

A Nation of Immigrants: Sojourners in Biblical Israel's Tradition and Law.

**By Richard H. Hiers. Eugene: Resource Publications, 2021.
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In *A Nation of Immigrants: Sojourners in Biblical Israel's Tradition and Law*, Richard Hiers invites Christians in America to rediscover the biblical narratives as stories of migrants and sojourners. The ultimate hope is that readers of the Bible would recognize that being migrants was an essential aspect of the identity of the people of Israel. This recognition, suggests Hiers, should lead contemporary readers of the Bible to an ethical posture of empathy and compassion toward refugees and asylum seekers. In order to make this argument, Hiers organizes his succinct study of Israel's scriptures into two major parts: in the first part, he deals with Israel as a community of migrants and sojourners in foreign lands; in the second, he discusses the ramification of this experience on Israel's treatment of foreigners and strangers whether in its midst or among its neighboring nations.

Hiers surveys episodes of sojourn in the story of Israel and its ancestors. Abraham, Sarai, Isaac, Jacob, and their families migrated from Chaldea to Canaan, from Canaan to Egypt, among the Philistines, to Mesopotamia and back to Canaan, and from Canaan to Egypt. In a foreign land, the seventy migrants prospered, were persecuted, became a nation, and went on a foundational experience of movement, namely, their liberation from Egypt toward the Land of the Promise. From Egypt, through the wilderness and entering the land under Joshua and the judges, Israel the migrant finally was able to form countries or nations of their own under the rule of David and Solomon. Their story of migration does not end there, however, because they suffered the traumatic experiences of being under foreign empires that made many of them leave their home country and force them into exile. Even though many Jews returned to the land, some remained in diaspora, and those who returned to the land were under the hegemony of the Greek and Roman empires. Based on this survey, Hiers concludes, "We have seen that sojourning was at the core of Israel's history as a people. In this sense, they were a 'nation of immigrants'" (45).

The centrality of the migration experience in the story of Israel has ethical implications for how the Israelites should treat the migrants in their midst. Thus, Hiers turns to stories and law codes that deal with how migrants and foreigners were welcomed or excluded in the Israelite society based on the biblical traditions. The biblical traditions present a complex



portrayal of intermarriage. While there are stories like Ruth, Tamar, Asenath, and Zipporah that advocate for inclusion, for these are foreign women who entered into the fold of the people of Israel, texts such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi warn Israelites against marrying foreign women. Yet, for Hiers, there are myriads of biblical examples that advocate for the inclusion of foreigners, which, therefore, stands in opposition to the exclusionary ethics and politics that appear in other traditions. The legal codes of ancient Israel advocate on behalf of the judicial and economic rights of the sojourners. The Israelites are commanded to treat migrants with justice, compassion, and generosity. Responding to the needs of migrants is not only grounded in Israel's experience of sojourn. For Hiers, the biblical tradition begins with a creation narrative in order to underline the theological claim that all, host and migrants, are humans who were created in God's image. Hiers concludes part two by asserting that "biblical law and tradition in a variety of ways give expression to the core biblical belief and understanding that all human beings and nations, whatever their differences, are the LORD's people and fully human. And can look forward to being together enjoying peace and well-being with each other and with all creation" (78).

In the final section of the book, Hiers draws connections between the issue of migration in the biblical traditions and the contemporary debates on the matter. He first reminds the readers that their stories likely entail ancestors who at one point or another lived on two if not three continents. This insight is the reason behind the title of the book, for, in the words of John F. Kennedy, the United States is a "nation of immigrants" (80). The second important conclusion for Hiers is that migrants ought to be seen as human beings who have the right to be treated with equality and dignity. He points out that this conviction was central to the formulation of the declaration of Independence and to the Fourteenth Amendment, which "prohibits states from denying 'any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law'" (81). Finally, if the United States considers itself a model for democracy and a beacon of hope for the nations of the world, then the people and leaders should resist xenophobic policies that demonize migrants and deny them processes to fulfill their dreams.

Hiers succeeds in producing a very accessible account of migration in the Bible. Readers with no specialized knowledge of biblical scholarship will find this book to be a very helpful resource for starting the conversation on migration as a central component of the biblical story and the ethical implications for contemporary debates on migration in the United States. Hiers plausibly highlights migration as an identity marker of ancient Israel and underlines the importance of creation theology to resist discourse and policies that dehumanize immigrants. While I applaud Hiers for covering a lot of ground in such a small book, the readers will need to explore further a few issues. Hiers—rightly so—shows that there are biblical traditions that are exclusionary of foreigners and migrants and others that are inclusive. However, his discussion lacks a discussion of hermeneutics and discernment when the biblical traditions hold diverse views. For example, one might appeal to the historical context of the exclusionary passages to show that they were dealing with a specific context and were not offering a blank policy of closing borders. Another issue that needs to be considered further relates to the title of the book. It is true that the United States is a nation of immigrants. But it is equally important to consider what this statement means in relation to the experiences of Native Americans and African Americans. Not everyone who lives on this continent is an immigrant and not everyone chose to immigrate. So as readers join Hiers in claiming their stories of migration in order to advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers, it is important to remember to acknowledge and seek to repair the harm that Native communities and African Americans have been enduring. That said, this book is highly recommended for nonspecialist readers who seek to explore what the Bible offers to contemporary debates on immigration.