

REFOCUS

LOVE THE STRANGER

MIGRATION, THE BIBLE AND
OUR SOCIETIES

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FOREWORD

More people are on the move and living away from home than at any time in history. The United Nations estimated in 2016 that the total number of migrants across the world is 244 million. Migrants for this purpose are people who live in a country other than the one in which they were born. The number of migrants has increased by a remarkable 41% since the year 2000. Some 21 million of these migrants worldwide are refugees.

Across the world, this means that an average of 3.3% of the entire global population are migrants. But in Europe and North America that proportion is currently 10%. The experience of migration affects not only those who move from one country to another; it affects their children, their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren in terms of their identity, their hopes and their deep attitudes.

Migration affects those left behind as well, particularly when the most skilled and talented members of a population leave. Understanding migration is vital for our world, our own society and our churches.

Migration is a subject which does not feature a great deal in sermons or Bible studies. However, it is a subject on which the Bible has a great deal to say. The Old Testament was written against a background of great people-movements. The New Testament was written in an age when it was comparatively easy to cross the known world. The Bible tells many stories of the experience of migration and integration, from Abraham and Ruth to the exiles in Babylon.

Understanding migration is an inseparable part of loving our neighbours as ourselves. To love means to

imagine ourselves in other people's shoes, to listen to their experiences, to see the world and our towns and cities and churches through their eyes. Understanding migration means looking more deeply into what helps a migrant community settle well and how the host country can help.

Migration from the perspective of the host country is, of course, immigration. Immigration is one of the most toxic and difficult topics of debate in the life of the United Kingdom at the present time. In public discourse the argument seldom moves beyond slogans and caricature.

Our country urgently needs language and skills to move the debate on, past these slogans, to a careful, considered debate about how to build integrated cities, towns and rural communities. Christians and churches have a vital role to play both in that conversation and in building those integrated communities, in partnership and through practical action.

I hope and pray that this book will open up and resource that conversation and build positive change as we seek together to love the stranger.

+Steven Oxford

INTRODUCTION

What is this study guide about?

This group study guide addresses one of the most important issues that the United Kingdom and, indeed, the wider global population must deal with today: migration. The guide is written for study group leaders and provides material for use in a series of sessions. The aim is to encourage participants to read and engage with the Bible, particularly in the hope that they can gain a deeper understanding of both migrants and host communities in various biblical texts, and relate this understanding to similar contemporary situations. We will look at what the Bible says about migration, how it depicts migrants, and how it suggests migrants should be treated. The guide uses texts from both the Old and New Testaments and discusses a range of stories in order to explore the many ways in which the Bible addresses the issue of migration.

Why are these studies important?

The Bible is a sacred text providing instruction and revelation for many people of faith. The Bible is also, for this reason and others besides it, the world's bestselling book, which has had a tremendous influence on culture. Its stories have influenced countless works of literature, art, films, music and adverts. Yet it is not widely recognised, either within faith communities or in culture more broadly, that the Bible often speaks about migration. We hope that, as a

result of following these studies, group participants will be encouraged to explore what practical and positive steps they might take to deal with the issues related to migration that we face today in the United Kingdom and beyond.

Who are these studies for?

Given the importance of migration in our society, this guide has been written to be suitable for a wide range of group members: people from the Jewish and Christian communities of faith, people who know the Bible well, those with less biblical knowledge, and those beyond these communities who are interested in the topic. The guide is written to provide the necessary information to run a study tailored to the specific knowledge level, interests and personality of your group.

Content of the studies

Over six sessions we will look at the depiction of migration throughout the Bible. There are three sessions that look at different types of Old Testament texts (narratives, legal writings and prophetic writings) and two sessions that look at different types of New Testament texts (the Gospels and the letters). The final session brings together the material studied in earlier sessions and builds upon it.

In preparation for Session 1, ask your group members to read the introductory material on pages 13–14 and to think about the questions in the ‘Opening experience’ section. This page may be photocopied and distributed to group members in advance; alternatively, it is available to download, free of charge, from biblesociety.org.uk/stranger.

The preparatory material provides a basic introduction to the topic of the Bible and migration. It is intended to be suitable for group members of all backgrounds, though you should note that the third and fourth questions in the ‘Opening experience’ require some knowledge of the Bible.

Practical advice on leading the sessions

As a group leader, your focus should be to lead and facilitate learning and discussion in an environment where group members feel comfortable.

Ask group members to bring a Bible with them to each session. Bring some extra Bibles to each session yourself to ensure that everyone has access to a Bible and no one is left out. This will also allow group members to engage with different translations of the Bible.

Encourage everyone in the group to get involved with discussion. Invite group members to ask questions and share their thoughts and experiences, while making it clear that they should only share experiences that they are comfortable talking about. Emphasise that everyone's views are valid and that everyone has an important contribution to make to the group. Highlight also the importance of listening to each other at all times to reinforce this point. Instruct group members to be sensitive and encouraging to each other; there is likely to be some disagreement between them about some issues, but this is healthy if discussion is carried out in a non-argumentative and mature manner.

Gently guide members who may dominate sessions, to make space for everyone to feel comfortable and share. Consider that group members might also look information up on their phones or tablets and share it with the group. This could be disruptive, so you may want to establish a specific process for people to contribute information in this way.

For each session, the discussion questions and suggestions for personal reflection are available as a free download from biblesociety.org.uk/stranger. Printed on A4 sheets, the download will provide space for group members to write down their thoughts about the questions raised. The maps on pages 55 and 56 are also included in this download.

Planning each session

Each session is designed to be one hour in length. We recommend that you read through each session before leading it, to familiarise yourself with its content and be aware of how the timings of each specific section might work. Try to ensure that discussions do not overrun and that all the content can be covered in the time available.



This symbol, which you'll find in the 'Introduction' and 'Bible encounter' sections, indicates essential background information for the session (for example, the paragraphs about Abraham on pages 16–17). As you prepare, decide in advance how you'll treat this information. You could:

- summarise it yourself, once the Bible passages have been read.
- ask group members to read it aloud.
- ask people to work in pairs, reading the information and Bible verses and sharing their own insights.
- combine any of these three approaches.

To support group members with little or no previous knowledge of the Bible, very basic information that will be helpful for each session can be found in text boxes in the page margins. The material in these boxes can be read out loud and should be the first place you look if you need to provide a wider background context to a session. In addition, at the start of each session is a paragraph entitled 'Leader's guide'; this gives an overview of the content covered and suggests how you might expand on the material if further background information is needed to support group members.

It may be necessary to allow time for activities not mentioned specifically in each session guide. If the group is new, it is a good idea to spend time in the first session getting to know each other before the first in-depth discussion commences. In subsequent weeks, you might want to briefly summarise the content of the previous session for anyone who was absent. Then, if everyone in the group is happy to

do so, consider praying together. For example, you may feel that it is appropriate to open and/or close a session in prayer.

Sessions 1–5 follow the same format:



Introduction

This section introduces the topic. It is best to complete any initial tasks such as welcoming the group or making any housekeeping announcements before you start on the content of this section, so that the session as a whole is not disrupted.



Opening experience

This is the first main section in which you will be facilitating group discussion. Allow 10–15 minutes for this section so that there is ample time for everyone to think, respond and ask their own questions.



Bible encounter

This section introduces the group to the key Bible passages (the NRSV text is used throughout the guide unless stated), as well as the bulk of the essential background information.

Ask someone in the group to read each Bible passage aloud. Please note that while shorter passages have been provided in this guide, you will have to read longer passages from a Bible – perhaps these passages could be split up and read out by different readers. Encourage group members to look up the passages in their own Bibles and discuss any differences in translation; these are really helpful for those who are getting to know the Bible well.



Group discussion questions

Group discussion questions are interspersed with the Bible encounter material. You should allow 10–15 minutes in total for group discussion, so that everyone can think, respond and ask their own questions.



Suggestions for reflection

These questions tend to be more personal in nature and so it may take longer for group

members to formulate a response to them. Depending on the group, you may wish to use some of these questions in addition to the Group discussion questions.

Session 6 follows its own unique format. It is made up of three sections, each of which contains group discussion questions. Aim to allocate around 15 minutes for each section.

Pastoral support

The topic of migration can be very personal, so it is possible that the study will reveal pastoral needs. As a group leader, it will be up to you to decide how to address these needs; usually it will be best not to devote time to them in a group session, but to speak to any individuals who need pastoral support in a more private setting at the end of the session. If you are not qualified to offer pastoral support, be prepared to signpost people to someone who can help. For example, in a church setting, there may be a dedicated pastoral team or it may be more appropriate to direct someone to a specialist organisation.

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

Leader's guide

This session introduces the Old Testament and gives overviews of the biblical characters of Jacob, Joseph and Ruth, with a specific focus on these characters as migrants. The session will require the group as a whole to have some previous knowledge of the biblical characters Jacob, Joseph, Ruth, Abraham and Sarah. If you think that any of the characters will be unfamiliar to the group, you could ask group members to read about specific characters before the session, and prepare a brief summary to share with the group.



Introduction

The collection of texts known most often as the Old Testament contains different styles of writing, including stories, legal codes, poetry and songs. Overall, the Old Testament contains more stories than any other type of writing. In this session we will explore some stories about migration from the books of Genesis and Ruth.

Genesis is a sacred text in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, although each of these religions views it from a different perspective. Running through this book is the story of four

The Old Testament is a collection of texts that were written over a period of hundreds of years and in a variety of locations across the ancient world. In Jewish tradition these writings are known as the *Tanakh*, while academics tend to use the term 'Hebrew Bible'. The Christian term 'Old Testament' is used in this study guide with no disrespect to any other traditions, as it is the most widely known name for this body of writing.

generations of a family who all experience migration, for many different reasons and across many borders.

The book of Ruth tells the story of Ruth, a poor woman from the land of Moab who comes to live in Bethlehem as a migrant. Her story is particularly thought-provoking, as the people of Moab were traditionally enemies of Israel.



Opening experience

Migrant: a person who moves from one place to another (often between countries) in order to improve their living conditions.

Voluntary migration: occurs when an individual chooses to move to live in a different location because of personal desires, including work, marriage and retirement.

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

Discuss the following questions:

- 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?



Bible encounter

Involuntary migration: also known as ‘forced migration’, occurs when an individual is compelled to move because of circumstances beyond their control, such as war, famine, floods and climate change.

Host community: the community into which an immigrant moves.

There are many migrants who feature in Old Testament narratives. The characters listed below move for a wide range of reasons, reflecting the diverse manner in which migration is depicted in the Old Testament.

- Abraham is commanded by God to move to a different land and then later moves to survive a famine (Genesis 12).
- Sarah also moves to survive a famine (Genesis 12).
- Jacob flees the threat of violence (Genesis 27—30).
- Joseph is trafficked into slavery (Genesis 37).
- Ruth moves for economic and family reasons (Ruth 1).



Group discussion

- As a group, share what you already know about each of these characters, 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.



After discussion, move on to ensure that the following points are brought out. You will look at Abraham and Sarah in further detail soon, so first consider Jacob, Joseph and Ruth.

The story of Jacob fills many chapters of Genesis, and in his life he moves around many times. Most significantly, Jacob is first depicted as a specific type of involuntary migrant: a refugee. A refugee is someone fleeing from their place of residence due to armed conflict or persecution, because it is too dangerous for them to stay. Jacob flees his homeland as his life is in danger. Notice, though, that Jacob is not blameless. He runs to the land of Haran because his elder brother, Esau, is threatening to murder him as a result of Jacob's deceptive actions (Genesis 27.41–45).

After 20 years, Jacob returns home; Esau seeks to be reconciled with him, which astonishes Jacob. Like some contemporary migrants, Jacob has reverse culture shock when he returns home.

In later years, Jacob migrates again. This time, he takes his whole family to Egypt, both to escape a famine in their homeland and to be reunited with his son Joseph, who is living in Egypt (Genesis 46.5–7).

The story of Jacob connects to the story of Joseph, which is also found in the book of Genesis. Joseph, like his father Jacob, is a migrant, but the circumstances involving his migration are very different. Joseph is kidnapped and sold into slavery by his brothers (Genesis 37.25–28); he is taken into the land of Egypt as a victim of human trafficking. His experience of Egyptian society includes traumatic events (in Genesis 39 he is thrown into jail unjustly), and when he is

able to integrate into Egyptian society it is only because of offers of kindness from members of the host community.

As you can see, involuntary migration defines the family that provides the origins of Judaism and Christianity.

Ruth, finally, is a widow from the land of Moab who moves with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, to Bethlehem (Ruth 1.14–19). Ruth lives among a foreign population as an unmarried woman with no income. She is vulnerable (Ruth 2.21–22) and she relies on the kindness of the host society to help her. If necessary, explain the Israelite custom described in Leviticus 19.9–10: at harvest time, farmers left the edges of each field unharvested so that vulnerable people, such as widows, orphans and foreigners, could gather whatever remained.

Ruth resembles many migrants today: forced to make a choice to move because of circumstances outside their control, she relies upon the compassion of a host community to survive.



Key passage: Genesis 12.10–20

As with all biblical passages in this study, ask a group member or members to read this passage aloud from the Bible.

Genesis 12.10–20 tells the story of Abraham and Sarah as they migrate to the land of Egypt in order to avoid famine. Let's look at the three main characters in this story: the immigrants Abraham and Sarah, and Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt.

Ur: in modern-day southern Iraq.

Haran: in modern-day Turkey.

Canaan: this area refers to modern-day Israel/Palestine.

The journey of Abraham and Sarah follows the shape of an arc across western Asia, starting in the east in southern Iraq, travelling north-west to Turkey, then finally south-west to Israel/Palestine.



Abraham

The book of Genesis tells us that Abraham was born in the city of Ur and that he moved over a thousand kilometres to the land of Canaan, passing through the city of Haran (Genesis 11.31—12.5). When we read the story about Abraham in Genesis 12.10–20, it is helpful to understand that Abraham is already a voluntary migrant when this story begins.

Abraham's next journey, though, is involuntary. There is a severe famine in the land of Canaan, leaving Abraham no choice but to move to Egypt, where there is food (Genesis

12.10). Using current terms, we would refer to Abraham as an environmentally induced involuntary migrant; in other words, Abraham has been forced to move from the place where he is living because of an environmental crisis.

In ancient Israel, most people lived directly off the land as farmers or shepherds. This society was especially dependent upon fresh water supply. Some water came from streams, rivers or wells, but the most important source was rainfall. If there was not enough rain, crops wouldn't grow very well and this could cause famine. Abraham found himself in a position where circumstances out of his control required him to leave his home in order to survive.



Group discussion

- 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?



When Abraham arrives in Egypt, he is very nervous and unsure whether he can trust the people of Egypt, his new host community. Therefore, he asks his wife Sarah to pose as his sister, not his wife, because he fears that an Egyptian man will kill him and take Sarah for himself (Genesis 12.11–13).



Group discussion

- Do you think Abraham was correct to wonder if he could trust the Egyptians?



Sarah

Sarah is Abraham's wife, also from the city of Ur (Genesis 11.27–32). Sarah travels with Abraham from Ur to Canaan, so, like Abraham, she is a voluntary migrant at the start of the story.

Abraham recognises Sarah's vulnerability as a female migrant into Egypt. He fears that if Sarah is identified as his

wife, he will be killed and Sarah will then be left without a husband's protection in a foreign land. You might think that Abraham is being over-anxious, but the story is set within the context of a strongly patriarchal culture where men held power and social status above women. To protect himself and his wife, Abraham instructs Sarah to pose as his sister. The result is that Sarah is taken into the Pharaoh's house and Abraham is rewarded with all manner of gifts from Pharaoh, including sheep, oxen, donkeys, slaves and camels (Genesis 12.15–16).

Sarah's story reflects the reality that many vulnerable migrants are exploited. Indeed, even as you read or hear this story, people are paying huge sums to smugglers in an attempt to escape violence in their countries. Others are being trafficked, often because they have been manipulated into thinking they are getting safe passage into a new country, and sometimes because it is their only choice to survive.

Sarah doesn't spend the rest of her life in the Pharaoh's house; God punishes the Pharaoh, Sarah is reunited with Abraham and they return to Canaan far wealthier than when they left (Genesis 12.17–20).



Pharaoh

The Pharaoh is the ruler of Egypt and represents the Egyptian host community into which Abraham and Sarah move. Pharaoh believes that Abraham and Sarah are brother and sister, so he takes Sarah into his house and repays Abraham with a variety of livestock and slaves. From the perspective of a person hearing this story in ancient biblical times, Pharaoh acts as a generous and hospitable host. Reading the story today, however, this strikes us as a completely unacceptable exchange of human life for goods.



Group discussion

- 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

If you have time in the session, ask for responses to the following questions. Otherwise, group members could ponder them at home in the coming week.

- 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?