Bible Society

What does the Bible say about MIGRATION?

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The Bible has much in common with the contemporary world when it comes to migration. Indeed, migration – especially involuntary migration – dominated the experience of the ancient communities who produced the biblical texts. Whether it resulted from the Assyrians destroying Samaria in 722 BCE, the Babylonians conquering Jerusalem in 586 BCE, perennial famines in the area, or later Roman rule, the experience of thousands of Israelites and early followers of Jesus involved involuntary migration.

Written at different times in many places by a collection of people who lived over a millennium, the Bible says many different things about migration. It is unsurprising then, that some of these statements are in tension with one another. Such tension does not result in irresolvable contradiction, but it should not be ignored. These tensions can be productive, requiring us all to reflect on things we 'think' we know, enabling us to come away with a fresh, deeper understanding of an issue. Here, then, we shall contend with some texts that trouble us alongside others that comfort and reassure us. Neither set of texts without the other accomplishes the aim of this paper: to examine what the Bible says about migration.

I shall present the 'data', as it were, in five sections: Old Testament narratives, Old Testament legal texts, and Old Testament prophecy; Jesus as depicted in the Gospels, and the letters of Peter and Paul. Each group of texts raises one key question for reflection. Direct answers to contemporary dilemmas are not forthcoming; yet, engaging with the Bible in this way, pondering what it does say, offers the potential to bring depth to our thinking and to sharpen our views on how to address the proliferation in migration, especially involuntary migration, in our time.

EXPLORING THE OLD TESTAMENT

Prior to discussing the Old Testament, a few words are necessary about its relevance for Christians. Any effort to place a divide between the Old and New Testaments fails because it lies at odds with the New Testament itself, which teaches that not one 'jot or tittle' from those Scriptures shall pass away (Matt 5.18). For the Christian, the whole Old Testament applies to their life, though none of the Old Testament applies in the same way that it did before the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Some things are transformed in radical ways (e.g. kosher food laws in Acts 10.9-29), while other changes are nearly indistinguishable (e.g. the command to love God with all one's heart, soul and strength in Deut 6.4; cf. Matt 22.37; Mark 12.30; Luke 10.27). Most texts lie somewhere between these on a spectrum, requiring one to reflect on what adjustments may be necessary. Space won't allow further discussion of that here, but it is necessary to bear it in mind when reflecting on these texts.[1]

1. A Roll Call of Migrants: Old Testament Narratives and Migration

One might consider a large number of stories in this category: the exodus and the narrative about David becoming king come to mind. For brevity, I shall discuss three representative texts: the ancestral narrative in Genesis, Ruth, and Nehemiah.

The Ancestral Narrative (Genesis 12–50)

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are familiar figures to many Christians. Then again, consider this unusual summary of their story.

Abraham migrates to Canaan from southern Mesopotamia (Gen 12.1-10). Immediately upon arrival (Gen 12.10), famine forces Abraham to flee to Egypt. To survive, Abraham instructs his wife Sarah to lie about their relationship. Predictably not well received by the Egyptians, this ruse still enables Abraham and Sarah to survive their time as refugees and to return to Canaan wealthier than they left. Abraham's son Isaac also faces famine (Gen 26.1). Rather than leave Canaan, Isaac drifts about within its boundaries, residing in various places to survive. Like father, like son: Isaac and his wife Rebekah employ the same tactic, hiding the true nature of their relationship. Their hosts are not impressed either, but, yet again, they emerge wealthier than they entered.

Isaac's son Jacob grows up in Canaan, but spends 20

[1] For further discussion, see Richard L Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1990), especially chs. 13-16.

years seeking asylum with his family in Mesopotamia to avoid the aggression of his brother Esau (Gen 27.41–28.9). While there, Jacob has to battle for his rights because his Uncle Laban, despite providing him protection, holds immense power over him (Gen 30.25-43). Like asylum seekers, Jacob treads carefully with Laban in fear that he might be returned to the dangerous situation he left. Jacob finally gains his independence, and when he returns to Canaan he finds a transformed, unrecognizable society. Esau, who now seeks to reconcile with Jacob instead of kill him, exemplifies how much has changed in Jacob's absence (Gen 33.1-17). Indeed, Jacob goes through the experience of reverse culture shock, a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has spent more than a few months away from home.

Are the ancestors in Genesis models of courage and resilience, or are they flawed characters who underscore our own shortcomings and moral failures?

Throughout Genesis, these ancestors of Israel are referred to as *gēr*, a Hebrew term translated 'sojourner' that connotes transitory residence, difference from the host population, and limited legal protection. There are many ways this story corresponds to contemporary society. For instance, one can categorize Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in terms used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Abraham begins as a voluntary migrant, but then lives in Egypt as an environmentally induced, externally displaced person. Isaac is born to immigrant parents, and he subsequently becomes an environmentally induced, internally displaced person. Jacob is a third generation migrant, who involuntarily migrates to seek asylum for fear of physical harm. Jacob does eventually repatriate by choice, but he lives out the remainder of his life as an immigrant.

It is no stretch to say that the traumatic experience of involuntary migration forms a core part these stories. Indeed, it is evident that involuntary migration lies at the very foundation of the identity that Genesis provides to those who adopt it as a sacred text. Genesis does not sugar-coat the experience: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob behave in ways that trouble us, sometimes lying and using questionable means to survive their precarious circumstances. Are they models of courage and resilience, or are they flawed characters who underscore our own shortcomings and moral failures?

However one resolves that issue, it is the case that the ancestral narrative does not advocate fear of outsiders. Nowhere is there a categorical resistance to engaging with those from another community. ***Genesis promotes engagement with outsiders and hospitality to others.***

Ruth

This little book depicts the challenges of being a foreigner among a potentially hostile host population. Foregrounding the experience of a female character, the book of Ruth preserves an ancient perspective on the challenges faced by the most vulnerable migrants.

Ruth, an unmarried widow among a foreign population (Ruth 1.14-19), does possess some 'social capital': because she resides with her mother-in-law Naomi in her hometown of Bethlehem, she has some connection to a middle class family. Still, she has no assurance of income or safety. Ruth relies upon the social safety net of ancient Israel, which allows her to glean after those reaping the harvest. Various Old Testament texts describe this practice, where the reapers leave some of the crop unpicked along the edges of a field. The 'widow, orphan, and foreigner' – those without protection in a patriarchal society – may gather this grain (e.g. Lev 19.9-10). Ruth seizes this opportunity, and through it she finds a patron in Boaz. Eventually, Ruth persuades Boaz to marry her, completing her transition from marginalized outsider to insider. When the epilogue of Ruth tells the audience her line will include King David, it underscores the magnitude of her transition.

Ruth starts as a foreigner and a widow, on the far margins of society. Dependent upon 'handouts' to survive, Ruth resembles those people who might receive the label 'bad' migrant in our society. Yet, as she is welcomed into her host society, she transitions from dependent to contributing member of society. ***Ruth epitomizes the so-called 'bad' migrant made good.***

Nehemiah

The book of Nehemiah presents the story of an Israelite living in Persia and serving as the cupbearer to its king. Disheartened that Jerusalem remains in shambles decades after its destruction by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Nehemiah uses his access to the Persian king to gain permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls. The story's primary themes relate to the challenges of a return migrant.

Return migration refers to a group repatriating to the place from which their ancestors left or were forced to leave. Traumatized and changed by the forced deportation of their community from Israel, Nehemiah and his community have developed strategies to protect their identity while in a foreign society. Despite never living in Jerusalem, Nehemiah and his community have an expectation of what they

will find when they return there. They have a myth of return, a vision of home that resembles a society that no longer exists because the people who remained there have moved on in many ways. Prominent among involuntary migrants, anyone who has returned to a place after an extended absence to find things 'not as they remember them' knows this experience. It is why we say 'you can't go home again.'

In exile, Nehemiah's community embraced endogamous marriage to survive. That is, they only married within their community. Nehemiah laments that in Jerusalem Jews had married 'women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab' (Neh 13.23). Moreover, many children of these marriages 'spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples' (Neh 13.24). Nehemiah believes these people have 'lost their identity,' and so he 'cleanses' these people from 'everything foreign.' The context makes clear this involves divorcing those wives and purifying the community.

The book of Ezra advocates the same sort of 'cleansings.' An implicit endorsement of this view underlies the critique of King Solomon taking 'foreign women,' who entice him to turn his heart away from the God of Israel (1 Kings 11.4). Establishing and maintaining group boundaries features frequently among minority groups who feel their existence is under threat, an experience familiar to very many involuntary migrants. To outsiders this may appear illogically isolationist, but from within the community it functions as a logical survival mechanism.

Nehemiah, unlike Genesis and Ruth, advocates drawing sharp lines between who is and is not a member of the community. Outsiders appear as threats to survival and require suspicious observation. Nehemiah stands a long way from the openness to outsiders of Genesis and Ruth. Some will say it speaks to our basest anxieties and encourages racism; I appreciate that viewpoint. More constructively, one might employ it as a piece of literature that offers insight into the apparently insular tendencies of involuntary migrants. Perhaps people who have been through such trauma 'keep to themselves' and 'resist integration' because their experience has suggested that survival requires that action. Perhaps we all need to reflect on the real loss connected with giving up one's identity, marginalizing core parts of ancestral heritage, and foregoing some aspects of a cherished tradition in order to complete the changes necessary to integrate with a foreign host population. ***Perhaps Nehemiah might help us see things from the perspective of the traumatized, displaced person and to understand their fears better.***

Reading with Empathy

I am a migrant, but I've never been a forced migrant. Perhaps you are a migrant too, but, most likely, you are not an involuntary migrant either. Thus, these and other Old Testament narratives offer us an opportunity to hear the voice of such people and to see how integral it is to the Bible. Though it is not always easy to read stories in this way, learning to empathize with another is rarely easy. ***How, then, can reading these stories increase our empathy with migrants and help us to understand better the challenges of their situation?***

How can reading Old Testament narratives about migration increase our empathy with migrants and help us to understand better the challenges of their situation?

2. Life as Host, not Migrant: Old Testament Legal Texts

A distinct change of perspective occurs between the narrative and legal material: whereas the narratives stress the experience of migrating, the legal texts focus far more extensively on the experience of hosting migrants.[2]

Two important terms for migrants in this material are *gēr* and *nokrî*. *Nokrî* designates a foreigner, likely one who has recently arrived and not integrated into the host community. *Gēr* – usually translated as stranger or sojourner – applies to a person of foreign origin who has assimilated into the host culture to a greater degree. For instance, the *gēr* celebrates the Sabbath along with Israel (e.g. Ex 20.10). To underscore this level of integration, recall that Abraham and Jacob are both called *gēr*. This term even inspires the name of Moses' son Gershom, who is born as 'a stranger in a foreign land' (Ex 18.3).

The legal texts often instruct the community to treat migrants as equals. For example, Leviticus is one place to find them commanded to leave part of the harvest for 'the poor and the *gēr*' to gather (Lev 23.22). Moreover, Leviticus states:

> *"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,*

[2] There are, of course, the examples of Abraham as a short-term host (Gen 18) and Laban (Gen 29–31), who hosts Jacob when he is a migrant in Old Testament narratives. Still, these are exceptions to the widespread on focus on the ancestors as migrants, not vice versa.

and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Leviticus 19.33-34 (ESV)

Exodus expresses a similar sentiment twice (Ex 22.21; 23.9). All three texts ground this attitude in Israel's experience living as a *gēr* in Egypt. Perhaps it is no coincidence that instructions predicated on the experience in Egypt appear to match the openness towards foreigners advocated in Genesis. Of course, Leviticus and Exodus cast a vision for how this looks among the powerful host community, rather than in the minority immigrant group.

Despite advocating acceptance of some migrants, there are statements recommending caution, even exclusion. Though Exodus calls for equal treatment of the *gēr*, elsewhere it excludes foreigners (*nokrî*) from Passover (Ex 12.43). Indeed, Leviticus specifies that no animal from a foreigner can be sacrificed to God (Lev 22.25). Elsewhere, there are texts that justify unequal treatment of migrants in the repayment of debts and in the loaning of money (Deut 15.3; 23.20).

How might one distinguish among migrants, and what would such distinctions mean for how to show hospitality to them?

There is not a single, simple, satisfactory vision for interacting with migrants in the legal material. Alongside texts commending generous hospitality and equal rights for the migrant, there are also texts that call for suspicion and unequal treatment. It is possible these differing attitudes are related to distinctions between groups of migrants, with the *gēr* representing someone who has assimilated to the host culture more than the *nokrî*. ***These texts raise a pointed question: how might we distinguish among migrants, and what would such distinctions mean for how one shows hospitality to them?***

3. Context Matters: The Old Testament Prophets

One might mention almost every prophetic book here, but I shall focus on Jeremiah and Ezekiel. These two books demonstrate that tensions about migration are not limited to the narrative and legal texts.

The book of Jeremiah depicts the events surrounding the final days of Jerusalem, including its destruction and the forced deportation of many of its inhabitants. Jeremiah and his community are not deported, but are displaced within the borders of their country by an external force beyond their control. That experience differs from deportation to a foreign country, but it is hardly a continuation of life as normal. For comparison, consider those Syrians still residing within the borders of their war-ravaged country or the millions displaced within Colombia: though they have not crossed a border into another country, they most certainly are displaced and traumatized.

It is hard to say in detail what life was like for those involuntary migrants from Jerusalem now in the city of Babylon. There is anecdotal evidence that they had some freedom about where they settled in Babylon, a city that must have struck them as vast and strangely cosmopolitan relative to Jerusalem, a largely mono-cultural place by comparison. The book of Jeremiah indicates these former residents of Jerusalem lived among the Babylonians and it encourages them to engage openly with their hosts:

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

Jeremiah 29.4-7 (ESV)

Contemporary research on migrants indicates that this sort of pragmatic, accommodating attitude is common among migrants with some choice about where they live or those who live in close proximity to outsiders.[3] ***Jeremiah suggests that these deportees from Jerusalem lived in a multicultural, integrated setting that promoted an open attitude towards foreign communities.***

Whereas Jeremiah depicts a community of migrants with some control over where they lived, the book of Ezekiel recalls something else entirely. Ezekiel addresses essentially the same period as Jeremiah – the final days of Jerusalem. However, Ezekiel does not address a community in Babylon living among other groups, but one involuntarily placed in a remote area, probably to build a canal. Formerly the elite of Jerusalem, these men and women became manual labourers forced to work for the imperial power that destroyed their city.

Many accurately describe Ezekiel as ethnocentric: the book expresses a negative attitude about the

[3] For instance, Elizabeth Colson, 'Forced Migration and the Anthropological Response,' *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2003): pp. 7-8.

role interaction with foreigners had on Israel in the past (e.g. Ezek 18 and 20) while envisioning a future in which they are not allowed to enter the precincts around the Jerusalem temple (Ezek 44.7). Research suggests this response is common among involuntary migrants forced to live in isolated contexts, such as refugee camps.[4] ***Since Ezekiel depicts a group living in an ancient setting similar to a modern refugee camp, it is notable that it advocates an insular ideology***. Here one finds a sharply different attitude from Jeremiah because one reads a text from a radically dissimilar context. Whereas Jeremiah emerges from a cosmopolitan, urban setting, Ezekiel speaks from the traumatic context of a closed, isolated camp. It is no wonder they seem radically divergent.

Since context influences migrants' response to their situation, how, then, should the Old Testament shape our thinking on where and how the United Kingdom hosts migrants?

Just between these two books one confronts how different migrant experiences and responses to migration can be. These ancient texts correspond to the contemporary insight that the social context of migrants massively influences how they handle the situation. Reading Jeremiah and Ezekiel as counterparts, much as we did earlier with Genesis and Nehemiah, raises this question: if the context that migrants finds themselves in influences their response to the situation – and has since antiquity – how, then, should the Old Testament shape our thinking on where and how the United Kingdom hosts migrants?

This brief review of the Old Testament underscores how prominent migration is in these texts. One can justifiably say that the Old Testament is a collection of texts written by involuntary migrants for other involuntary migrants, often about involuntary migration. And yet, as the product of many authors with divergent experiences of migration, it is hardly surprising that they are not uniform in what they say about migration. This tension challenges an attempt to formulate a single 'biblical' position on almost any aspect of migration. The texts, rather, offer us an opportunity to think again about our own views and sympathize with the experience of involuntary migrants. ***The Old Testament, at a minimum, can and should support our efforts to comprehend an experience that most of us have never directly known.***

[4] Among others, Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

ENGAGING THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, the theme of migration changes tone, but it does not disappear.

4. Jesus the Migrant

Anyone familiar with the New Testament is likely to know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Less well-known is that this was a forced migration for the family, which had to leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem for the census.

Perhaps you have heard someone say that 'Jesus was a refugee'. They probably had in mind this passage:

> *[A]n angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'*
>
> Matthew 2.13-15 (NRSV)

In this passage,[5] the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes that Jesus shares the experiences of Israel. The main point is that Jesus doesn't just sympathize with the involuntary migrants that feature throughout the Old Testament, but in his own life experience he can empathize with them. The passage highlights the role of empathy for the displaced and marginalized, a theme encountered already.

One might also point out some similarities between Jesus and another category of migrants: the Roma. Defined as 'a member of a traditionally itinerant people living by itinerant trade,' the Roma evoke much of what we know about Jesus of Nazareth. He was a man who travelled from town to town, living on the support of people who valued his teaching, even declaring that '[f]oxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man [Jesus' way of referencing himself] has nowhere to lay his head' (Matt 8.20; cf. Luke 9.58). It is true that the 'itinerant' religious leader is a well-attested figure in antiquity, and one who enjoyed cultural acceptance in ancient Judaism. Still, it is notable that

[5] For further background on this passage, see Markus Bockmuehl, *This Jesus* (London: T&T Clark, 1994), pp. 34-36.

Jesus of Nazareth's lifestyle resembles the perennial movements and cultural marginalization so common among the Roma instead of a settled lifestyle common among those empowered to make judgments about how to treat them.

Lest it slip away, the main point remains that the central figure of Christianity lived as a marginal, mobile person, mixing frequently and openly with so-called outsiders. Some of those outsiders – the Roman centurion and the tax collectors representing Rome, for instance – represented clear and present dangers to the survival of all that Jesus' own community revered. Still, no group was more hated by Jesus' community than the Samaritans.

Closely related to the Jewish community that centered its religious life in Jerusalem, the Samaritans worshipped the same God in Samaria, which those loyal to Jerusalem regarded as a heinous perversion of their beliefs and practices. More than any other 'enemy,' the Samaritans represented a threat residing just on the other side of a 'porous' border. How did Jesus handle this situation? To begin, he did not avoid Samaria; according to the Gospel of John, Jesus travelled through Samaria, voluntarily stopping in one of its towns to converse with a woman of 'ill repute' and to stay for two days among its people (John 4.1-42). Furthermore, when Jesus had to explain the greatest commandments of Judaism – to love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself (Luke 10.27) – he selected a Samaritan as his paradigmatic example of faithfulness.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is so familiar that the story has lost some of its most radical features. Astonishing as it would have been to Jesus' audience that the Samaritan helped the man from Jerusalem, it would have pushed the bounds of belief to imagine that Samaritan taking the injured man to the inn where he leaves this Jerusalemite to recover (Luke 10.34-35). Why? Well, what would those Jews think was the cause of this Jewish man's injuries: bad luck or the hated Samaritan who brought his badly injured body into the building? The parable describes an ancient equivalent to a gang member carrying an injured member of his rival gang into a public place where his rivals congregate. Foolish as the strategy may be, the story underscores that the Samaritan places himself in imminent danger to ensure the injured man finds safe haven. ***The parable summons us to love those people – especially those people – who we think threaten our community.***

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, writing on this command to love, observes that:

> *The Hebrew Bible contains the great command, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19.18), and this has often been taken as the basis of biblical morality. But it is not: it is only part of it. The Jewish sages noted that on only one occasion does the Hebrew Bible command us to love our neighbour, but in thirty-seven places it commands us to love the stranger.*[6]

The Jewish and Christian traditions both go to great lengths to teach the necessity of providing care to those outside the community who, in very many cases, present a threat to that which one's own community holds sacred.

> What would it mean for us to incarnate the command to love those we see as neighbours *and* strangers in our migration policy?

The Gospels depict Jesus in a way that demands not only that we love our neighbour, but the stranger as well. ***What, then, would it mean for us to incarnate this command to love those we see as neighbours and as strangers in our migration policy?***

5. Peter and Paul: Letters to Churches of Migrants

The final texts come from the letters to the early church written by Peter and Paul.

The letter known as 1 Peter characterizes its audience as exiles or refugees living in the diaspora of Christians in Asia Minor. To do so, it refers to these Christians in the same way that Gen 23.4 describes Abraham, namely, as persons who live as migrants among a number of host populations. Why does Peter adopt this term? To encourage those Christians to live as Abraham did: 'Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge' (1 Peter 2.12, NRSV). This passage does not teach that because Peter can apply this term to Christians, we are compelled to accept migrants indiscriminately. Rather, the passage highlights the value of empathy in at least two ways. First, the experience of living with a distinct set of values that departs from social norms or public opinion and produces opposition should not surprise Christians. Indeed that experience should produce empathy for other marginalized people. Second, since the experience of living as a refugee characterized

[6] Jonathan Sacks, *Faith in the Future* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 78.

the experience of many ancient Christians, then those living through that experience today – whether Christian or not – can teach us much about what these texts mean. ***In other words, while religious believers in the United Kingdom may be able to offer safe haven to involuntary migrants, these people possess knowledge that can teach us much about the New Testament.***

A final text to mention is Paul's Epistle to the Romans. For those familiar with Romans, it may seem odd to include it. However, evidence indicates that Romans deals with the aftermath of Roman emperor Claudius expelling a number of Jews thought to be causing disturbances in Rome who were connected to the Christian church there.[7] It is likely that Paul wrote this letter to offer his perspective on how the Roman church should deal with the return of its Jewish members who were forcibly removed some time ago. They are not completely unknown to the community, but returning after a long absence, for all intents and purposes they are unfamiliar immigrants entering the group. Paul addresses people dealing with a sudden surge in immigration.

> The epistles of Peter and Paul invite us to imagine 'What is the transformative social potential of sympathizing with migrants and showing selfless hospitality to them?'

From this perspective, Paul's statements about the shared experience of Jews and Gentiles gain relevance. To argue that 'all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin' (Rom 3.9) and that God is the God of Jews and Gentiles together (Rom 3.29) emphasizes the similarities between host community and immigrants. Paul marvels that anyone would 'pass judgment on your brother or sister' (Rom 14.10), for 'each of us will be accountable to God' (Rom 14.12). He instructs them to 'no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another' (Rom 14.13). Speaking most broadly, Paul implores the church at Rome to 'welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you' (Rom 15.7). Among the various issues Romans addresses, it provides guidance for a community dealing with the challenges of accepting and integrating many new arrivals.

It is fair to say, then, that the letters of both Peter and Paul offer perspective to Christians in thinking about and responding to the current 'crisis' of migration. Peter describes the Christian life as one defined by the migratory experience while Paul underscores the shared aspects of our humanity, the predicaments common to all people, and the immense power of exhibiting hospitality to another by accommodating them instead of disparaging them. Together, these texts invite us to imagine ***'What is the transformative social potential of sympathizing with migrants and demonstrating selfless hospitality to them?'***

THINKING 'BIBLICALLY' ABOUT MIGRATION

The diversity of material about migration in the Bible may surprise some. However, this is just a reminder that the Bible is a collection of texts written by people in a wide variety of contexts. If one's aim is to develop a straightforward statement on what that the Bible says about migration that is consistent with its contents, the sheer diversity of material should give one pause. That is not to say there is no value in developing summary statements and syntheses of the material, but any such effort will face challenges about what to emphasize. How, then, does one use the Bible to think about migration? I shall offer four thoughts.

First, many texts from the Old and New Testaments hold the potential to open our minds to an experience that is not our own. Reading the Bible can and should generate a greater appreciation for migrants – especially involuntary migrants – and the immense challenges they face. Allowing texts like Genesis, Nehemiah or the Gospels to speak to us not only from a different time, but also from an unfamiliar social situation, may unveil prejudices, highlight illegitimate stereotypes, and generate a compassionate attitude among those of us who can hardly even imagine what faces a man in the Calais 'jungle', a Syrian woman on the island of Lesvos, or a teenager in the Zaatari refugee camp. ***Cultivating a compassionate and empathetic attitude towards migration is the necessary first step to developing a loving response to it.***

Second, pursuing compassion and empathy does not imply treating all migrants the same. By preserving the difference between the *gēr* and *nokrî*, the Bible

> Cultivating a compassionate and empathetic attitude towards migration is the necessary first step to developing a loving response to it.

[7] For further discussion, see N T Wright, 'The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,' in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), especially pp. 406-8.

does suggest that distinctions between migrants are possible. There are voluntary and involuntary migrants, those fleeing armed conflict and others environmental disasters; some migrants possess in-demand skills, some have no work experience at all; many migrants have strong connections to a particular community or ethnic group while some have little to no cultural allegiance. The list could go on. Whatever distinctions one makes, there remains the obligation to regard each and every person as an image of God, valuable and befitting dignified treatment. Indeed, any distinctions one does draw should exist in order to aid the goal of caring for others rather than serving as a means to maximizing the potential benefits of migration for just oneself and one's community.

Empathy and compassion require acknowledging such differences because exhibiting hospitality and acting with love demands dealing with a person's circumstances, not reducing them to an abstract category that effectively puts aside their personal history. A Christian response to migration, then, demands that we recognize and respond to such characteristics, not ignore them.[8] National borders will not disappear anytime soon and communal identities shall always endure, therefore real and difficult choices about how to respond to the people who cross these geographical boundaries while retaining the distinctives of their communal identities do exist. Many of the hard decisions about migration policy involve determining how to respond appropriately to such divergent experiences. And yet, neither divergent experiences nor national and communal borders supplant the call to show compassion and to love people. Borders may or may not be permeable to people, but the command to love always traverses them.

Third, the biblical texts concerning migration call on us to adopt a disposition of self-sacrificial love to those outside our own community. The Church of England's Bishops recently authored a letter in which they called for a dialogue about migration that rejects negative stereotyping and unfounded suspicion of migrants because such an approach shows 'scant regard for the Christian traditions of neighbourliness and hospitality' (paragraph 103). Echoing the parable of the Good Samaritan, their call reflects the sort of general principle in mind here.

But, do the Bishops go far enough? ***Whether Jewish, Christian, or just an interested reader of the Bible, one encounters a principle of self-sacrificial love, not just for the neighbour, but also the stranger, that requires one to go further still.*** Since the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jeremiah and Ezekiel revolve around the experience of involuntary migration, how should these texts influence current thinking about migration, asylum seeking and granting refugee status? If Jesus of Nazareth was a refugee, what level of solidarity should a Christian show for those living as refugees now?

> In the Bible one encounters a principle of self-sacrificial love for not just the neighbour but also the stranger.

Fourth and finally, reading the Bible to understand what it says about migration presents us with a question, not an answer. This anthology of texts asks us: What might a sustained engagement with the sacred texts in the Bible that accounts for the ways that voluntary and involuntary migration defines the communities of Judaism, Christianity and Islam do to change the tenor of the public debate about migration policy and the attitude of people towards migrants? This question – perhaps more pressing now than at any time in recent memory – remains open until we respond to it with our words and our actions.

[8] There is an analogy between this view and the one Miroslav Volf advocates on reconciliation, where he argues that differences of identity must remain for one to properly embrace the Other to whom they are reconciled. For details, see *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (London: Abingdon, 1996).

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