers come asking for food they do not recognize him. In the end, Joseph himself acknowledges his special role as an immigrant / stranger

when he speaks to his brothers in Gen. 45:4-8; 50:19-21.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God....'. Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.' And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Thus, even after his death Joseph's embalmed body would immigrate via a long journey through the desert back to the land of his origins.

The Bible develops this missiologically perspective in a significant number of narratives about persons whom God uses precisely as immigrants / strangers. We could mention Daniel and his missional role in Babylon, another administrator who is a special agent of God's mission although initially he is an exiled prisoner, a cross-cultural missionary sent against his will to a strange land. Daniel devoted his life to serving as counsellor and

friend of the kings of Babylon and Persia even though he was a foreigner.

We could also mention the two women whom Jesus highlights in Luke 4 as special agents of God's mission. Both are immigrants / strangers. One was the widow of Seraphath (1 Kings 1:8-16), the other a young Israelite girl taken captive and serving as a slave in the household of Naaman the Syrian. As an agent of God's mission, the little girl's simple testimony brings about Naaman's healing from leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-4). Precisely as foreign women God uses them in God's mission to the nations.

Interestingly, during the exile in Babylon, the People of Israel found themselves having to choose between two different perspectives. On the one hand, they could see themselves as victims as expressed in Psalm 137:4 where the Israelites—as captives in Babylon—cry, saying, 'How can we sing a song in a foreign land (or as foreigners in this land)?' On the other hand, they could choose a self-understanding as active agents of the mission of God, even though they were strangers in a new nation. It is fascinating that during the exact same moment in history, with reference to the same persons experiencing the same exile, in the same context, God says to them through Jeremiah, 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it

prosper, you too will prosper' (Jer. 29: 5-7).

This second perspective involves the Israelites seeing themselves as being sent to Babylon by God with a missional purpose as agents of God's mission for the well-being of the land to which they had been sent.

We could mention Esther, a woman who as a descendent of immigrants / strangers adapts so well to her new culture that she is chosen to serve in the harem of the king of Persia. And even as an immigrant / stranger, Esther allows God to use her both to save her people from being destroyed, and to be the catalyst through whom all Persia comes to know about the God of Israel. Similarly, Mordecai the Jew, an immigrant / stranger ends up exercising great influence in the realm.

If we had space, we could mention David, exiled among the Philistines, an immigrant / stranger whom God uses among them. David becomes a companion at arms with, and counsellor to, Achish, king of Gath (1. Sam. 27). Maybe this is why the New Testament writers seem so easily and naturally to take note that Jesus himself was an immigrant / stranger, exiled as a child to Egypt. Luke brings this to mind once again on the lips of the two who are walking to Emmaus after the passion and resurrection of Jesus, describing the one who joins them as being a 'stranger' (Lk. 24:18).

This perspective of the immigrant / stranger as an agent of God's mission appears to be so compelling that Ezekiel speaks of God using foreigners themselves in God's mission of judgment against Israel when Israel refuses to be an instrument of God's mission to the nations (Ezek. 28:7).

This vision is echoed in Habakkuk 1:5-6 where God says that he will use the Chaldeans in God's mission. Paul makes reference to this same passage from Habakkuk in his first major sermon in which he develops his mission theology (Acts 13:41). Paul's use of Habakkuk echoes the way in which Isaiah states that, due to the infidelity of Israel, God will use other nations in God's mission (Isa. 61:5).

Can we imagine what God might want to do through the Hispanic/Latino, Korean, African, Filipino, and Chinese diasporas (to name a few) now spread all over the earth if we were to view them as agents of God's mission in the re-evangelization of North America, Europe, the Middle East and the globe?

### 3. The immigrants / strangers as means of God's mission to the nations

A third aspect of this missionary and instrumental perspective of the immigrant / stranger in God's mission has to do with the way in which immigration itself is presented as a fundamental method of God's mission to the nations. There are indications in the Bible that on occasion God used immigration to fulfill certain important aspects of God's mission. Clearly there is an intimate relationship between the agents whom God uses in God's mission and the means by which God chooses to carry out that mission. Yet in this essay I will make a distinction (though it may at the outset appear to be somewhat artificial) between these two aspects of God's mission in order to be able to read with new missiological eyes the history of God's mission as

it is portrayed in the Bible.

When one thinks of immigration—that is, the phenomenon itself of being a stranger/alien/foreigner—as one of the methods that God uses in God’s mission, a number of biblical narratives come to mind. The first we might mention is the story of Moses. Raised in a bi-cultural and bi-lingual environment (Aramaic and Egyptian) Moses was still not a useful instrument for God’s mission. It was necessary for Moses to spend forty years as an immigrant / stranger among the Midianites, learning how to survive in the desert, learning how to shepherd sheep (God was preparing him to be able to shepherd a large human flock in the desert), and being shaped personally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically for the leadership role that would be his. Moses describes himself as an immigrant / stranger. The narration in Exodus 18:1-3 tells us,

Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her and her two sons. One son was named Gershom, for Moses said, ‘I have become an alien in a foreign land...’ (See also Ex. 2:22; Acts 7:29.).

The theme of the desert as the womb from which mission is born represents a strong and consistent emphasis in the Bible. John the Baptist came from the desert to begin his ministry. As another example, in Luke 4, Jesus begins his ministry surviving the temp-

tations in the desert. And in the case of Saul of Tarsus, after being encountered by Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul—known later as Paul—spends quite a few years in the desert rereading the Old Testament. In the desert, all are strangers. And in the desert they are shaped, formed, reborn to participate in God’s mission. It appears that at times God places people in situations of being immigrants / strangers with the purpose of forming them in preparation for their participation in God’s mission.

A second figure we could mention is a woman, a widow, a Moabite, who precisely because she was an immigrant / stranger was used by God to heal the bitterness of Naomi, her mother-in-law, illustrating in her person what God wanted to do for Israel. In the history of Ruth the agent of God’s mission is combined with the means of God’s mission. Here I want to emphasize an aspect of the narrative of Ruth having to do with immigration itself as a means of God’s mission.

The entire story derives from the way in which Boaz treats Ruth. Clearly the narrative is meant to be a love story in the midst of which the bitterness of Naomi (representing Israel?) is healed by and through the love Ruth and Boaz have for each other. But the relationship of Ruth and Boaz flows from the faithfulness of Boaz as a righteous Israelite. He knows the Scriptures. He knows that in Lev. 19:10 and again in Lev. 23:22 God signals the way in which the People of Israel were to treat the immigrants / strangers in their midst. Ruth describes herself as a ‘stranger’ in Ruth 2:10.

At this, she bowed down with her

face to the ground. She exclaimed, 'Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?'

The form in which Boaz receives her and the compassion that Boaz shows to Ruth demonstrates that Boaz was a just and righteous Israelite who follows the Levitical norms.

Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God....(Lev. 19:10)

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 23:22) (See also Deut. 24:19, 20, 21; 26:12, 13.)

Let us remember what we have already noted: God has a special care, compassion, and love for the stranger, widow, and orphan (See, for example, Ps. 94:6; 146:9.). It is precisely because Ruth is a stranger, a widow, an alien, that God was able to use her in the environment of the faithfulness, compassion and love of Boaz to bring about the healing of the bitterness of Naomi. The woman, the widow, the stranger, is the means and the example of the compassion of God.

The New Testament offers us an echo. In Luke 17, when Jesus heals the ten lepers, only one returns to give thanks to Jesus and praise God for being healed. And that one was a Samaritan, considered a stranger and alien by the Jews at the time of Jesus. It is precisely because he was a stranger and alien (in the eyes of the Jews) that Jesus points him out as an

example.

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, 'Jesus, Master, have pity on us!' When he saw them, he said, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, 'Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Rise and go; your faith has made you well.'

There are many other examples of this third aspect of immigration as a means of God's mission to the nations. The exile itself was a means whereby God created a great *diáspora* out of which resulted the Septuagint, the synagogues, Jewish proselytism, and a network of human relationships that spread over the entire Roman Empire, contacts that Paul would later use as the pathways for his missionary journeys. Later in this essay I will highlight the Parable of the Good Samaritan as one more illustration of the way the stranger and alien are presented as examples of the means of God's mission to the nations.

Could this biblical perspective of immigration as a means of God's mission offer us a lens through which we might better understand what is hap-

pening in this century? Is it possible that God is using immigration itself as a means to proclaim in word and deed the coming of the Kingdom of God among the nations?

#### 4. The immigrants / strangers as goals of God's mission to the nations

A fourth aspect of a missiological and instrumental perspective of the role of immigrants / strangers in God's mission sees immigration in relation to the goals of God's mission among the nations. Immigration seems to play an eschatological role that propels God's mission and the participation of the People of God in that mission toward the future. This futurist vision appears early in the Bible in the call of Abraham in Gen. 17:3-8.

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.'

All immigrants think and dream of

going to a promised land that will offer better conditions of life. This hope of the future as a fundamental aspect of immigration can be seen in numerous biblical narratives. For example, when God raises up Moses to call the People of Israel to come out of Egypt, Moses speaks of their going to a new land. In Exodus 6:1-8, we read,

Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.' God also said to Moses, 'I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore, say to the Israelites: "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD."'

God's mission toward the future is

closely connected to his love of Israel as a pilgrim and immigrant people. In one of his psalms, in 1 Chr. 16:15-26, David cries out,

He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant: 'To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit.' When they were but few in number, few indeed, and strangers in it, they wandered from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another. He allowed no man to oppress them; for their sake he rebuked kings: 'Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.' Sing to the LORD, all the earth; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

This eschatological perspective of immigration includes the hope that the nations will one day come to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, creator of heaven and earth. This is the vision of Isaiah, for example. In Is. 56:3-7, we read the following.

Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.' And let not any eunuch complain, 'I am only a dry tree.' For this is what the LORD says: 'To the

eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.'

The writer of Hebrews associates this eschatological hope of the immigrant / stranger with the expectation of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11: 13-16. 'All these people,' the writer states, 'were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.... Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.'

The vision the Bible offers us is that all immigrants / strangers are invited to the great banquet of the Lamb (Matt. 22:1-14; Lk. 14:15-24). Every stranger is invited to the table of the Lord. This eschatological perspective of the immigrant / stranger is emphasized also in Revelation. Repeatedly the author of the Revelation announces that a great

multitude of every language, family, tribe, and nation will gather around the throne of the Lamb. (See, for example, Rev. 1:7; 5:8; 5:13; 6:12; 10:6; 11:15; 14:6; 15:1; 19:6 and chapter 21.) This great gathering will occur as the result of a great migration to the holy city. In Revelation 21:1-2, 23-26, John describes the event.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.... The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it.

What impact—and what changes might there be—in our Christian churches and ecclesiastical institutions if we really believed that in the final analysis, at the end of history, the immigrants / strangers are specially invited to the Great Banquet of the Lamb? (See Lk. 14:15ff; Matt. 22:1ff.) What are the implications for our nations and our Christian churches in the thought that the hope of the world resides with the immigrants, aliens, strangers, and foreigners in our midst? And what if in their future we find our own global future?

## Conclusion

The four aspects of this instrumental and missiological perspective of the role of immigrants / strangers in God's mission to the nations converge in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Luke places the parable within the narrative in which Jesus sends the 70 on a mission. They are sent as envoys of Jesus' mission which is thus their mission. And the primary example of such a mission is the Samaritan.

In the parable we find the motivation for mission in Jesus' response to the question posed by the young noble as to how the young noble is to keep the law. As Jesus tells it, the 'neighbour' in this story is not the one who stands beside the young noble. Rather, it is the one who acts neighbourly. The 'neighbour' is the one who lives out the norms of the Older Testament in being 'neighbourly' to others. In the parable, the one who demonstrates such a way of life is in fact the Samaritan. The Samaritan is the 'neighbour'.

The parable clearly presents the Samaritan stranger/alien as the agent of God's mission. And the way Jesus tells the parable shows that Jesus also wants to highlight the alien Samaritan as the means by which Jesus can offer the young noble a new path of participating in God's mission.

Finally, the parable also focuses on the future. With the words, 'Go and do likewise', Jesus points toward a future in which the young noble can fully receive God's mercy. The young noble himself will no longer be a stranger. And because of God's mercy the young noble can also begin to create a new reality in which immigrants / strangers are no longer excluded from his care,

his compassion, and his love.

I believe that when we begin to fully understand the Bible's missiological and instrumental perspectives with regard to the immigrant and stranger, we may possibly gain a better grasp of, and live more fully into, the missionary vision expressed in 1 Peter 2. If the church of Jesus Christ truly saw itself as a pilgrim community whose land and nation are not of this earth, then the Christian church would begin to understand that it is itself a community of immigrants—ambassadors, yes (2 Cor. 5)—but even so, immigrants.

Out of all the nations of the earth, God has chosen the Christian church to be 'a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God'. Being who we are, it is not acceptable for us to reject the call of God to participate in God's mission in this world—especially God's mission because of, by means of, with the participation of, and on the way toward immigrants and

strangers. Is it possible, in this century, to express the canticle that gives concrete expression in real life to the vision of the psalmist in Psalm 146: 1, 5-10?

Praise the LORD....Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—the LORD, who remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. The LORD reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD.

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