

Refugees in the Bible



According to the United Nations, there are over 44 million forcibly displaced people in the world. That's about 1 in every 160 people alive today. Sadly, the actual number is likely much higher.

The challenges of forced migration – refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people – are among the biggest facing the world today. No country is left untouched. Some voices paint the issue as a security threat. Others say refugees and migrants are an economic problem and social burden. Some make it a polarizing political issue, while yet others emphasize the humanitarian mandate to assist forcibly displaced people.

As a follower of Jesus, we need to take time to be biblically informed when we enter into the discussion. This document is not intended to tell you how to think about the issue. It is simply a tool to help you ponder biblical stories that include forced displacement and let you draw your own conclusions.

While the Bible is filled with references to “aliens” and “strangers”, this document simply brings into focus stories of forcibly displaced people in the Bible.

Thank you for taking the time to pursue a biblical perspective on the issue of forced migration. May God give you eyes to see, ears to hear and a heart that embraces all he reveals to you.

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You can find other resources related to forcibly displaced people on the website of International Association for Refugees – www.iafr.org.

Refugees in the Bible



From beginning to end, Scripture is filled with stories of forcefully displaced people. These are just a few.

Use this guide to explore causes of forcible displacement. Open up the texts and explore their context. Pay attention to the emotions and trauma experienced by those displaced. Note how God is actively engaged in the stories. Ponder how God used forcibly displaced people in their land of refuge or exile. Take notes of your observations and questions. Discuss them with others.

Consider how these stories might be similar to those of forcibly displaced people today. Contemplate whether God might be actively engaged in the lives of refugees now – just as he was throughout the biblical narrative.

ADAM AND EVE

Displaced by God in response to sin

“So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.” Genesis 3:23-24

CAIN

Displaced by God in response to sin

“The LORD said to Cain...‘You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.’ Cain said to the LORD, ‘My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.’ Genesis 4:12-14

NOAH

Displaced by natural disaster/climate change

“And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives entered the ark to escape the waters of the flood.” Genesis 7:7

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Displaced by famine to Egypt

“Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.” Genesis 12:10

Displaced by authorities in Egypt

“Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!’ Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.” Genesis 12:19-20

Displaced by scarcity and conflict

“But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. And quarreling arose between Abram’s herders and Lot’s.” Genesis 13:6-7

LOT

Displaced by invading kings

“The four kings seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food; then they went away. They also carried off Abram’s nephew Lot and his possessions, since he was living in Sodom.” Genesis 14:11-12

Displaced by God from a place under imminent judgment

“Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!” Genesis 19:17

HAGAR

Displaced by persecution into the desert

“‘Your slave is in your hands,’ Abram said. ‘Do with her whatever you think best.’ Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.” Genesis 16:6

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

Displaced by persecution into the desert

“Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, ‘I cannot watch the boy die.’ And as she sat there, she began to sob.” Genesis 21:14-16

ISAAC AND REBECCA

Displaced by famine to the land of the Philistines

“Now there was a famine in the land—besides the previous famine in Abraham’s time—and Isaac went to Abimelek king of the Philistines in Gerar. The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, ‘Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you.’” Genesis 26:1-3

JACOB

Displaced by a threat of violence to Harran

“When Rebekah was told what her older son Esau had said, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, ‘Your brother Esau is planning to avenge himself by killing you. Now then, my son, do what I say: Flee at once to my brother Laban in Harran. Stay with him for a while until your brother’s fury subsides.’” Genesis 27:42-44

Displaced by increasing exploitation back to Canaan

“Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. So he fled with all he had, crossed the Euphrates River, and headed for the hill country of Gilead.” Genesis 31:20

Displaced by famine into Egypt

“We have come to live here for a while, because the famine is severe in Canaan and your servants’ flocks have no pasture. So now, please let your servants settle in Goshen.” Genesis 47:4

ESAU

Displaced by scarcity and conflict to Seir

“Their possessions were too great for them to remain together; the land where they were staying could not support them both because of their livestock.” Genesis 36:7

JOSEPH

Displaced by international human trafficking

“So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels[b] of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.” Genesis 37:28

MOSES

Displaced after committing a revolutionary act (murder) to Midian

“When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian...” Exodus 2:15

Displaced along with the oppressed people he was liberating into the wilderness

“By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger...” Hebrews 11:27

ALL OF ISRAEL

Displaced from an oppression into the wilderness

“At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD’s divisions left Egypt.” Exodus 12:41

NAOMI

Displaced by famine into Moab

“There was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.” Ruth 1:1

Return from Moab to Judah

“When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.” Ruth 1:6

“‘Don’t call me Naomi [pleasant],’ she told them. ‘Call me Mara [bitter], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty.’” Ruth 1:20-21

RUTH

Displaced out of loyalty to family from Moab to Judah

“But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.’” Ruth 1:16-17

DAVID

Displaced by political persecution to the land of the Philistines

That day David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath.” 1 Samuel 21:10

Displaced from Gath to the cave of Adullam

“David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam.” 1 Samuel 22:1

David moves his parents (who were also refugees) to Moab

“From there David went to Mizpah in Moab and said to the king of Moab, ‘Would you let my father and mother come and stay with you until I learn what God will do for me?’ So he left them with the king of Moab...” 1 Samuel 22:3

David and his fellow refugees continually on the move

“David and his men, about six hundred in number, left Keilah and kept moving from place to place.” 1 Samuel 23:13

Displaced by persecution to the land of the Philistines

“The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand.” 1 Samuel 27:1

ELIJAH

Displaced by persecution by king Ahab

“Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there.” 1 Kings 17:3-4

Displaced from one refuge to another due to drought

“Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the LORD came to him: ‘Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.’ 1 Kings 17:7-9

Displaced by persecution by king Ahab and Jezebel

“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough, LORD,’ he said. ‘Take my life...’” 1 Kings 19:3-4

ALL OF ISRAEL

Forcibly displaced into Assyria by the invading king of Assyria

“So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there.” 2 Kings 17:23

Forcibly displaced into Babylon by invading king Nebuchadnezzar

“He [Nebuchadnezzar] carried all Jerusalem into exile: all the officers and fighting men, and all the skilled workers and artisans—a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest people of the land were left. Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin captive to Babylon. He also took from Jerusalem to Babylon the king’s mother, his wives, his officials and the prominent people of the land.” 2 Kings 24:14-15

NEHEMIAH

Returnees from exile in Babylon

“Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to their own town, in company with Zerubbabel, Joshua, Nehemiah...” Ezra 2:1-2

News about returnees reaches Nehemiah, still in exile

“The said to me, ‘Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.’ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept.” Nehemiah 1:3-4

The exile longs to return home to rebuild the ruins

“The king said to me, ‘What is it you want?’ Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, ‘If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.’ Nehemiah 2:4-5

EZRA

Returnee from exile in Babylon

“Ezra came up from Babylon... Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month...” Ezra 7:6,8-9

ESTHER AND MORDECHAI

Displaced by exile into Babylon

“Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai... who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.” Esther 2:5-7

JEREMIAH

Taken by force with other refugees to flee attack from Babylon into Egypt

“They took Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah along with them. So they entered Egypt in disobedience to the LORD...” Jeremiah 43:6

EZEKIEL

Displaced by exile in Babylon

“In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.” Ezekiel 1:1

DANIEL, SHADRACH, MESHACH AND ABED NEGEO

Displaced by exile into Babylon

“And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god. Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king’s service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians... Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.” Daniel 1:2-4,6

JONAH

Displaced in an attempt to run away from God’s calling

“But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish.” Jonah 1:3

JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH

Displaced by political persecution to Egypt

“An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt...” Matthew 2:13-14

THE EARLY CHURCH

Displaced by religious persecution

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” Acts 8:1

“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch...” Acts 11:19

PHILIP

Displaced by religious persecution

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there.” Acts 8:4-5

PETER

Displaced by religious persecution

“Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. ‘Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,’ he said, and then he left for another place. Acts 12:17

AQUILA AND PRICILLA

Displaced by ethnic persecution

“Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.” Acts 18:1-2

Thank you for taking the time to reflect on this sampling of stories in the Bible. We hope that it has been helpful for you as you seek to develop a biblically informed framework from which you can interact with the world around you on issues related to refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced people and even undocumented migrants (also referred to as “illegal aliens”).

Please feel free to share your insights and thoughts and questions with us. You can reach us by email at refmin@iafr.org.

IAFR
P.O. Box 47947
Minneapolis, MN 55447
USA

www.iafr.org