Refocus

Love the Stranger

Migration, the Bible and our societies

CA Strine
with RB Hamon
MIGRATION
Preparation for study

The following material provides a basic introduction to the topic of the Bible and migration. It will be helpful as background reading before you attend Session 1: Old Testament narratives.

Migration is one of the most important issues in many societies today. It affects every part of the world as people move between nations for all manner of reasons. Living in a prosperous country like the United Kingdom, it can be difficult to appreciate that migration is happening not just out of choice but sometimes out of necessity. Some people migrate to reunite with family members, others migrate to work or to retire, while others are forced to migrate in order to escape war, survive famine, or deal with other environmental issues. Perhaps it should not surprise us that migration is frequently in the media, the subject of radio and television dramas, and the focus of intense political debate.

When you think about the topic of migration, the Bible might not immediately come to mind. This is for good reason: the Bible is a collection of ancient texts that are understood by our society to deal mainly with a range of religious issues. Yet migration features in many books throughout the Bible. Indeed, most of the authors of the biblical texts were themselves migrants.

In order to prepare for our journey of discovery over the next six sessions, it might be helpful to begin thinking about the following questions relating to the Bible and migration.

Opening experience

• What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘migration’?
• Do you know anyone who is a migrant?
• What stories from the Bible or biblical characters come to mind when you think about migration in the Bible?
• What do you think the Bible says about migration?
Session 1

OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

Opening experience

Objective: to introduce group members to a number of key terms relating to migration.

• What do you think the term ‘voluntary migration’ means?
• In contrast, what do you think the term ‘involuntary migration’ means?
• What do you think a ‘host community’ is?

Group discussion

• As a group, share what you already know about Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph and Ruth, paying particular attention to the reasons why they moved and what their experience of migration was like. Discuss both the positive and negative experiences of these characters and how they were treated by the host communities that received them.
• In what ways does Abraham’s status as a migrant influence the way you understand his character in the story? Is Abraham a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ migrant?
• Do you think Abraham was correct to wonder if he could trust the Egyptians?
• How do you feel about what happens to Sarah in the story?
• Can you identify with migrants today who might be cautious of the people of the community into which they are moving? Think about cultural differences and language difficulties. Can you remember a time when you experienced an unfamiliar culture? Examples of this could be moving to a new town, school or workplace. How did you feel? How might this influence your view of vulnerable migrants with little money and few social connections who are entering a new country for the first time?

Suggestions for reflection

• Abraham and Sarah were environmental migrants. What is the connection between environmental issues and migration in our world? What things can you do to live in a way that is both more environmentally conscious and more mindful of the current increases in migration?
• Since Abraham – whom Jews, Christians, and Muslims share as an honoured ancestor – was a migrant, do you think that religious communities have a special responsibility to care for migrants?
**Session 2**

**OLD TESTAMENT LEGAL TEXTS**

### Opening experience

Objective: to encourage the group to think about how laws in countries today treat migrants.

- Think about what you know about the law in the United Kingdom today. Is it easy for migrants to leave the country if they want to live somewhere else? Does it depend on the country they want to move to?
- Thinking again about what you know of the law in the United Kingdom today, do you think it is easy for migrants to enter the country to settle here?
- Do you think current United Kingdom laws distinguish between different types of migrants? For example, what sort of differences do you think there are for people in the following situations:
  > A married couple in their 50s who have retired and want to leave the United Kingdom to go and live in Spain?
  > A Canadian banker who wants to move to London in order to work in the financial sector?
  > A refugee from Syria seeking asylum in the United Kingdom?

For helpful background information, you could visit the following two websites:

- www.emigrate.co.uk
- www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-visas-and-immigration

### Group discussion

- What words would you use to describe the attitude encouraged in Leviticus 19.33–34 towards the integrated foreigner?
- How does the instruction in Leviticus 24.22 sit alongside the attitude encouraged by Leviticus 19.33–34, which you read previously?
- Why do you think Deuteronomy 23.20 suggests that it is acceptable to treat foreigners differently in financial matters? Do you think this is justifiable?
- Why do you think the *nokrî* was excluded from the Passover celebration (Exodus 12.43–45)?
- Some immigrants in the United Kingdom have principles and values that are different from those considered acceptable here. How might we engage with immigrants in these circumstances and show love to them? What could we do to help immigrants from different cultural backgrounds to integrate into our communities more easily?

### Suggestions for reflection

- In some cases, the Bible indicates that all migrants should be treated the same. In other places, it suggests that some migrants might need to be treated differently. How do these differences – which come from texts written at different times and in different places – help us to think about how we think we should treat migrants from different backgrounds?
- How can this diversity also help us to engage in discussions and debate about migration and migration policy today?
Opening experience

Objective: to encourage group members to empathise with migrants in different cultural settings.

Imagine two scenarios:

• Being a migrant confined to an enclosed community with no one but other migrants from your homeland as company.
• Being a migrant in a multicultural society.

Discuss how you think these two experiences would compare to each other.

Think further about your experience of different cultures. Have you ever had to integrate with a group of people from a different place before? Examples of this could be: a different country, a different region of the United Kingdom, or a different workplace. What are the challenges in doing this? Were there specific words that had different meanings? Were there different cultural conventions?

Group discussion

• Read Jeremiah 29.1–14. How does your knowledge that this text is speaking about the experience of migration from the perspective of an involuntary migrant influence the way you understand it?
• What does Jeremiah 29.1–14 indicate about how the people deported from Jerusalem were viewed by the host community of Babylon? Does this influence the way you understand the book of Jeremiah as a whole?
• Does the knowledge that Ezekiel was addressed to a specific community of migrants, who had been forcibly exiled from their homeland and made to undertake manual labour, make it easier to see why this book portrays cultures outside ancient Israel in a negative light? Why do you think people might view cultures other than their own negatively and with distrust? How might these feelings be overcome?
• Jeremiah 29.4–7 was written to a migrant community living peacefully in a multicultural society, whereas Ezekiel 44.4–9 was written to an oppressed migrant community living in isolation and forced into manual labour. These are two very different types of migrant community. What types of migrant communities are you aware of around the world today?

Suggestions for reflection

• Jeremiah 29.4–7 suggests that native citizens and migrants can both benefit from the well-being of a society. How does this impact the way you think about governmental responses to migration?
• How might you help migrants to integrate into society in the United Kingdom today?
• Jeremiah and Ezekiel resemble the findings of contemporary research: in a peaceful multicultural society migrants are more likely to integrate and accept people of different cultures. Conversely, if forcibly held in a confined group, migrants are more likely to be suspicious of people from other cultures. How might these Old Testament stories, which are supported by contemporary research on migrants, inform policies about where and how the United Kingdom hosts its migrants?
Opening experience
Objective: to encourage group members to think about migration within the context of the New Testament.
- Can you think of any characters in New Testament stories who were migrants?
- Are any of the characters from the Old Testament who were migrants important in the New Testament?
- Do any New Testament texts speak about the way Christians should treat migrants? If you can’t think of any direct references, can you think of any texts that might suggest how Christians should treat migrants?

Group discussion
- Most people familiar with the way Jesus is presented in the New Testament are aware of his humble background, but how does framing Jesus as an involuntary migrant to Egypt contribute to your understanding of him?
- The Roma people originated from northern India and were traditionally Hindu; this is evident in their flag, which contains Hindu symbolism and imagery. As early as the 12th century AD, the Roma began to migrate through northern Africa and western Asia to Europe. Since this time, the Roma people have gradually begun to adopt Christianity. What aspects of Christianity do you think are particularly attractive to Roma communities?
- In the Gospel of John, we see Jesus reaching out to the Samaritans; in the Gospel of Luke, we see him using a Samaritan as an ideal of faithfulness to God. Jesus spent time with and spoke positively about a group of people whom his society rejected. Who are the ‘Samaritans’ in our society? Can we do anything to reach out to them collectively? What positive examples do they set for us?

Suggestions for reflection
- How does it change our understanding of Jesus’ teaching about loving people outside the community when we realise that he was an involuntary migrant too?
- As a group, we discussed how we might reach out to marginalised people in our society. How did this discussion resonate with you? Are there things that you can do as an individual to reach out to and show love to those on the margins?
Session 5

LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES

Opening experience

Objective: to encourage group members to consider the challenges of communicating with different audiences. (It is important to appreciate that the New Testament texts were written to a range of different audiences.)

Imagine how you might talk about the sensitive issue of migration to the following groups of people:

- Your work colleagues
- A class of primary school children
- A group of university students from Asia and Africa

What differences might there be between these groups? How might you change what you say, to make sure that your message is clear and relevant for each group?

Group discussion

- In Romans, Paul emphasises the similarity between host community and migrants. Can you see similarities between citizens of the United Kingdom and those migrating into the nation? Of course there are cultural and religious differences, but what do we share with these people? What values do you think transcend culture, nationality and religion? Do these peoples have similar goals in life as we do?
- Hebrews highlights the basic human desire to seek out a better life. As residents of the United Kingdom, we live in one of the wealthiest nations in the world and generally enjoy a good quality of life, with our basic needs met and often exceeded. Can you empathise with those living in less prosperous countries who want to migrate in order to seek out the same quality of life as we citizens of the United Kingdom have?
- Given that many biblical texts were written by migrants, often to other migrants, commonly discussing the theme of migration, do you agree that migrants could help us understand the Bible more clearly?

Suggestions for reflection

- The image of Christians as involuntary migrants is common in the New Testament. How might this influence our understanding of New Testament teaching about attitudes towards migrants?
- In light of 1 Peter 2.12, what would it mean for you to conduct yourself honourably with people from other cultures? How do your current actions or non-actions help or hinder the integration of migrants in your community?
Session 6

Reflecting on Migration and the Bible

Group discussion: Variety of experiences of migration
• Have any of the Bible stories about migration that we looked at had a particular personal importance for you?
• Have you found any of the Bible stories about migration that we examined particularly challenging?
• The Bible depicts many different reasons for migration in the ancient world. How does that range of reasons help you to understand migration in today’s world more fully?

Group discussion: Empathy
• How easy was it for you to relate to the stories in the Bible that we looked at? Were there any stories that were difficult to understand or relate to?
• How did you feel about what happened to Sarah in the story of Abraham and Sarah’s migration to Egypt? How did you feel about Jesus reaching out to the Samaritan community, which was largely disliked in his homeland? What views of yours did these stories challenge?
• In what ways has reading these stories about migrants helped you to empathise with migrants today? How have your views about people migrating into the United Kingdom from overseas changed as a result?
• Do you now feel more aware of the issues that migrants face?
• How, if at all, do you feel inspired to engage with migrants in your own community after this study?
• How, if at all, do you feel inspired to engage with migrants beyond your own community?
• How do you feel about the way migrants are treated in the United Kingdom? What, for instance, do you think about the manner in which migrants are depicted by different newspapers? Do you think that political party representatives talk about migration in helpful or hurtful ways?
• What do you think about current United Kingdom migration policy? How has your answer to this question changed as a result of this study?

Group discussion: Thinking about the Bible
• How has this study changed your perception of what the Bible is?
• Has this study changed the way in which you understand and use the Bible?
• Do you think the Bible is more or less relevant to understanding contemporary political and social issues than when you started this study?
• Will this study change the way you explore the Bible in the future?
The Babylonian Empire

Ezekiel lived in exile in Babylon during the period before and after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel address the scattered population of Israel during the period of the Babylonian Empire.