



Hoffmeier, James K. 2009. *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway. Paperback, 174 pages.

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James Hoffmeier grew up as a missionary kid in Egypt. He knows firsthand what it means to be an alien and stranger. His wife is of Chinese descent, the granddaughter of immigrants. In the Introduction, Hoffmeier states that he wrote *The Immigration Crisis* in order to fill the void of serious study of biblical material on illegal immigrants. Although he claims that this book is not a response to M. Daniel Carroll R. (*Christians at the Border 2008*), the author mentions the other work and points out the differences.

The Immigration Crisis debuts with statistics which show that the immigration process is larger in the U.S. than in any other country. The author deals not only with the legal and economical debate, but also with questions regarding the attitude one should have towards illegal immigrants already in the country. He contends that the Bible is influencing the immigration debate, but asks if people don't just use the Scripture to support their already preconceived views. As a safeguard, Hoffmeier proposes four hermeneutical principles: (1) a careful study of text and context, recognizing that circumstances in biblical times do not transfer literally to our days; (2) an honest look at the calls made by the biblical prophets to apply the laws of the country consistently, but not limiting the identification of the actual corpus of laws of a country with the biblical ethics; (3) an analysis of biblical laws in order to find out the ethical principles behind them, and to find their contextualized application today, maintaining open to the possibility that the Bible does not offer a comprehensive list of answers that address today's conundrums; (4) extracting a biblical worldview from themes that extend throughout the biblical canon and evaluating social and legal issues against this worldview.

Hoffmeier stresses the importance of borders and boundaries, showing that they existed even in antiquity. Abraham is presented as a sojourner who crosses borders, especially the one to Egypt. In fact, the author makes a parallel between the United States and Egypt, indicating that even in ancient times one needed an approval, a visa, in order to cross the border of a certain nation. He shows how Egyptians allowed foreigners to travel in their country for water or other necessities, but defended their own sovereignty and territorial integrity. Abraham is presented as an alien who seeks permission before entering Egypt.

An interesting discussion revolves around the question, What is an

alien in the Bible? The author proposes that Abraham is described as a *resident alien*, dismissing the frequent parallelism used in the Hebrew language. He makes the distinction between an alien and a stranger, the first being a permanent resident while the second is not. Jacob's family is presented as receiving permanent resident status because they asked to settle in the land of Egypt. Hoffmeier insists that accepted aliens were not allowed to invite or sponsor other aliens in order to receive permanent residence. From the author's perspective, the Old Testament describes a legal system for immigration similar (if not identical) to the one existing in the United States and Canada.

Hoffmeier considers that the Israelites were subjected to slavery in Egypt only when the country was ruled by foreign pharaohs (the Hyksos). He contends that the laws referring to aliens in the Pentateuch have been given to Israel simply because they went through the painful experience of being mistreated as aliens in Egypt, so they should not mistreat others (72). However, the author insists that these laws offering protection and rights refer to the "resident alien" with a legal status, not to the foreigner. What is intriguing is that Hoffmeier talks about the "equality of all humans" which excludes the illegal immigrant as a human being. Even the cities of refuge are described as offering sanctuary to "legal" people, not to illegal criminals, and Hoffmeier concludes that "American cities and churches who offer sanctuary for illegal immigrants are twisting biblical statutes and subverting federal law." In his view, today's legal system is "biblical." It seems to me that the author breaks his very first hermeneutical rule.

Hoffmeier examines how aliens were treated in the Old Testament, but also how Israel was treated during different periods of exile. Then he moves to the New Testament and states that "Jesus never directly spoke about aliens or refugees or how they should be treated. In fact, the New Testament is conspicuously silent on the matter" (135). What is interesting is that, again, the author suggests that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had to stop and ask permission to enter Egypt when fleeing Herod's rage. There is no textual support for this statement, and extra-biblical sources are simply interpreted to reach such a conclusion.

Two main arguments are presented for the lack of references to aliens and their status in the New Testament: (1) Jews and Christians lived in an occupied land, and (2) Christians viewed themselves as aliens in this world and citizens of the Kingdom of God. However, the author emphasizes that Christians should "submit to earthly authorities," quoting Rom 13:1-7. Unfortunately, only those words have been italicized in the text which, taken out of context, indicate blind submission.

Hoffmeier criticizes M. Daniel Carroll R. for his "dismissive treatment

of Romans 13" (144), and claims that "for Carroll's position to have merit, current American laws must be inherently unjust" (145). On the other hand, the author does not acknowledge that, in order to blindly submit to authorities, one has to believe that current American laws are inherently perfect and just. The conscience Paul is talking about in Rom 13 does not automatically dictate one way or the other. Those who live under oppressive regimes know what I am talking about. However, Hoffmeier admits that there are stories in the Bible which clearly indicate disobedience of human laws because of conscience. He claims that such stories "entail preservation of life" and considers that such is not the situation of those looking to "improve their economic standard" (147). Again, such a statement is based on generalization and judgment of people's motives to illegally enter another country. Little he knows that some people who cross boundaries risk their lives in order to save their family's lives at home.

As he addresses the critical question, "What biblical guidelines concerning aliens (legal and illegal) should influence national immigration law?" the author sees "nothing in Scripture that would abrogate current immigration laws" (146). Although claiming in the introduction that the book was written to fill a gap in the biblical studies about illegal immigrants, he talks very little about them. The author also claims he does not take aim at M. Daniel Carroll R.'s position; however, Hoffmeier repeatedly does exactly that. Academic dialogue is welcome when each side allows for the possibility that the truth may be above and beyond each argument. I recommend *The Immigration Crisis* to be studied together with Carroll's *Christians at the Border*, and I invite the readers to avoid going to the Bible in order to get support for preconceived ideas. Immigration is largely a result of sin, and solutions are not always easy to find, especially when it comes to national immigration laws.

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