

# “We Don’t Want Them Here”<sup>1</sup>: From the Politics of Rejection to Sustainable Relationships with Immigrants

María Alejandra Andrade Vinueza

“The day after the elections, my son Sebastián came home crying from school and begged me not to send him back. He said, ‘That kid was yelling at me again: *Build the wall. Go back to Mexico. Nobody wants you here.*’” Sabina is a Mexican woman who for the past fifteen years has lived and worked legally in Wisconsin.

1. Words of President Donald Trump when signing his first executive order, referring to those who would be affected by order 13769. See “Trump: We Don’t Want Them Here,” CNN.com, January 27, 2017.

Ma. Alejandra Andrade V., from Ecuador, is a specialist on children, faith, and development. For over fifteen years she has worked in church settings promoting integral mission. She is currently the Director of Strategic Alliances and Theology for Latin America and the Caribbean for Tearfund, UK.



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With sadness, she narrates how ever since Trump's campaign for presidency began, every time "that kid" runs into Sebastián, he shouts Trump's campaign slogans, waving his hand like a gun and shooting.<sup>2</sup>

As it has for Sabina, the arrival of Donald Trump to the Oval Office has increased the concern of governments and civil society in Latin America, most notably regarding two of his campaign promises which threaten to further jeopardize the rights of many foreign-born inhabitants of the United States: the building of a wall along the border with Mexico and the acceleration of deportations. If carried out, these measures could affect the nearly 11 million undocumented residents believed to be in the United States<sup>3</sup> as well as the thousands that continue trying to arrive. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the number of people from Central America requesting asylum in the United States in 2015 was a full 250% increase from 2013.<sup>4</sup> This new wave of migrations from Latin America continues to rise, characterized by two factors: an increase in unaccompanied minors seeking to enter the country and the multiplication and interrelatedness of factors that compel people to migrate, the most common being violence, poverty, and family reunification.<sup>5</sup>

Trump began to make good on his anti-immigration positions within his first few days of office, when he signed his first executive order. Alluding to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, president Trump justified the ban on, among other things, the entrance into the United States of travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries as a necessary measure to "keep radical Islamist

2. Maye Primera, "Miedo al país de Trump: Tres historias de inmigrantes hispanos en los campos de Wisconsin," Univisión Noticias, December 9, 2016.

3. BBC, "Trump Election: Up to Three Million Migrants 'To Be Targeted,'" BBC News, November 14, 2016.

4. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Action Urgently Needed as Central America Asylum Claims Soar," April 5, 2016.

5. UNHCR, *Children on the Run* (Washington, DC: UNHCR, 2014), 1, 11.

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terrorists out of the United States of America."<sup>6</sup> Ironically, none of the countries of origin of the 9/11 attackers was affected by the anti-immigration order.<sup>7</sup> Leaving aside the legality of Executive Order 13769 as well as its evident violation of international treaties like the Geneva Convention of 1951,<sup>8</sup> what concerns us here is the popularity of policies (of which Trump's measures are only one example) which institutionalize discrimination against people based on race, religion, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence.

In reality, the United States is not an isolated case. We are witnessing the growth and legitimization of ultranationalist sentiments reflected in xenophobic discourse and protectionist political decisions in several key countries throughout the world. England, France, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany are a few examples.<sup>9</sup> Latin America is also a stage for the rise of the "new right"<sup>10</sup> that is pushing several governments to promote, among other measures, tougher migration laws. The political groups, civic organizations, and individuals who defend such postures associate the increasing number of migrants with a presumed negative impact on their country's economy, vulnerability to terrorist activity, concern for the loss of culture and national identity in general,

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6. Dan Merica, "Trump Signs Executive Order to Keep Out 'Radical Islamic Terrorists,'" CNN.com, updated January 30, 2017. The text of the executive order itself appeals to the attacks of September 11, 2001. See Section 1 of The White House, "Executive Order: Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," January 27, 2017.

7. Pamela Engel, "Trump's Immigration Ban Doesn't Include the Country Most of the 9/11 Hijackers Came From," *Business Insider*, January 30, 2017.

8. Shehab Khan, "Angela Merkel 'Explains' to Donald Trump the Obligations of Geneva Refugee Convention after his Immigration Ban," *The Independent*, January 30, 2017.

9. Iñaki Pardo Torregrosa, "La extrema derecha de Europa, rumbo al centro político," *La Vanguardia*, May 8, 2016.

10. Francisco López Segrera, *América Latina: Crisis del posneoliberalismo y ascenso de la nueva derecha* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2016), 13.

and increasing social problems.<sup>11</sup> One way this negative perception surfaces is through the connotations of the terms used to refer to migrants: for example, “illegal immigrant” and “irregular migration.” Terms like these equate such people with criminal behavior which must be punished, as opposed to considering the reasons behind the emigration and, consequently, the assistance they may need.<sup>12</sup>

The legitimization of the rejection of foreigners is particularly problematic when we face two realities: first, that the world is facing the largest migratory crisis of all time, with 65.3 million people forcibly displaced worldwide;<sup>13</sup> and second, that it is very likely that these numbers will increase over the next few years due, among other factors, to climate change (the existence of which has been denied or at best severely questioned by Trump<sup>14</sup>).<sup>15</sup> Thus, in a world in which 34,000 people per day are forced to flee their homes due to conflict, violence, and poverty,<sup>16</sup> exclusionary attitudes significantly limit their opportunities to move on with their lives and expose them to greater levels of risk and violations of their human rights.

In light of these realities, those who believe that the church ought to be a community that welcomes the needy, denounces unjust laws, and promotes a world in which every human being

11. Sputnik Nóvosti, “América Latina debe apostar por leyes migratorias que garanticen los derechos humanos,” *El País* (Costa Rica), January 31, 2017.

12. Terminology is crucial in the debate over migration because words carry social, symbolic, legal, and public-policy implications. We are wise to be careful in our choice of labels. See UNHCR, “‘Refugees’ and ‘Migrants’ – Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs),” March 16, 2016.

13. UNHCR, “Figures at a Glance: Global Trends 2015.”

14. Carline Kenny, “Trump: ‘Nobody Really Knows’ if Climate Change is Real,” CNN.com, December 12, 2016.

15. A British government report estimates that there will be “between 154 and 179 million people living in rural coastal floodplains by 2060” who will need to move away but be unable to “due to poverty.” See Nina Chestney, “Climate-Driven Migration Challenge Underestimated,” Reuters, October 19, 2011.

16. UNHCR, “Figures at a Glance: Global Trends 2015.”

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can experience an abundant life in a holistic way have been surprised to find that, both in the United States<sup>17</sup> and in Latin America, some sectors of the evangelical church have taken up the discourse and postures of the conservative right regarding what constitutes “Otherness,” even citing the Bible in support thereof. There have been examples of this in Colombia, Honduras, Chile, Guatemala, Peru, Costa Rica, and Brazil, among others.<sup>18</sup>

To start off, we must recognize that though the Bible contains powerful passages in defense of the life and rights of foreigners, the biblical texts also include passages that reflect attitudes of marked separation and rejection. This leads to two questions: If the central message of the Bible revolves around God’s glorious action to redeem the entirety of his creation so that all creatures can live a full, abundant life under his lordship, how can the biblical text include such differing views of migrants? How can we reread and interpret biblical passages that reflect a posture of open rejection between human beings in such a way as to encourage communities of believers today to act in defense of those who are fleeing in search of better opportunities?

With all of this in mind, this article will take up the challenge of reading Ezra 9–10 contextually in light of the reality of migration from Latin America and the Caribbean. By doing so we hope to equip Christians with tools that help them understand the human dynamics that lead to the rejection of the foreigners and help them consider alternative ways of relating to migrants and refugees, keeping in mind the complexity of the issues both

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17. One emblematic case is found in the support for Donald Trump among influential Christian leaders. For example, see Christianity Today editors, “James Dobson: Why I Am Voting for Donald Trump,” *Christianity Today*, September 23, 2016.

18. See Harold Segura, “Cavilaciones públicas ante mis maestros,” *Protestante Digital*, October 22, 2016, including the comment section with further anecdotal examples.

for sending and for receiving countries. The endeavor will develop in four sections. The first will describe the attitudes and actions we observe in Ezra 9—10 of rejecting what is foreign. The second will attempt to focus on understanding the motivations that led to this rejection. The third will offer biblical reflection on the concept of foreigners. Finally, the fourth section will explore alternative ways of building more inclusive and sustainable relationships with migrants and refugees.<sup>19</sup>

## I. Accepting the Rejection: Ezra and Weeding out the Foreigners

The book of Ezra describes the return of certain groups of Jews who were exiled in Babylon after King Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem. It begins with the decree of Cyrus, king of Persia (538 BC), which allowed an initial group of Jews exiled in Babylon to return to their homeland, led by Zerubbabel. This first group rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. A second group (around 525–457 BC) was led by Ezra, who was to reinstate Mosaic Law. Since the book of Nehemiah describes the return of a third group which oversaw the rebuilding of the city and its walls (444 BC), some Bible scholars suggest that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah should be read together and as a continuation of the book of Chronicles.<sup>20</sup>

19. Though there are legal, social, and symbolic differences between the terms “foreigner,” “refugee,” and “migrant,” this article utilizes all three terms since the people who find themselves in any of these conditions face rejection for being considered “other,” regardless of their legal status and the special protections to which they are entitled.

20. The dates, sequence, and revision process for the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are the subject of debate among scholars. Even so, many concur that there is a close connection between the two. See Enzo Corteze, “Esdras y Nehemías,” in *Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano* (Estella, Spain: Verbo Divino, 2005), 769; and Elisabeth Cook Steike, *La mujer como extranjera en Israel: Estudio exegético de Esdras 9—10* (San José: SEBILA, 2011), 50.

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The stories of Ezra and Nehemiah about the return of the Jewish diaspora to Judah make very clear that the efforts at identity reconstruction unfolded in the midst of fear (Ezr 3:3) and conflicts with other neighboring groups (Ezr 4—6; Neh 5).

Central to chapters 9 and 10 of the book of Ezra is the sin of infidelity to God that the postexilic Jews committed when they mixed with other peoples whose practices were considered detestable (Ezr 9:1, 11). Passages like the following suggest that the reconstruction of Jewish identity among the group that returned from exile necessitated differentiation and the rejection of the Other:

[God had said,] “Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.” (Ezr 9:12)

This text concludes with the people’s repentance and their decision to send away the foreign women whom the Jewish men had married, as well as their children (Ezr 10:3–44). The biblical narrative is short on details of the human drama that might have resulted from the separation of families based on lineage. Yet we cannot but notice the way the text dehumanizes the “foreign women” (no names are given, and the only detail is that they are “from the peoples around us” [Ezr 10:2]) and the unilateral approach to the decision (the foreign women seemingly have no chance to defend themselves or offer an opinion).

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*Jewish  
identity  
reconstruction  
unfolded in the  
midst of fear.*

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In her exegesis of Ezra 9–10 from the perspective of gender, biblical scholar Elizabeth Cook wonders why the Jewish community banished particularly the “foreign women and *their* children” (Ezr 10:3, emphasis added). Were there no foreign men in their midst?

Cook concludes that in Ezra, as in other passages (Ex 34; Dt 7), foreign women incarnate all the dangers that threaten Israel in critical historical moments,<sup>21</sup> in particular the risk of being unfaithful to God by worshipping other gods. Using Cook's analysis as a starting point, this article proposes that in Ezra 9—10, the banishing of the "foreign women" should be understood as a rejection of all—males and females—whom the Jewish people of the diaspora came to consider "foreign." As such, we will focus on attempting to understand the sociopolitical and theological factors that led them to adopt an open attitude of rejection toward the Other.

## II. The Threat of the Other and the Search for Identity in the Book of Ezra

To understand the events of Ezra 9—10, we must recognize the depths to which the Babylonian exile marked post-exilic Judaism at the socioeconomic, cultural, political, and theological levels. For a people who were not very distinct culturally from the surrounding polytheistic Canaanite people groups, the worship of the one God, YHVH, became the element of their differentiation and a bastion of their identity as a people.<sup>22</sup> During the exile, the Jewish people essentially lost the reference points that connected them to YHVH (the land, the temple), around which they also built their identity as a nation. These losses meant they were at the brink of disappearing altogether as a people. Therefore, when they returned from exile, the reconstruction of their identity was foremost on their agenda. This identity centered on three foundational elements: the temple, the land

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21. Cook, *La mujer como extranjera en Israel*, 191.

22. See Edesio Sánchez-Cetina's article in this volume, "The People of God as Citizens in an Era of Trump."



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(symbolized in the wall to protect their capital city, Jerusalem), and the law. With the fragile post-exilic identity, separating themselves from all that constituted a threat to the Jewish people—in this case, the surrounding peoples who worshiped other gods and lived according to other principles—became a critical issue of survival.

Another detail that helps in our rereading of this passage is that the Jewish people interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest and their subsequent exile to Babylon as punishment from God for their infidelity (Dt 28:64; Ezr 5:12; Lam 1:5). In fact, in general terms, Israel’s history can be explained in terms of the exile experience, in which the dynamic of banishment and return plays a primary role in defining an identity that is reconstructed in the midst of guilt, fear, and separation.<sup>23</sup> In this way, the suffering they experienced in being displaced, the underlying threat that it might happen again, and the fear of disintegrating as a people explain their constant effort to separate themselves from all impurity and stay faithful to God at all costs.

What is striking is how the Jewish people went from seeing themselves as a dominated, conquered, disperse, and fearful people to a chosen people with a special blessing which set them apart from other peoples. Practically, the fact that one people group is chosen implies that there are others that are not chosen, which emphasizes the inclusion/rejection relationship as an absolute dynamic and, in this case, a necessary dynamic to avoid infidelity to God and the subsequent punishment.<sup>24</sup> Thus, feeling like beneficiaries of a special relationship with God helped the people hold onto hope in the midst of the most trying times in their history,<sup>25</sup> yet it also led them to take refuge in their religious and moral identity and to take a position of radical rejection toward the surrounding communities. Lindy Scott comments on a similar irony in the history

23. Cook, *La mujer como extranjera en Israel*, 85.

24. *Ibid.*, 25.

25. *Ibid.*, 81.

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of the United States: comprised of a nation of immigrants (and their descendants) who escaped Europe in search of a better life, at some point the inhabitants turn against what they define as Other (indigenous communities, African slaves, and Mexicans, among others).<sup>26</sup>

Finally, we must remember that not every Jew was deported to Babylon, only the upper classes, the warriors, and the artisans. The poorest Jews remained in the land, exposed to contact with the surrounding peoples who worshipped other gods and had practices the Jews considered unclean.<sup>27</sup> Cook states that the importance that the experience of exile in Babylon took on for the Jews, together with the fear that those Jews who had not been deported had been contaminated by the unclean practices of the surrounding peoples (Ezr 3, 9) led to the “true Jewish lineage” being defined in absolute terms. These terms included only those who had been deported and returned (the *golah*) and left out the rest, even those of Jewish lineage.<sup>28</sup> This concern for defining precisely who belonged to the “people” and who did not is reflected in the long lists of those who returned from Babylon in the different phases and of those who agreed to send away their foreign wives (Ezr 10). This fact is important because it helps us understand that the construction of the identity of the Other as “foreigner” in Ezra 9–10 is ambiguous and not based only on lineage. Rather, it is a social construction based on a context and on specific interests.

Rereading the Ezra passage in this way helps us understand—not necessarily justify—the crisis the Jewish community was facing when they returned to the land and which led them to adopt an

*Attitudes of rejection toward the Other as a means of protection have been common in societies throughout history.*

26. Lindy Scott, “*Mi Casa es Tu Casa: A Biblical Perspective on the Current Immigration Situation*,” *Journal of Latin American Theology (JLAT)* 1, no. 2 (2006): 136.

27. Cook, *La mujer como extranjera*, 78.

28. *Ibid.*, 71–74.

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attitude of such separation regarding foreigners. However, utilizing an attitude of rejection toward the Other as a means of protection has been common in societies throughout history, especially during times of economic and social crisis.<sup>29</sup> In fact, this is very similar to what a recent study carried out with 35,000 European employees demonstrated: “The intensity of recession significantly correlates with anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe.”<sup>30</sup>

What is troubling is that when this sentiment of rejection is taken to the extreme, it can lead to the emergence of ultranationalist and xenophobic groups like the Ku Klux Klan, the Nazi party, and the recent Alt-Right movement, to mention only a few. Groups like those mentioned are not new. Yet what does seem to be changing is the legitimization of their sentiments. Previously such sentiment has generally been held by a minority of the population and has been censured. Now it is growing both in terms of the number of sympathizers and in the aggressiveness of their public demonstrations.

Yet are rejection and distrust the only viable ways of relating to foreigners? What other clues does the biblical narrative offer for constructing more dignifying relationships with foreign Others?

### **III. Diverse Points of View Regarding Foreigners in the Bible**

While it seems so categorical in the book of Ezra (especially after chapter 7), the vision of foreigners as a threat to the integrity of

29. Samuel Escobar, “Migration,” *JLAT* 11, no. 1 (2016): 110.

30. Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, “Study Examines Economic Roots of Anti-Immigrant Sentiments,” February 21, 2017. See Javier G. Polavieja, “Labour-market Competition, Recession and Anti-immigrant Sentiments in Europe: Occupational and Environmental Drivers of Competitive Threat,” *Socio-Economic Review* 14, no. 3 (July 2016): 395–417.

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the Jewish people is not the only Old Testament perspective on foreigners. In fact, according to scholars, the attitude of distrust, suspicion, and rejection toward foreigners was common among all societies in the ancient Near East, who saw foreigners as enemies that had to be subjugated or exterminated. In light of this tendency, Ramírez states that the Jewish people stood out from the rest of the nations because, as a result of their own experience as foreigners in distant lands, they developed a different attitude than the surrounding peoples, being open to living together and even establishing laws that codified special protections for foreigners:<sup>31</sup>

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:33–34)

In a more general way, we could say that the Bible is a book written by foreigners for foreigners, since the main characters themselves were foreigners,<sup>32</sup> including Jesus's ancestors and Jesus himself, who was born "on the move" and was a displaced person early in his life. The New Testament is full of episodes that show Jesus's preference for breaking the stigma towards the Other in his day—women, children, the sick, sinners, and foreigners—and

defending them in their society. Some examples include Jesus' radical tenderness toward children (Mt 18—19; Mk 10; Lk 9); his compassion for lepers (Lk 17); his counter-cultural attitude toward the adulteress (Jn 8) and toward Zaccheus (Lk 19); and his interactions with foreign women, like the Syrophoenician (Mk 7) and the Samaritan

*The Bible is a book written by foreigners for foreigners.*

31. José Enrique Ramírez-Kidd, *El extranjero, la viuda y el huérfano en el Antiguo Testamento* (San José, CR: Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana, 2003).

32. *Ibid.*, 36.

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woman (Jn 4). Later, in Acts 1:8, Jesus himself bolsters the message of inclusion of Israel’s neighboring nations when he sends his disciples to carry the Good News to all the world, beginning in Judea and Samaria.

Finally, the New Testament presents a paradigm shift regarding who is considered part of the “people.” In Christ, the blessing that in the Old Testament had been bestowed upon the people of Israel is open to all humanity. Thus, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are... heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:28–29). The apostle Peter goes even further and proposes that followers of Christ see themselves as “foreigners and exiles,” which constitutes a call to solidarity with the reality of those who choose to migrate (1 Pt 2:9–11).

We see, then, that the Bible offers several key theological considerations for our approach to the situation of migration from a Christian perspective, and it narrates a range of experiences of migration from different viewpoints—those who migrate, those who receive them, those who welcome them, those who reject them—, which can help Christian communities better understand the complexity of the phenomenon and avoid taking an unstudied position on the matter. The biblical text provides examples of legal frameworks and models for welcoming migrants in such a way that they are protected even as they assume responsibility in their receiving communities.<sup>33</sup> Thus, a rereading of Ezra 9–10 in its context and in light of the totality of the biblical narrative shows, on the one hand, that belonging to the “people of God” is not a factor of lineage

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*Belonging to the “people of God” is not a factor of lineage but of faithfulness to and dependence on God.*

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33. M. Daniel Carroll R., book review of *Después de Nuestro Señor, Estados Unidos: Perspectivas de análisis del comportamiento e implicaciones de la migración internacional en Guatemala*, ed. Silvia Irene Palma C. (Guatemala: FLACSO, 2004). Review published in *JLAT* 1, no. 2 (2006): 151–56. See especially p. 156.

but of faithfulness to and dependence on God.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, our rereading also demonstrates that a separatist stance is not the only possible way of relating to foreigners. Such a stance does not, in fact, represent the biblical model for today's church which, following the example of our Master, must be a community that welcomes the weak in the midst of an age of exclusion and rejection.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV. Overcoming the Fear: Toward the Construction of Dignifying, Sustainable Human Dynamics

This section will explore alternatives for approaching the phenomenon of migration in a realistic, sustainable way. On the one hand, this means recognizing that the huge waves of migration generate major challenges within the receiving countries on the economic, political, social, cultural, and religious levels; yet, as one immigration expert comments, "A moratorium on foreigners entering the United States is more costly than the benefits even when including the property, business, and greater economic costs caused by foreign-born terrorism."<sup>36</sup>

*Those who maintain negative attitudes toward immigrants have understandable reasons and concerns.*

##### **Fears Related to Migration**

Those who maintain negative attitudes toward the ever more frequent arrival of immigrants into their countries

34. For a fuller development of the identity of the "people of God," see Sánchez-Cetina, "The People of God as Citizens in an Era of Trump."

35. Escobar, "Migration," 110.

36. Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis," Cato Institute, September 13, 2016, <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/terrorism-immigration-risk-analysis#full>.

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have understandable reasons and concerns. We will discuss four of the most common.

1. The impact of immigration on the national economy. For example, in the United States, one common fear is that immigrants are competing against native-born inhabitants in the job market and “stealing their jobs,” as was a common argument in Trump’s presidential campaign.<sup>37</sup> Yet numerous studies demonstrate that immigrants do not by and large take jobs that native-born US Americans are seeking.<sup>38</sup> There is also a perception that public expenditure on immigrants is very high, which is partially substantiated by research. Studies have shown that first-generation immigrants do represent high public costs, primarily related to providing public education for immigrant children. These costs diminish over time, and, even by the second generation, immigrant families are contributing substantially more to government finances than what they are costing the nation.<sup>39</sup>

2. Increased risk of terrorism. According to the Global Terrorism Database, the number of terrorist attacks and the number of deaths caused by terrorist attacks have increased since 2012. Even so, in comparison with the 1970s and 1980s (when terrorism at the hands of local groups was high), the number of deaths due to terrorist activity has decreased in Western Europe.<sup>40</sup> In the United States, a recent study by the Cato Institute revealed that, indeed, foreign-born terrorists who entered the country either as immigrants or tourists were responsible for 88% of deaths caused by terrorism on US American soil from 1975 to 2015. Yet the same study is quick to point out that within the very same period, the likelihood of dying

37. Sally Kohn, “Nothing Donald Trump Says on Immigration Holds Up,” *Time*, June 29, 2016.

38. Julia Preston, “Immigrants Aren’t Taking Americans’ Jobs, New Study Finds,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2016.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Caelainn Barr, “‘Terrorism Threat is Waning’: Figures Put Europe’s Summer of Violence in Context,” *The Guardian*, July 28, 2016.

in a terrorist attack committed by a foreign-born person was 1 in 3.6 million per year.<sup>41</sup> Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst, concludes, “The hazards posed by foreign-born terrorists are not large enough to warrant extreme actions like a moratorium on all immigration or tourism.”<sup>42</sup>

3. Worsening of social problems in general, including increased crime and insecurity. While some immigrants are indeed criminals, numerous studies demonstrate that, despite the general perception—thanks in part to media coverage—that increased crime and immigration go hand in hand, the vast majority of immigrants are not committing crimes. It is no wonder, then, that harsh anti-immigrant policies do not equate to decreased crime levels nationwide. Rather, they reinforce the stigma that immigrants are criminals, and vice versa.<sup>43</sup>

4. Loss of cultural identity. Many people fear that the presence of immigrants and foreigners will threaten the cultural status quo and upset their way of life. This may very well be the case in some situations. Yet we will discuss below the positive contributions that the presence of foreign-born inhabitants can make to the cultural aspects of native-born communities.

In other words, while huge influxes of immigration pose challenges to a nation’s social systems and to a community’s social fabric, outlawing or severely decreasing legal immigration does not solve a country’s existing internal problems.

According to sociologists and human rights experts, migration is a global phenomenon, the product of deep and historic inequalities between countries.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the real problem is not that people

41. Nowrasteh, “Terrorism and Immigration.”

42. *Ibid.*

43. Walter Ewing, Daniel Martínez, and Rubén Rumbaut, “Criminalization of Immigration in the United States,” American Immigration Council, July 13, 2015.

44. Liza Ruiz Peralta and Eric García Cárdenas, “Movilización, migración y retorno de la niñez migrante: Una mirada antropológica,” *Región y sociedad*, 27, no. 63 (May/Aug 2015): 299–309.



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move from one country to another<sup>45</sup> but rather the reasons behind *why* they move, which, for most, are related to violence of some kind (armed conflicts, violence within families, gender-based violence, etc.), economic reasons, natural disasters (which is foreseen to be on the rise given the reality of climate change), and reuniting with family members.<sup>46</sup> In order to keep people from being forced to leave their countries, the countries from which people are migrating must provide the living conditions necessary for their inhabitants to meet their basic needs and have the opportunity to develop their potential as individuals and social collectives. Until this happens, people will continue moving in search of a better life,<sup>47</sup> or simply to survive.

However, achieving these adequate living conditions is an extremely complex task given the internal and external factors involved (like the fragility of state systems and the drug trade). This observation has at least one obvious implication: the phenomenon of migration is not going to disappear, so we had better seek alternative ways of accepting and dealing with it positively, recognizing and trying to overcome the challenges it entails. After all, the world was populated and humanity became what it is today through migration. The flow of people can clearly have positive effects.<sup>48</sup>

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### ***Benefits Related to Migration***

In the effort to sketch a more hopeful, sustainable outlook on the phenomenon of immigration, and with no intention of being

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45. N6vosti, "Am6rica Latina debe apostar."

46. UNHCR, *Children on the Run*, 23.

47. Vilma "Nina" Balmaceda, "What Does the Lord Require of Us...When Migrant Children are Crossing the Border?" *JLAT* 10, no.1 (2015): 96.

48. Regarding immigration as a positive opportunity, see Samuel Escobar, "Immigration: Avenue and Challenge to Mission," *JLAT* 1, no. 2 (2006): 70-94.

exhaustive, here we identify four benefits that migration brings to receiving countries:

1. Immigration strengthens the economy. In contrast to the widespread accusation that immigrants depress the job market for native-born citizens, immigrants tend to strengthen the economy since they increase the human capital of the receiving country. In countries with an aging population, immigrants increase the active population, which in turn contributes to the healthy functioning of the economy.<sup>49</sup> Finally, numerous studies demonstrate that a high percentage of immigrants become small-business owners, which subsequently contributes to the generation of new employment and the strengthening of the economy.<sup>50</sup>

2. Immigration bolsters innovation. Receiving countries benefit from the human talent and capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship many foreigners offer, without having borne the cost of educating and training these immigrants. There are countless famous examples of how “brain drain” benefits the receiving country, to such a degree that numerous big-name technology companies based in the United States are vocally opposing tightened immigration measures.<sup>51</sup>

3. With immigration comes cultural enrichment. While immigrants adapt to their host countries, the native-born in those host countries also adapt to the presence and customs of the immigrants. Studies have shown that the more willing the native-born are to adapt to immigrants, the more those native-born thrive in their

49. See the example of Italian villages in Lorenzo Totaro and Flavia Rotondi, “Italian Villages Welcome Refugees to Avoid Oblivion,” Bloomberg, February 29, 2016.

50. University of Pennsylvania, “The Effects of Immigration on the United States’ Economy,” June 27, 2016; and Adriana Kugler and Patrick Oakford, “Immigration Helps American Workers’ Wages and Job Opportunities,” Center for American Progress, August 29, 2013.

51. John Blackstone, “Tech Industry, Fueled by Immigrants, Protesting Trump’s Travel Ban,” CBS News, January 31, 2017.

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regular life, without a diminished sense of traditional culture.<sup>52</sup> The cultural benefits that immigrants bring to a receiving country depend on the context but usually include contributions in medicine, agricultural techniques, diet and cuisine, and spirituality.<sup>53</sup>

4. Immigration helps revitalize faith practices (for Christians, but also other religions). Immigration offers an opportunity to revitalize the faith through the practice of compassion, prophetic denouncement, and the appreciation of different ways of living out the faith.<sup>54</sup> Members of Christian communities in Greece and Italy who are on the front lines receiving immigrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea have testified to how deeply these new arrivals have encouraged them in their walk with Jesus.<sup>55</sup> The flip side is a more evangelistic take: Scott points out that, without migrations, the rapid spread of the gospel would never have been possible.<sup>56</sup>

By way of concluding this section, the phenomenon of migration is real, it is increasing, and harsh laws will not deter it. However, serious studies demonstrate that there are countless benefits to the receiving countries in the short, medium, and long terms and at the economic, social, cultural, and religious levels. Yet approaching the phenomenon of migration from a positive perspective requires a paradigm shift: welcoming immigrants and allowing them the possibility of integrating within the receiving society. This process includes but goes beyond enforcing laws that allow immigrants access to the job

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52. Katharina Lefringhausen, “Why Immigration is Good for Culture,” *Newsweek*, August 24, 2016.

53. Rohit Kumar, “4 Ways Immigrant Cultural Wisdom is Inspiring America,” *Huffington Post*, March 21, 2013.

54. Escobar, “Immigration: Avenue and Challenge to Mission,” 94.

55. Testimony shared by Myrto Theocharous at the 2016 Stott-Bediako Forum, “The Refugee Crisis: A Shared Human Condition,” sponsored by the International Fellowship for Mission as Transformation and the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS), June 13–14, 2016, at the OCMS.

56. Scott, “*Mi Casa es Tu Casa*,” 135.

market and social safety nets.<sup>57</sup> The process requires social and cultural change, because effective integration cannot take place in an environment of exclusion and rejection. In promoting and living out this paradigm change, the church can be salt and light, being the model of a welcoming community by following in Jesus's footsteps and promoting dignifying relationships with foreign Others.

### Conclusions: Implications of Ezra 9—10 for the Current Migration Reality

Many biblical and theological writings deal with the subject of immigration from the perspective of welcoming and protecting the migrant. Ezra 9—10 does so from the perspective of a community who rejects foreigners. That the community that excludes the foreigner is Jewish, together with the fact that the chapters chosen for our analysis follow immediately on the heels of a migratory experience so fundamental to the Jewish people, is particularly relevant because therein plays out an age-old human dynamic which is more and more common in the current migration crisis today: the construction of identity based on a rejection of the Other.

In light of the reception that far-right conservative parties—whose anti-immigrant positions have been discussed in this article—are enjoying by many evangelical congregations,<sup>58</sup> a contextual reading of the Holy Scriptures is thus indispensable: a reading which seeks to understand the context in which the biblical texts were written, the power struggles of the groups involved, and the interests of each group. This article suggests that a rereading of texts like Ezra 9—10 helps us understand the rejection of the Other

57. Balmaceda, "What Does the Lord Require," 96–98.

58. See Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash" (Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper, August 2016).

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as a common human dynamic in the face of fear, in processes of reconstructing identity, and in times of crisis. However, this article also holds that a contextual reading of this passage can lead us to consider alternative ways of relating to migrants and foreigners, taking into account the complexity of the issues.

Finally, the diversity of positions in the Bible regarding migrants and foreigners demonstrates that, while the current immigration crisis is an enormous challenge, it is possible to build positive, enriching, empowering relationships both for those who migrate and those who receive them. Herein lies the challenge to churches around the world: to be communities that, inspired by the biblical narrative, welcome, defend, integrate, and grow enriched by foreigners, showing the world that it is possible to approach such a complex problem from an alternative perspective. In the words of Samuel Escobar, “Only a fellowship marked by this spirit of acceptance of other sisters and brothers, beyond cultural and ethnic barriers, could be considered worthy of the name *church*.”<sup>59</sup>

“We are pro-life  
to the extent that we are men and women for others, all others;  
to the extent that no human flesh is a stranger to us;  
to the extent that we can touch the hand of another in love;  
to the extent that for us there are no ‘others.’”

Brennan Manning<sup>60</sup>

59. Escobar, “Immigration: Avenue and Challenge to Mission,” 87.

60. Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 1990), 141.