



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 19 February 2017

Migration and the Bible

In this session we will look at the highly topical issue of migration and how it relates to the Bible.

- (1) Discuss what migration is.
- (2) Discuss the Bible as a collection of writings written largely by migrants.
- (3) Look at biblical texts about migration.

Defining migration for the purpose of this session: the movement of people to one place to another.

Purposefully wide definition.

No Geographical or spatial context.

We tend to think of migration taking place across national borders and it does. However, it is more correct to see migration simply as the movement of people between different places.

How you might define different places can be quite broad; it may be cultural, it may be geographical, it might be tribal, it might be from one nation to another.

And the length of time in migration should also be an open-ended dimension; it is clear that if you visit a place for a day you haven't migrated there – but if you're a self-employed person going there on a contract to work and earn money for one day, then in a sense you are an economic migrant, moving to a different place specifically for the purpose of earning money.

A broad definition of migration is helpful when looking at migration in a biblical context as the ancient world of the Bible was not always defined by clear national borders. We see tribes, cities, and nations, but none of these are defined as nations in the sense that we think of nations today; there was no border control, no passports. (Jericho, perhaps an exception!)

For example, if you think about the Israel depicted in the Bible, at the very start of Genesis the nation did not exist; the nation was then established, but it took a number of generations before it identified itself as a kingdom.

And then of course the kingdom was divided into two regions: Israel in the North and Judea to the South.

The North was invaded by the Assyrians and later the South was invaded by the Babylonians and the people living there were taken captive.

And then the Persians invaded Babylon and King Cyrus decreed that the Israelites could return to their homeland.

And then the nation of Rome gained power and took control over Israel; this is where the New Testament is set.

So when thinking about migration and the Bible, it's important to see migration as the movement of people.

When talking about migration there are some key terms to think about:

Migrant: defined above.

Host community: the community that absorbs the migrant.

Voluntary migrant: a migrant who chooses to move from one place to another. Examples of this include students, economic migrants, people who retire overseas.

Involuntary migrant: someone who is forced to move from one place to another: war, famine, slavery, environmental disaster are all examples of things that could drive involuntary migration.

With this in mind can anyone think of any stories about migrants in the Bible? Biblical characters who are migrants? Jesus!

When we think about the authorship of the Bible, most of us will be aware that it originated from a range of different times, places, social contexts. We think of the origins of the Hebrew bible: ancient folk songs and folk tales retold and eventually put to paper by scribes. We think of the letters written by members of the early church to address specific issues or specific church communities.

It is also correct to add to this that the Bible was primarily written by migrants; people who had moved from one place to another for a variety of reasons.

But what does the Bible say about migration?

Can you think of any specific verses from the Bible that detail how migrants should be treated?

One way to look at what the Bible says about how to treat migrants is to look at the Old Testament legal writings and see if there were any specific rules about it.

One way to examine how a nation treats its immigrants is to look at the laws it has in place to govern them.

In Judaism, the first five books of the Bible are referred to as the Torah, which means 'instruction' or 'law'. Whilst the Torah actually contains different types of writings including stories, songs, and poetry, the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy feature a lot of legal writing. Here we will look at four texts that deal with migrants coming into the land of Israel. You will notice that the sentiment of the first two passages is very different to the second two passages.

To start, it is important to know that two Hebrew terms are frequently used to refer to migrants:

Nokri a foreigner, most likely to be someone who has just arrived in the host community and not integrated into it.

Gēr is usually translated as stranger, sojourner or alien. The term applies to a foreigner who has become more settled into life within their new host community. For instance, in Exodus 20:10 the *gēr* celebrates the Sabbath along with Israel.

Leviticus 19:33–34

³³ When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴ The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Here, the word translated as 'alien' is the Hebrew word *gēr*. So these verses are talking about foreigners who have become accustomed to life in the land of Israel; familiar with its customs and culture.

These verses show great compassion towards foreigners settling in Israel; they are to be treated as a 'citizen', which in this context refers to any male of Israelite heritage who is not enslaved.

Remember that this ancient culture was patriarchal. Men held power and social status over women, but also children, slaves, widows, orphans, and others.

In other words, this passage envisions offering a rather privileged status to migrants who have integrated with the host community.

Leviticus 24:22

²² You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the Lord your God.

Again, the word translated as 'alien' here is the Hebrew word *gēr*, so this verse deals with foreigners who have settled in Israel.

It is helpful to know that this verse appears within the context of a story in which the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man commits an act of blasphemy; in anger, he speaks out the holy name of God in a negative way (Leviticus 24:10–16). According to Jewish tradition, the name of God should not be spoken out loud, so this was a serious offence. In the story, the blasphemer is put to death and a series of rules follow, including the verse above (Leviticus 24:16–23).

This verse states explicitly that Israel should have one law that applies to both its native population and to foreigners settling in the land. One might think of this as a logical complement to Leviticus 19:33–34—migrants should be welcomed and treated fairly, but should also be subject to the same norms for how to treat other people.

Deuteronomy 23:20

²⁰ On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess.

Here, the word translated as 'foreigner' is the Hebrew word *nokrî*, meaning a person from a foreign land who has not yet become integrated into the life of their host community. The verse concerns a different type of migrant to the verses in Leviticus. This rule in Deuteronomy indicates that people thought it necessary to treat the *nokrî* and *gēr* differently, for instance by charging interest on loans to foreigners who had not yet become fully integrated into Israelite society.

Exodus 12:43-45

⁴³ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: This is the ordinance for the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, ⁴⁴ but any slave who has been purchased may eat of it after he has been circumcised; ⁴⁵ no bound or hired servant may eat of it.

This instruction for how to celebrate Passover, one of the most important celebrations in ancient Israel, also distinguishes between groups.

As you can see, the *nokrî* is one of several groups excluded from the celebration. Though no explanation is offered, perhaps it is because the Passover formed such an important part of Israelite identity that they did not think it was appropriate for someone who was not yet integrated into the community to participate.

Just looking at these four examples, one can see that in the legal writings of the Old Testament there is not one single and coherent instruction about how migrants in the land of Israel should be treated.

Alongside texts that encourage generous hospitality and equal rights for some migrants, there are also texts that reveal a sense of suspicion about some migrants and consider different treatment for some migrants acceptable.

It is possible these differing attitudes are related to wider social distinctions between groups of migrants reflected in the Hebrew language: the *gēr* represents someone who has made an effort to integrate into the life of the host community whilst the *nokrî* remains an outsider.

Another possibility is that the authors envisioned a difference between how one should treat a migrant in social situations (Leviticus 19:33–34), in legal terms (Leviticus 24:22), in financial transactions (Deuteronomy 23:20) and in religious ceremony (Exodus 12:43–45).

Group discussion questions

So what does all this indicate? That within the Bible are a range of views on the treatment of immigrants: we have really just scratched the surface here; there are numerous other examples.

Considering the following questions might help to contextualise what we have looked at today.

One of the most well known statements from the Bible is to love your neighbour as yourself (Leviticus 10:18). Yet, the Bible says far more often (over 30 times) that we should love the foreigner as ourselves (e.g., Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19). How does this observation change the way we understand this commandment, which is not only central to Judaism and Christianity, but advocated by so many people outside of those religions too?

Deuteronomy 23:20 suggests that it is acceptable to treat foreigners differently in financial matters. Why do you think Deuteronomy suggests this approach? Do you think that it is justifiable?

The texts that we have examined seem to distinguish between different types of migrants; those that have settled in the land and those that have not yet settled. Do you think that this is reasonable?

Today in the United Kingdom, our immigration policy treats different types of migrants differently – do you think that this is fair?

Similarly, today in the United Kingdom immigrants and citizens are entitled to different types of social welfare – do you think that this is fair?