

# A Christian response to immigration

Guy Brandon, Jubilee Centre

This short leaflet draws heavily on previous Jubilee Centre works about immigration, including Jonathan Burnside's *The Status and Welfare of Immigrants* (Jubilee Centre, 2001), Nick Spencer's *Asylum and Immigration* (Paternoster, 2004), and Rose Lynas and Dewi Hughes' chapter on Nationhood and Immigration in *Votewise Now!* (SPCK, 2009). Readers can find more detailed treatments of immigration in these books.

## Introduction

*'I know this is an issue that people feel really passionate about. And I know the debate around immigration is not always a healthy one. It often swings between extremes... between those who argue strongly that migration is an unalloyed good, vital for our economic success... and those who say it completely undermines our economy because immigrants take all our jobs. Between those who attack caution about immigration as racist and xenophobic... and those who plead that our communities just can't cope with the demands of ever greater numbers flooding in.'* – David Cameron<sup>1</sup>

Immigration is a live and perennial issue. Opinion polls for the last 50 years have shown that the British public favours a reduction in immigration, with MORI recently finding that around seven out of ten people believe there are too many immigrants in the UK. It is consistently seen as one of the most important issues going into elections – in 2010, race relations/immigration was second only to the economy.<sup>2</sup>

Immigration tends to prompt strong and polarised reactions, but it is also a deeply misunderstood issue. A 2011 MORI poll found that, when thinking about immigrants, the public are most likely to think about asylum seekers (62 percent) and least likely to think about students (29 percent). In fact, asylum seekers represent the smallest group coming to the UK (4 percent in 2009) and students represent the largest group (37 percent of 2009 arrivals). Asylum has not accounted for a significant proportion of migration since 2004: our perceptions are years out of date.<sup>3</sup>

The strength of public opinion hides the complexity of the issue. How we think about immigrants and immigration is connected to how we see Britishness. But both immigration and Britishness are impossible to reduce to simple arguments and one-size-fits-all solutions, despite the impression given by so much of the media coverage about them.

## A biblical view of immigration

Although the Old Testament's insights into immigration and nationhood are more than 3,000 years old, they present a refreshingly nuanced and helpful approach to the subject today. Existing in the cultural melting pot that it did, early Israel had to have clear guidelines for interacting with those of other nationalities. Israel's own formative years as foreign slaves in Egypt informed their attitude to immigration, which was concerned both with keeping their own national and religious identity but also caring for the vulnerable and oppressed in society. In the New Testament, Christians are repeatedly described as 'aliens and strangers' in the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Speech, 10 October 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2612> (accessed 23 November 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See full report at <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/understanding-uk-public-opinion/executive-summary> (accessed 23 November 2011).

There is therefore much that Christians can learn from a biblical approach to immigration: how we see immigrants, how we understand Britishness and, ultimately, how we view our relationship with God alongside these.

## What do we mean by ‘immigrant’?

When speaking about immigration policy or a Christian response to immigration, it helps to be clear what we mean by the term ‘immigrant’. The word is often used as an unhelpful catch-all for several categories of people who originate from other countries. They typically have different reasons for being in the UK and different requirements, and therefore demand a different response.

**Immigrant** is simply a broad description without any clear definition, but generally means someone who has settled somewhere other than their country of birth.

**Asylum seekers** are those who have fled their country of origin due to persecution or fear or persecution and have applied for asylum or refuge in another country. Grounds for asylum can include persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group.

A **refugee** is someone who has had their request for asylum granted and has been granted residence in the new country.

Both of these are often confused with **illegal immigrants**, who live outside of their country of origin without permission from the authorities in their new country of residence. These might include failed asylum seekers who have not left the country, and those who have not applied for asylum for one reason or another.

In addition, there are **economic migrants** or **migrant workers**, who have come to the country on either a long-term or short-term basis to find employment.

Obviously, these categories can overlap and there are many reasons for immigration. However, the confusion that can arise from this is all too easily exploited. Statistics are commonly manipulated and facts misrepresented to give an impression that serves a particular purpose. The term ‘immigrant’, which includes all of the above categories, is often implicitly conflated with ‘illegal immigrant’ – a far smaller subsection of the immigrant population. Certain news stories do little more than play on an undercurrent of racism and xenophobia. In November 2011 a row erupted after the head of the UK Border Agency, Brodie Clark, relaxed immigration controls. Home Secretary Theresa May admitted ordering reduced checks in limited circumstances, but claimed that Clark had gone far beyond these without ministerial authorisation. The questions that automatically followed – both from politicians and the media – focused on how many thousands or even ‘how many millions of people were let in under the relaxed border controls agreed by the Home Secretary’<sup>4</sup>, and how many terrorists, criminals and illegal immigrants had been allowed into the country as a result.

Concerns about the size of the immigrant population are a common theme in some tabloids, but accurate data is harder to come by. One 2007 MORI poll found that ‘Daily Express readers believed that 21% of the population were immigrants, Daily Mail readers thought that 19% of the population were immigrants and Guardian readers thought that 11% of the population were immigrants. In reality 7% of the population were immigrants.’<sup>5</sup>

The issue of immigration is therefore highly vulnerable to misinterpretation on a number of fronts. Firstly there is the question of scale, and the extent to which the immigrant population of the UK is exaggerated – whether as a percentage of the total, as with MORI’s inflated figure of 21 percent for

---

<sup>4</sup> Ed Miliband, quoted by the *Daily Mail*.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/jan/23/pressandpublishing.immigrationasylumandrefugees> (accessed 25 October 2011).

*Express* readers, or as an absolute number, as with Ed Miliband's unlikely 'millions' in the Brodie Clark row. But there is also a general gloss that is all too often placed on immigration. Despite the huge diversity of people who enter the UK from foreign countries, they are often treated with the same wariness. It doesn't matter whether they are asylum seekers, economic migrants or if they really are terrorists: the fear is that they are all out to take something at our expense. Our default state is too easily one of suspicion – an undercurrent that has, in the past, played into the hands of extremist groups such as the British National Party and the English Defence League.

## What do we mean by 'British'?

Our approach to immigration is heavily shaped by our understanding of nationhood, but that understanding is not always as well thought-through as it might be. This reflects the rather ambiguous nature of 'Britishness' in the first place.

Christians pray for 'our nation' and politicians talk about 'this nation', seeking to evoke a sense of national unity. At the annual Labour party conference in 2007 Gordon Brown promised 'British jobs for British workers', prompting a storm of controversy in the process. But what we mean by 'British' isn't always shared by others, or even by those to whom we apply the term. Did Gordon Brown's understanding of British include the 6.5 million people born overseas who were resident in the UK at the time? Or the 25,670 people who applied for asylum that year?

Even for those born in the UK there are a range of different national identities. The term 'British' encompasses Scottish, Welsh, Irish and English people, but many of those would primarily identify themselves as belonging to their own countries. In fact, ethnic minorities are more likely to describe themselves as 'British' than white people. Only a third of white Brits describe themselves as British, preferring to describe themselves as English, Scottish or Welsh – whereas the vast majority of non-whites describe themselves as British.<sup>6</sup>

Even for those who do describe themselves as indigenous Brits, it is not clear what this really means when the history of the United Kingdom is so complex and diverse. 'Indigenous' is as slippery a term as 'British'. Does it mean that they are descended from the original Brits who first populated the land when they migrated here on foot from the continent at a time when sea levels were lower, a period which ended some 8,000 years ago? Or from the various Celtic groups – who did not have the collective identity that the modern term 'Celtic' implies – who came across in boats during the Bronze Age? Or the Romans, who invaded and encountered the 'Britons', merging their cultures and politics into the entity *Britannia* – 'the land of the Britons'? How about the successive waves of Angles, Saxons, Vikings and Normans who invaded after the fall of the Roman Empire? When the very identity of 'British' is such a patchwork in the first place, what does it mean for our attitudes towards the more recent waves of Afro-Caribbean, Asian and Eastern European immigrants? The whole issue of national identity is further complicated when those of mixed-race are considered. The number of people who identify themselves as ethnic minorities in Britain is slightly less than 1 million. However, when the ethnic identity of people's parents is what determines the definition, rather than self-identification, the number is almost twice as high.<sup>7</sup>

The identity of 'English' is almost as difficult to pin down – not only because of its similarly complex roots, but because of the way the word is often used. In his preface to the 15<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Oxford History of England*, published in 1965, A. J. P. Taylor wrote, 'when the Oxford History was launched a generation ago "England" was still an all-embracing word. It meant indiscriminately England and Wales, Great Britain, the United Kingdom, and even the British Empire.' The word is still commonly used, if inaccurately, as a kind of catch-all term.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Social Trends 39 (2009): Population*

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15164970> (accessed 14 November 2011).

The fact is that Britain has always been home to distinct people groups. Diversity is in the nature of what it means to be British. When we use the word to signify some single characteristic of ethnic identity, we are referring to something that doesn't exist.

## **What does the Bible say about immigrants?**

The idea of the landless and oppressed alien is one that is absolutely core to Israel's national identity. The Patriarchs, starting with Abraham, were nomadic shepherds who had no country of their own. In fact, Abraham had been called by God to leave his home country and family so that God could guide his descendants into a new land, where they could establish a new national identity in him (Gen. 12:1-3).

After the Israelites settled in Canaan, this identity as homeless nomads remained deeply ingrained in the national consciousness. Deut. 26:5-11 contains one of the Israelites' earliest creeds or statements of faith. It is significant that resident foreigners are included in the celebration that marks the end of the Israelites' time as rootless aliens:

'Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to 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, subjecting us to harsh labour. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, 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 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, Lord, have given me." Place the basket before the Lord your God and bow down before him. Then you and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household.'

The Israelites' experience as slaves in Egypt shaped their national identity and informed their own treatment of foreigners. This understanding of our place in the world is the same for Christians, with the awareness of being 'in the world but not of the world'. Jesus said that he was 'not of this world' (John 8:23) and that neither was his kingdom (John 18:36). 1 Peter describes Christians as aliens living in a foreign culture, with different standards. '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.' (1 Pet. 2:11-12) This is just as true for Christians today, living in a culture that is often hostile to our faith.

### **A 'mixed multitude'**

Their historic identity as marginalised outsiders played a significant part in Israel's faith and self-understanding, as did the importance of having a home country of their own. The land is a fundamental and recurring theme of Israelite religion. However, like the British today, the Israelites did not have a single, pure ethnic identity. It is easy to imagine that a group of Hebrew slaves left Egypt at the Exodus and that these alone comprised the nation of Israel. The truth is more complicated, as both archaeological evidence and some of the Bible's lesser-read passages suggest.

Abraham makes a special effort to ensure that Isaac has an Aramean wife, rather than one 'from the daughters of the Canaanites' (Gen. 24:3-4), as does Isaac with his own son, Jacob (Gen. 28:1-9). But Jacob's sons, the fathers of the twelve tribes, were less concerned to maintain their ethnic identity. Judah and Simeon marry Canaanite women (Gen. 38 and 46:10), and Joseph married the daughter of an Egyptian priest (Gen. 41:50). The blood lines of the Exodus group can hardly have been unchanged after 400 years in Egypt, during which time a group of seventy men and their wives

(Gen. 46:27) increased to a nation of many thousands. Moses' own father-in-law was a Kenite shepherd and a priest in the land of Midian.

In any case, an often-overlooked reference shows that the Exodus group wasn't simply made up of Jacob's descendants: 'Many other people went up with them, as well as large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds.' (Exod. 12:38) The Hebrew word *'ereb* here suggests that the 'other people' were really an ethnically diverse mixture of non-Israelites, a 'mixed multitude', as it is often translated. The New Living Translation renders it: 'many people who were not Israelites'. The same word is found in Neh. 13:3, under very different circumstances, where it is translated 'of foreign descent'. These foreigners, probably other slaves and labourers in Egypt, took the opportunity to join the Israelites in escaping their captors. It is striking that such a formative moment in Israel's history involved so many of foreign descent, who had found themselves in the same oppressed circumstances as the Israelites. It is also worth noting that the degree to which, and conditions under which, foreigners could take part in the Passover meal were settled immediately after this story, in Exod. 12:43-49. From the very start, right relationships with foreigners was a live issue for the Israelites.

Beyond the 'mixed multitude' that went up from Egypt, 'Israel' would also include a significant number of Canaanite people. Josh. 9 describes how one Canaanite group, the Gibeonites, tricked Joshua into sparing them and instead allowed them to assimilate with the Israelites. Perhaps they were not the only ones. In Josh. 24, Joshua renews the covenant with the Israelites. At this stage, even though they had now entered the promised land, some of them were still worshipping the gods of their ancestors and the gods of the Amorites, one of the Canaanite peoples. "Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Like Britain, then, Israel can hardly be viewed as a homogenous population. Within the overall umbrella of Israel, people had strong affiliations to tribe, clan and extended family, and perhaps their own ethnic identities too. In Israel's early days, the 'nation' was no more than a loose confederation of the twelve tribes, who only came together in the overall 'national' interest, such as to fight wars. The Israelites were Israelites because they chose to follow God, not because they had an automatic birthright or unifying ethnic roots.

### **Care for the alien**

The phrase 'love the stranger' occurs 36 times in the Old Testament. Knowing what it was like to be poor and dispossessed themselves was supposed to prompt them to treat aliens well within their own borders.

However, this welcome of immigrants and care for the vulnerable was qualified by a recognition of their responsibilities towards Israel. Acceptance was not unconditional. Broadly speaking, there are two types of immigrant in the Old Testament. There were *nokrim* or *zarim*, often translated as 'foreigners', who lived outside of Israel and had no real link with the land, its people or their God. They might typically have been mercenaries or merchants. Their level of integration with Israelite society was low and they were typically viewed with suspicion and concern as potential enemies or exploiters – although there was still the hope that they might learn about the God of Israel through the Israelites' example (1 Kings 8:41-43).

So, for example, the Israelites were not allowed to charge interest to any of their fellow countrymen, and were instructed to cancel debts every seven years – a provision made to ensure that debts never grew to unmanageable levels, avoiding in long-term poverty. The *nokri* were the only ones who did not fall into this category. Because they did not identify with Israelite culture and abide by its rules, they were not protected by the same economic laws. Presumably, this avoided the

problem of foreigners being able to exploit the Israelites by taking advantage of beneficial rules to which they themselves were not subject. Similarly, they were not allowed to join the Passover meal (Exod. 12:43) and they had limited worship rights in the Temple (Deut. 23:1-8). There was a recognition of the danger that *nokrim* could subvert Israelite culture and religion by leading the Israelites astray – most notably in the example of king Solomon’s many foreign wives (1 Kings 11:1-13), and king Ahab’s Sidonian wife Jezebel (1 Kings 21).

By contrast, the *ger* or *toshav* (usually translated ‘alien’ or ‘sojourner’) represented a very different category of foreigner. *Gerim* are frequently mentioned alongside other vulnerable and dependent groups in society – the poor, widows, orphans, and hired hands. Despite, or more likely because they risked being marginalised, they were supposed to be fully integrated with Israelite society. Israel’s laws applied equally both to the native Israelite and to the *ger*, as stated in Exod. 12:49 – ‘The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you’. For example, foreign workers were not to be made to work on the Sabbath:

‘Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.’ (Deut. 5:12-15)

Unlike the *nokri*, they were both protected by the law and bound by its responsibilities. Although they could acquire their freedom and economic independence, it seems that they were more generally disadvantaged and in need of support.

One thing that is clear is that ethnicity was not the factor that decided how the Israelites treated foreigners. In this respect, there was no difference between *ger* and *nokri*. The distinction is instead one of intention and self-identification. *Gerim* were part of normal Israelite society, integrating culturally and economically, and hence were protected by but also expected to live by Israelite standards. *Nokrim* were more economically independent and showed little, if any, interest in becoming part of God’s people. Hence they placed themselves outside of its culture, responsibilities and protections.

## **What does the Bible say about nationalism?**

The purpose of the Church is to be, like Israel, a ‘light to the nations’ (Isa. 42:6, 49:6). Whatever the exact nature of its attitude towards other nations, then, Israel’s approach was not to be one of unthinking exclusivity and inward-looking nationalism.

The early chapters of Genesis show much of the Bible’s view on nationhood. God creates the world, commanding humans to ‘increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen. 1:28). A few chapters later, the development of different nations and languages is presented as a natural consequence of this Creation mandate (Gen. 10). Groups of people who spoke the same language and were concentrated within a particular territory became known as separate nations – often named after a common ancestor.

Thus the existence of different nations in itself was not considered something bad. Throughout the Bible, nations and empires are judged on their relationship with the Israelites (or the Church, in the case of Rome), and with God. In the next chapter, Gen. 11, there is the example of Babel. In this instance, nationhood becomes a form of idolatry. The inhabitants of Babel identify themselves primarily by their geographic location, trusting in their technological ability and their own achievements rather than in God. It appears that their arrogance leads to nationalism and

imperialism, since this account prefigures the rise of the Babylonian Empire, with all its abuses against the Israelites and other nations. In fact, the leaders of any empire – Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome – are prone to this kind of idolatrous loyalty; centralised power and the nationalism that goes with it present problems for anyone who wishes to place their loyalty to God before their country. In the case of Babel, God put an end to their unhealthy allegiance to their nation, scattering them and enabling the fulfilment of his command to fill the earth.

Nationality is not irrelevant in the Bible, but nationhood comes a firm second to identity as God's created beings. God directed the formation of nations, as can be seen by the apparently incidental notes in Deut. 2:9-12 and 19-23, which the NIV translation puts in brackets. In Acts 17:26, Paul tells the Athenian intellectuals that God 'made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.' Similarly, in Gal. 3:28-29 he reiterates that faith is – as it was for the Israelites in the Old Testament – the unifying identity above any considerations of nationality or other criteria: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.'

### **Conclusion: Our response**

The biblical approach to immigration is more nuanced and balanced than modern presentations of the issues often suggests. Despite the fact that there are many different categories of immigrants, we are prone to tarring them all with the same brush; our reaction is too often one of suspicion or hostility, something that media coverage rarely does anything to address.

Lying behind our approach to immigration are our assumptions about nationhood, and what it means to be 'British'. Despite the mixture of nationalities that are, and have historically always been, a part of Britain, the term is open to abuse as an exclusive rather than welcoming label. The model of Israel suggests that self-identification is a more useful criterion for viewing someone as 'British' than ethnic identity. Plus, the distinction between *ger* and *nokri* reflects the current complex situation that immigrants have many different reasons for being here. Some will be willing to integrate with British society – without giving up their own ethnic identity – whereas others will not. In Israel, the benefits and protections of assimilation also came with responsibilities and expectations.

More relevant, however, is the reminder that many immigrants are amongst the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised of society. Like the Israelites, then, our acceptance of immigrants might be qualified by questions about their intentions and willingness to participate in 'British' society, but this should be our starting point. The repeated command to 'love the alien' for this reason is a helpful reminder that our default position should be one of compassion and openness, rather than defensiveness and hostility.