

## I WAS A STRANGER . . .

Keith Norman

One hundred seventy-two years ago this coming Wednesday, July 24, the first company of Mormon pioneers entered the Salt Lake Valley, which was to be their new home. Being mostly a desert, it didn't look very inviting to these refugees. But they had been driven out of their homes back east at gunpoint too many times, and after months of trudging over the plains and struggling through the Rocky Mountains, they were resigned to settling in a place practically nobody else wanted. They thought of themselves as the new Israel, the covenant people of the Lord, and their leader, Brigham Young, was seen as the American Moses, leading them through the wilderness to the promised land.

The Israelites under Moses were also refugees, although, unlike the Mormon pioneers, they left Egypt to escape slavery rather than because they had been driven out. In fact, Pharaoh was enraged that the Israelites were leaving and led his army to pursue them, either to bring them back or to slaughter them. It did not turn out well for the Egyptians. But it was no picnic for the escapees, either, who spent years of hardship in the desert before they could secure a place to settle.

Refugees are defined as people forced to flee their home country to escape war, persecution, violence, or other disasters. Long before the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was established, America was a place of refuge. Lehi and his family were fleeing the imminent destruction of Jerusalem when they came here. Centuries later, our own

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honored forefathers, the Pilgrims, were escaping religious persecution in England. Their descendants and fellow European immigrants soon began the process of turning Lehi's descendants into refugees, forcibly displacing those they had not already killed from their ancestral lands, then breaking treaty after treaty whenever they coveted the latest place of Native American resettlement. Eventually the Native Americans were confined to reservations, areas perhaps even less hospitable than the primitive Salt Lake Valley. We might well call them "refugee camps" rather than reservations.

Other examples of refugees immigrating to America abound. Beginning in 1845, just when the Saints were being driven out of their homes in Nauvoo, a devastating blight destroyed most of the potato crop in Europe, causing widespread famine. Hardest hit was Ireland, where over a million people starved to death, and another million emigrated, mostly to the United States. They faced resentment, discrimination, and economic hardship in their new home, but, for the most part, they survived and eventually prospered. My grandsons Cameron and Connor Shea are descended from Irish refugees. By contrast with the grudging welcome the Irish found here, the United States took in large numbers of dissidents from Cuba following the Communist takeover of the island in 1959. There are now over a million political refugees from Cuba living in Florida.

Today it seems that the entire planet is flooded with refugees. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, there are currently almost 71 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 26 million who have had to leave their home country, an all-time record. On average, 37,000 people are forced from their homes per day due to violence and persecution. In addition to losing their homes and their livelihood, in many cases they are separated from their families. Over half of all refugees are children under the age of eighteen. All too often they experience violence, discrimination, and deprivation during their journey and even after it ends in exile. The modern-day slave trade is mostly fueled by refugees.

The majority of refugees are from three countries: Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan. But large numbers come from elsewhere, including areas such as Venezuela, Somalia, Myanmar, and Central America. Today, Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees, 3.7 million, followed by Pakistan, Sudan, Uganda, and Germany. Historically, the United States, a nation of immigrants, has been the leader in resettling refugees. Several years ago, when I attended my oldest son's graduation from Cal State Fullerton, the program listed, in alphabetical order, around one thousand graduating students from the College of Business and Economics. I looked down the list to find the name of my pride and joy, but I noted that the single "Norman" on the list was preceded by no less than forty-five "Nguyen"s. I'm not sure how to pronounce it, but I recognized it as a Vietnamese name. The US has been reasonably good at bringing in people displaced by our own military ventures, including Vietnam and, more recently, Afghanistan and Iraq.

But recently, we have seen a change in our national policy toward refugees. The number of people we accept has dropped dramatically, despite the increasing numbers and desperate conditions of those in need. I am trying not to get political here, so let's consider what the scriptures say about refugees.

The Bible does not use the word "refugee" in our English translations but could often be understood as such when terms such as "foreigner," "stranger," or "sojourner" are used. In contrast to many of the ancient Middle Eastern tribal societies suspicious of or hostile to outsiders, Israel was held to a higher standard. Although we like to focus on the Ten Commandments, the Lord gave Israel additional requirements and instructions from Mount Sinai, including this: "Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). Elaborating on the theme, the Lord later told them: "But the stranger that dwells with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:34).

So already in the law of Moses we have the Golden Rule, and it is applied to foreigners living among us: treat them as equals. This should not surprise us, considering that the Lord God who gave the command is Jehovah, or Jesus. He reiterated it during his earthly ministry: do unto others as you would have others do to you. This, Jesus explained, was the meaning of the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12). The law of Moses further specifies that foreigners were to be included in religious festivals (Deuteronomy 16:14), that tithes collected by the priests were to help provide food for foreigners as well as widows and orphans (Deuteronomy 14:28–29), and that farmers were actually expected to be sloppy in their harvests so that the poor and the foreigners could glean the remains from the fields (Leviticus 23:22). The New Testament likewise counsels us to show hospitality to strangers (Hebrews 13:20) and tells us that when we are baptized into the kingdom of God, we “are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the Saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19).

When Jesus described the coming day of judgment to his followers, he specified the behavior that would separate the sheep from the goats: those who would inherit his kingdom had fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison, and been hospitable to foreigners: “I was a stranger, and ye took me in” (Matthew 25:35). Jesus himself had been a refugee: his family had to flee their home in Judea when warned that King Herod wanted to kill the infant before he could fulfill his prophetic destiny. Thus, Jesus really meant it when he said, “Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). I think it is safe to say that today’s refugees qualify as among the least, the most unfortunate, the most desperately in need, of the people of the world.

The Book of Mormon does not mention strangers or foreigners in the sense of refugees, but this does not let us off the hook. We in this favored land are blessed with peace, prosperity, and stability. It is easy for us to ignore the plight of those millions of God’s children not so fortunate. We may think, well, they need to work out their own

problems where they are, not come to us for a handout. King Benjamin, in his comprehensive address to his people on morality, after exhorting them to teach their children to love and serve one another, then tells us we must look beyond our families:

And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.

Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of any substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—

But I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God. (Mosiah 4:16–18)

Harsh words! Although they echo Christ’s pronouncement on separating the sheep from the goats: whoever failed to help those in need “shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Matthew 25:46). King Benjamin goes on to say that we are all beggars before God, depending on him not just for our worldly wealth but for the remission of our sins (Mosiah 4:19–20). Thus, we have no excuse for hoarding our abundance when others are in want.

Last year, the Church issued the following statement: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long expressed its position that immigration reform should strengthen families and keep them together. The forced separation of children from their parents now occurring at the U.S.-Mexico border is harmful to families, especially to young children. We are deeply troubled by the aggressive and insensitive treatment of these families.”<sup>1</sup> We have seen the pictures on

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1. Church News, “Church Calls for Unity, Compassion in New Statement on Immigration,” June 18, 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/church-calls-for-unity-compassion-in-new-statement-on-immigration?lang=eng>.

the news of refugees who drowned trying to cross a river or an ocean, of decaying bodies in the desert, of children separated from their families, crowded together in cages with despair on their faces. But what can we as individuals do, so removed from these horrible scenes? Now that we live in a global society, I don't think we can just wait until someone in need comes knocking at our door.

A few years ago, as news of the desperate throngs trying to escape the carnage of the civil war in Syria bombarded us, I felt moved to get involved somehow. Perhaps we could sponsor a refugee family, help them get settled here. To my surprise, I could find not a single instance of Syrian refugees coming to Cleveland. You may recall that the United States decided not to accept any victims of that conflict on the assumption that a terrorist might slip through disguised as a refugee. But on further research, I did find a local organization called Refugee Response, which was helping refugees from other countries such as Afghanistan, Burma, Bhutan, and Ghana who did make it here. I learned that, in addition to helping them find housing and teaching needed life skills, they operate the largest urban farm in the country in Ohio City, which employs refugees to grow and harvest produce. I contacted them and ended up as a tutor for a ten-year-old boy whose family had spent fifteen years in a refugee camp in Nepal after being kicked out of neighboring Bhutan for not practicing the official religion. I worked with him on reading and homework for about a year and a half until his family moved to central Ohio. By that time, the refugees allowed into the US had been restricted even further, so Refugee Response never came up with another assignment for me. They are still in need of adult tutors for women, however.

My adult children pointed me to the International Rescue Committee, one of the most effective organizations assisting refugees worldwide. Although it doesn't give the same satisfaction as personal contact, they are always happy to accept donations. Another organization doing similar work, although not with refugees per se, is the Bountiful

Children's Foundation, a.k.a. the Liahona Children's Foundation. An all-volunteer organization (no paid staff), it was established and is run by Church members, many of them missionaries who returned from developing countries wanting to help the people they had come to love. They focus their efforts on nutrition and immunizations, and they also depend on the generosity of people like us who, having read the passage in Doctrine and Covenants telling us we should not wait until we are commanded to do good, feel the need to help (D&C 58:26–29). The Bountiful Children's Foundation is not a Church-sponsored organization and does not engage in proselytizing. However, you may recall that several months ago a refugee from Bhutan via Nepal, Nischal Pradhan, was baptized in our ward. (I understand he now attends the young single adult branch.)

If you tithe and pay a generous fast offering, you deserve commendation. You needn't go beyond that to qualify for a temple recommend. However, in the temple, we express our willingness to consecrate *all* our time and means to doing God's work. Are we not a little bit relieved, though, that we don't actually have to get so extreme *now*? Maybe in the Millennium things will be different, and we can take that covenant more literally. Personally, I doubt I will live that long. But when I do get to the great day of reckoning, is the Lord going to say to me, *Well done, Brother Norman, you fed and clothed me, you took me in when I needed your help: enter into my kingdom?*

Or something else?

May there be no goats among us, I pray.

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