



More than neighbours?: The Old Testament as a resource for thinking about migration



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Migration is ever-present in the media, political discourse, and even casual conversations, and this prevalence has been the case for at least a decade. This situation may strike us as new, a departure from the past, perhaps a result of the unrelenting tide of globalisation with which we are all so familiar. It may strike us that way, but it is far from the truth. Migration, with its attendant questions of migrants' social status, legal rights and the responsibility of host societies to them has been a prominent topic for millennia. The Old Testament may be the most well known example of just how important an issue migration was in the ancient world.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Congregations of the Commonwealth, has written and spoken on the topic frequently and he has highlighted this point succinctly: '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.'¹

This frequent reference to the stranger and the need to develop a coherent response to her presence underscores the centrality of engaging with migrants for the Bible. Perhaps the Old Testament, despite its authorship millennia ago in a society very different from the UK, is relevant for our present social and political dialogue than many recognise. A further look into the Old Testament reveals that the current focus on migrants

and migration is just one more case of everything old being new again.

Surprising as this may be to some, many of the major figures of the Old Testament are presented as migrants. Some of these figures move voluntarily; most of them migrate involuntarily to flee famine, escape persecution, and some are forcibly deported in military conflicts. Taken together, these texts depict an ancient society where the issue of migration features persistently. In this respect, there is an astonishing similarity between the Old Testament and our news media.

A roll call of migrants

To begin, it is helpful to consider a few figures in the Old Testament who are migrants. Take, for instance, this summary of the narrative in Genesis about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The story begins with Abraham, who migrates to Canaan from southern Mesopotamia. Immediately upon his arrival (Gen. 12.10) famine forces Abraham to flee to Egypt. Abraham returns to Canaan in due course, and it is there that his son Isaac also faces famine (Gen. 26.1). Rather than leave Canaan, Isaac drifts about within its boundaries, residing in various places to survive. Isaac's son Jacob grows up in Canaan, but spends his early adulthood seeking asylum with his family in Mesopotamia to avoid the aggression of his brother Esau. After 20 years, Jacob returns to Canaan to find a transformed, unrecognisable society. The conciliatory attitude of Esau, who now seeks to reconcile with Jacob instead of kill him, exemplifies how much has changed in Jacob's absence. Indeed, Jacob goes through the experience of reverse

culture shock, a phenomenon familiar to almost anyone who has spent more than a few months away from their home. Throughout Genesis, the patriarchs are referred to as *gēr*, a Hebrew term translated 'sojourner' that connotes transitory residence, difference from the host population, and limited legal protection.

To demonstrate just how much this narrative corresponds to the contemporary environment, one can categorise Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the terms used by the UN 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. Finally, 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 migration and the experience of being an immigrant among foreign groups forms these patriarchs' identity and is, in this way, inscribed into the very foundations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The focus on migration does not stop here. Think, for instance, of the great prophetic figures Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The book of Jeremiah depicts the ministry of its namesake and the events surrounding the final days of the kingdom of Judah, with the destruction of Jerusalem and the involuntary migration of its population in 586 BCE. Jeremiah is afforded the choice to stay in Judah or to go with the involuntary deportees to Babylon. He chooses the former (Jer. 39.11–14), though this does not spare Jeremiah from living as an involuntary migrant. With his city of Jerusalem destroyed, Jeremiah becomes an involuntary, internally displaced person forced to survive elsewhere in Judah. That experience is surely different from being deported to a foreign country, but it is hardly a continuation of life as normal. Consider, for comparison, all those Syrians who at present still reside within the borders of their war-ravaged country: though they have not crossed a border into another country, they are undeniably displaced and traumatised by that experience. According to the book of Jeremiah, the prophet is forcibly taken to Egypt by some of his fellow Judahites some years later. Thus, Jeremiah also becomes an involuntary, externally displaced person.

It is hard to say in any detail what life was like for those involuntary migrants in Babylon Jeremiah decided not to join. It is probable that these exiles were compelled to work in various ways to support the maintenance and expansion of Babylonian imperial power and wealth. Yet, there is anecdotal evidence that these Judahites were given some freedom about where they settled in Babylon, a city that must have struck them as vast and strangely cosmopolitan. Jeremiah suggests these former residents of Jerusalem lived among the Babylonians and people from other communities. It is undeniable that the book encourages these Judahites to engage supportively with their hosts: 'Thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community which I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them,

plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the LORD in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper' (Jer. 29.4–7; Jewish Bible).

Contemporary research indicates that this sort of pragmatic, accommodating attitude is widespread among migrants who possess some level of freedom to choose where they live and find opportunities to associate with dissimilar communities. In short, Jeremiah gives us indications that these involuntary migrants from Judah lived in a multicultural, integrated setting that led at least some of their leaders to advocate for an open, positive attitude towards foreign communities.

Whereas Jeremiah depicts a community of migrants with at least some freedom of choice in where they lived and encourages constructive engagement between those migrants and their hosts, the book of Ezekiel offers a markedly different perspective. This prophetic text deals with essentially the same period of time: the final days of Jerusalem, its destruction in 586 BCE, and the lifetime of those forcibly deported to Babylon. By contrast, Ezekiel's community is not settled in cosmopolitan Babylon, where it may interact with other communities, but is sent to the vicinity of the Chebar canal (Ezek. 1.1). The evidence available is limited, but it is most likely that this community was placed there in order to build and maintain the waterways that enabled Babylonian military and economic hegemony over Mesopotamia and the Levant. Formerly the elite of Jerusalem, these men and women were now manual labourers forced to work for the imperial power that had just destroyed their home.

The book of Ezekiel is frequently and correctly described as ethnocentric: it not only expresses a negative attitude about the role interaction with foreigners has had on Israel in the past (Ezek. 18; 20), but it also envisions a future in which they are not allowed to even enter the precincts around the Jerusalem temple (Ezek. 44.7). This attitude is the polar opposite of the open engagement with foreigners exhibited in Jeremiah 29. Contemporary research suggests that this results from more than a difference of opinion about foreigners; rather, it is very likely that these divergent attitudes correspond to the different living situations. Ezekiel depicts a group living in an ancient setting similar to a modern refugee camp, where immigrants are isolated from the host population and limited in their ability to interact with and get to know foreigners. This is sharply different from the cosmopolitan setting of the immigrants living in Babylon that are described in Jeremiah. It is hardly a surprise to find the hardening of ethnic identity and the vehement opposition to engaging with foreign groups advocated in Ezekiel when one recognises the strong similarities between its isolated social context and modern refugee camps.

There is, therefore, a wide diversity of migrant experience and attitudes among just these five characters from the Old Testament. Furthermore, when these ancient texts

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1. J Sacks, *Faith in the Future* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995), p. 78.

2. Among them are Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah.

are approached with an eye towards the causes of and responses to different migratory experiences, it is clear that the Old Testament is ancient evidence that social context and personal experience massively influences one's views about migrants and migration.

Space will not allow it, but a number of other Old Testament figures could be added to this list.² The Old Testament preserves a wealth of stories that demonstrate how prominent the experience of migration was among the authors and earliest audiences of these texts. Despite the geographical and chronological distance that separates ancient Israel and the UK today, these Old Testament stories reflect many of the experiences of and responses to migration familiar to us.

Life as host, not migrant

It is equally important to consider how the Old Testament presents migration from the opposite side. These texts are not short on instruction about how to live as a host community with migrants in its midst. This material is found primarily among the so-called law codes of the Pentateuch.

In these five books there are two key terms used to describe migrants: *gēr* and *nokrî*. The precise nuances of each term are debated, but it is clear that *nokrî* designates a foreigner – perhaps one who has very recently arrived and not integrated themselves into the life of the host community. A *gēr* – translated as stranger or sojourner most often – is also a person of foreign origin who has migrated to Israel, but the texts indicate the *gēr* has assimilated into the host culture to a greater degree. Thus, the *gēr* is commanded to celebrate the Sabbath along with Israel (e.g. Exod. 20.10). To underscore this greater level of integration, recall Abraham and Jacob are both called *gēr*. This term even provides the name of Moses' son Gershom, who is born as 'a stranger in a foreign land' (Exod. 18.3).

The legal texts often instruct the community to treat migrants as equals. Perhaps the strongest statement is the principle that, 'When a stranger (*gēr*) 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' (Lev. 19.33–34, ESV). Exodus expresses a similar sentiment on two occasions (Exod. 22.20; 23.9), and all three of these texts justify this attitude on the prior experience of being a *gēr* in Egypt. For its part, the book of Jeremiah makes this behavior a measuring stick of just governance (Jer. 22.3–5). One tangible result of this ideal is in agricultural practice: the Israelites are commanded to leave a part of their harvest untouched so that 'the poor and the *gēr*' can gather it to provide for their needs (Lev. 23.22).

Despite this prominent and strong advocacy to accept and include the migrant, it is impossible to ignore that there are statements recommending that one treat migrants with caution, even exclusion. A foreigner (*nokrî*) cannot eat the Passover (Exod. 12.43), and an animal that comes from a foreigner cannot be sacrificed to God (Lev. 22.25).

Furthermore, there are texts that justify unequal treatment of migrants in the repayment of debts and in the loaning of money (Deut. 15.3; 23.21). Much as the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel offer different assessments of what it is like to be a migrant and different visions of how one should interact with the host population, so also the legal material includes material with contrasting ideas about how one should treat migrants living among the community. Alongside texts commending generous hospitality and equal rights for the migrant, there are also texts that call for caution, even unequal treatment of those originating from outside the community.

This may surprise and even concern some people. Yet, it should not astonish us, at least not when we bear in mind what the Old Testament is: an anthology of many texts and not a single book, contrary to its familiar physical appearance in the modern world. The Old Testament gathers together texts written by many different people, in many various places, over the span of hundreds of years. While this characteristic makes it a rich resource that preserves for us a range of migratory experiences and responses to them, it also means that the Old Testament does not offer a single, unified viewpoint on migration. How could it be otherwise?

It is an unavoidable task for those who value the Old Testament – either as important evidence to ancient life or as sacred text, religious guidance and ethical resource – to work out exactly how to weigh up the differing perspectives it enshrines. The various perspectives on migration preserved in the Old Testament create tension, to be sure; that can be a productive tension if one approaches it with a certain attitude, but is an issue for another time. At a minimum, it is relevant to appreciate that the different views preserved in it bear a strong resemblance to the current dialogue in the UK where well-intentioned people may find themselves at odds over one or more aspects of migration policy.

More than neighbours

The recently released letter from the Church of England House of Bishops calls 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' (para 103). This call, rooted in the New Testament parable of the Good Samaritan, is well justified and helpful insofar as it goes. But, does it go far enough?

The Old Testament would suggest that one can – perhaps must – go further: if key figures like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and many others were migrants, then how should these texts shape current thinking about migration? What would a sustained engagement with the Old Testament 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 peoples' attitudes towards migrants? The time is ripe for thinking again about the ways texts from the Old Testament might provide a fresh perspective on how to speak about, respond to, and care for the migrants among us.