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Very few cultural debates stir Americans' hearts today like the topic of immigration. It requires participants in those debates to confront issues about national sovereignty, national identity, ethics, law, and belonging. Two guiding principles, however, can help Christians navigate this divisive topic, much like two guardrails help direct a vehicle down a winding mountain road. Those principles are (1) the wisdom of scripture and (2) a brief understanding of history.

It should be said from the outset that the history of national sovereignty is a deeply complex one. But one can reasonably aim to understand a basic historical framework from which Christians can further develop their personal views on the subject.

Long before the days of Moses and God's liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, God spoke to Abraham, [promising him that He](#) "will make of [him] a great *nation*." In [Genesis 18](#), the Lord repeats His promise to Abraham after visiting him in person but before His judgment of the land of Sodom: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty *nation*, and all the *nations* of the earth shall be blessed in him?"

From Abraham came Isaac, from Isaac came Jacob, and from Jacob, whom the Lord would rename "[Israel](#)," came twelve sons, all of whom would become the basis for the [Twelve Tribes of Israel](#). Joseph, the son of Jacob who rose to serve as the penultimate authority of Egypt, invited the Israelites from Canaan into Egypt during seven years of famine. But the Israelites did not leave Egypt after the famine. Instead, [Exodus 1](#) says the Israelites "were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them." But a new Pharaoh emerged to view the Israelites as a threat, [ordering the death of numerous children and enslaving them for 400 years](#).

Eventually, God used Moses to liberate the Israelites from Egypt, provide to them a new law, [beginning with the Ten Commandments](#), and guide them to the "[Promised Land](#)" known as Canaan. According to [Numbers 13](#), the Promised Land flowed with milk and honey but was occupied by the "Nephilim," or giants, [a people](#) who engaged in wicked behavior and worshiped false gods. Joshua, Moses' successor, led the Israelites to conquer Canaan and [succeeded with the Lord's favor](#). Eventually, one people were united in the land promised by the Lord to Abraham.

Throughout this story, Israel is repeatedly referenced as a "nation," a concept that the [Cambridge dictionary](#) describes as "a country, especially when thought of as a large group of people living in one area with their own government, language, traditions, etc." In fact, the Old Testament describes other peoples as "nations" as well. Deuteronomy 32:8 says that "the Most High apportioned the nations" and "fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods." That apportionment of national boundaries describes an event in Genesis with which many Christians are familiar: [Babel](#). All nations had spiritual rulers, or "princes," over them. In [Daniel 10:20](#), we find the angel Gabriel referring to the "prince of Persia" and the "prince of Javen [Greece]."

Ancient Greece was not a "country" as we understand the term today. They were not united under one political state. Rather, they were a [civilization](#), a nation united by a common religion, language, and culture. Each city-state within Greece worshiped all gods in their pantheons, but



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designated one “patron” god above others. For instance, the city of “[Athens](#)” worshiped the goddess Athena, while the city of [Corinth](#) worshiped Poseidon.

The same pattern is observed in the ancient middle-east. The ancient [Sumerians](#) in [Mesopotamia](#) were not unified under one political state. As one scholar explains, [Sumer](#) was “a region of city-states each with its own king.” Before Sumer’s city-state regime, the Sumer civilization consisted of “[temple towns](#),” which were “built around the temple of the local god.” In this same region lies [Babylon](#), a city that scripture uses as a [representation of great evil](#).

Israel, however, was set apart from these other nations. Arguably, Israel was the first example of a “nation-state,” [defined as](#) “an independent country, especially when thought of as consisting of a single large group of people all sharing the same language, traditions, and history.” Not only did Israel share a history, tradition, and language as people, they were an independent state operating under the Mosaic law. In other words, “Israelite” was both a cultural identification *and* a political identification. But ancient Israel existed during an age of empires and conquest, phenomena that contradict the modern idea of “national sovereignty.”

Historians generally regard the “[Peace of Westphalia](#)” in 1648 as the event that transformed international politics into a “[sovereignty-based international system](#).” Before then, different lands under the Holy Roman Empire did not regard themselves as “nation-states.” Instead, they were “[Imperial Estates](#),” private property that a reigning king was entitled to by royal birthright. The term “estate” is something many of us are familiar with in America, just not at the scale of territories within the Holy Roman Empire. Estates consist of the personal property of individuals and are transferred through a process called “[probate](#).” After someone dies, the probate process transfers a person’s property to their heirs or descendants. Imperial Estates were similar, transferred from King to son through the inheritance of the royal crown.

This model of international relations produced great conflict, including bloody religious battles like the [Thirty Years’ War](#). Westphalia was the West’s solution; it is the reason why terms like “international” make sense. From a historical perspective, **to believe in the concept of “national sovereignty” is to believe that borders serve as markers for independent places of belonging, a home where people decide their own politics and affairs.** “National sovereignty,” and international respect for borders by extension, serves the positive good of global peace and makes possible an American system of self-government.

The advent of national sovereignty raised questions about migration; ancient peoples were periodically forced under one authority through the conquest of empires, much like Israel and Rome. In the words of one [political scientist](#), “since the Peace of Westphalia established the current system of territorial nation-states, control over immigration has been almost universally acknowledged as a principal component of state sovereignty.” [Our Constitution recognizes this authority](#), at least in part, by granting Congress the power “to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization.”

If national sovereignty is a positive good, and all nation-states possess a corresponding authority to control the flow of immigration into its borders, then one more question emerges: what should those policies be? Scripture gives Christians some guidance.



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In Leviticus 19, the Lord tells the [Israelites the following](#): “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” God commands that Israel treat the “sojourner,” a foreigner who passes through Israel temporarily, with kindness and even likens the foreigner’s status with the Israelites while in Egypt.

The closest analogy to this situation in ancient Israel would be those cases of persecuted foreigners seeking refuge in the United States. As descendants of Abraham, Christians should be hospitable to the refugee and seek to align the law of their nation with the will of God. The City upon a Hill welcomes the refugee in the name of Christ; it does not exploit them or dehumanize them.

But just as Christians have an obligation to treat refugees with love and dignity, they cannot blind themselves to the consequences a rule has on their fellow countrymen. For instance, the book of [Nehemiah](#) describes how Israel rebuilt the walls once surrounding it after they were destroyed by a brutal Babylonian invasion. By the grace of God, America does not face the threat that Israel once faced. Nonetheless, current geo-political tensions, including Russia’s goal to take over Ukraine and Hamas’s invasion of Israel remind us that tyrants and barbarians still exist.

The Old Testament also provides an example on how the United States can orient its immigration policies toward the common-good and the flourishing of citizens and immigrants alike. God instructs the Israelites to have compassion for the foreigner seeking temporary refuge, but commands them to bring foreigners seeking a permanent abode into the fullness of the Mosaic law. [Exodus 12 says](#) the following:

“If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. **There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.**”

At first glance, this looks like the modern process of assimilation, but that is only partly true. By itself, assimilation is morally neutral. It can be evil, just as invading peoples tried to change the religious order of the ancient Israelites. But it also can also be beautiful, just as this verse indicates.

In order for foreigners to break bread with the Israelites in the sacred tradition of Passover, they were obliged to accept all of God’s commandments. No matter where you come from, any foreigner who accepts the fullness of God’s law is viewed equally in the eyes of God. Today, the Christian can see themselves in the foreigner. As Paul says in [Galatians](#), “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave[a] nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The laws of the United States must be designed to secure the common-good, and the Church should advocate for those laws to align with the moral example of God’s law as fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ. Given that national sovereignty is a proven good, and that immigration with



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assimilation is biblical, defined and enforced borders support the essential governmental ends of peace, security, and justice.

