

Protagonist Corner: Toward a Theology of Migration

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In a recent article Daniel Groody observed that today “there are more than 200 million people migrating around the world, or one out of every thirty-five people on the planet.”¹ And as one family he interviewed said, “We are migrating not because we want to but because we have to. . . . I’m already dead in Mexico, and getting to the U.S. gives us the hope of living, even though I may die.”² Here in the macro and micro perspectives we confront the phenomenon that is most often described in the U. S. as the “immigration problem.” Frequently this description leads to a variety of political and economic analyses that pay little attention to either the macro or the micro perspective on migration, but rather seeks to capitalize on the “opportunities” that the “problem” offers.

Two days after Christmas 2008, *The New York Times* published an article that described how the small Rhode Island town of Central Falls discovered a way to make its state of the art detention facility actually begin to generate some of the revenue for which the city had hoped when it was built.³ An improved financial balance sheet came from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) payments for the housing of immigrants detained at the rate of \$101.76 per day. A special agony for Central Falls arose from the fact that a city, founded on waves of earlier immigrant populations and currently a mostly Latino town, discovered that some of its own valued citizens had been secretly incarcerated there. These familiar faces in the community had been caught in crackdowns on supposed illegal immigration. Even so, both city and detention center officials continued to say they are only running a business that tries to meet the needs of its clients, in this case a chief client being ICE.

But surely the “immigration problem” deserves to be considered on grounds other than that of the economic opportunities it may present to distressed communities needing jobs and revenue to support their public services. The Bible’s own account of migration as a fundamental experience of God’s people in the world invites us to a richer understanding of the phenomenon of global migration so evident in the present.

One particularly instructive starting point for such an understanding of global migration is Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, in which he gives a remarkably comprehensive account of the dispersion of humans around the globe. Beginning in the heart of Africa in approximately seven million B.C., human migration reached across the Middle East and Central Asia by one million B.C. and into central and Western Europe by 500,000 B.C. Thereafter, the human dispersion reached through Southeast Asia to Australia by 40,000 B.C. Subsequently, the path of human movement went through Siberia by 20,000 B.C. and across the Bering Strait sheet into North America around 12,000 B.C. and to the tip of South American by 10,000 B.C.⁴

For a theological approach that tries to understand the human experience *sub specie aeternitatis*, this expands the frame for one of the Bible’s most fundamental themes, that of “promised land.” Whereas we might easily and readily think of the theme of “promised land” in the history of Israel, Diamond’s account leads us to

ponder whether Israel's experience might not be paradigmatic for the human family as a whole. Israel's vision of a place of security, livelihood, and well-being ("promised land") may well represent a vision that God has placed in the heart of humankind. What else than a universal, divine summons to a land in which humans might flourish explains the impulse that would lead them to venture in hope from known places to others unknown—again and again, for millennia?

Christian communities have a manifest theological obligation to approach the contemporary phenomenon of global migration in light of the Biblical theme of "promised land." Instead of mindlessly joining in political and economic debates about the "immigration problem," they have the opportunity to bring special insight to the conversation. Rather than criminalizing those who are on the move from places of death to places of human flourishing, Christians may fairly ask if the God who promised a land of bounty to Israel may be the same God who moves in the hearts and struggles of today's migrants.

Those who have pondered the traditions about "promised land" in scripture are careful to note that there is both variety and ideology in the way the theme is sounded. Walter Brueggemann notes in the preface to the second edition of *The Land* that recent analyses of the "promised land" in the Old Testament have drawn attention to the political arrangements which the theme may justify and privilege.⁵ In *The Land is Mine*, Norman Habel agrees that the land traditions of the Old Testament are ideologically cast, but he describes one of those traditions, the immigrant ideology of the Abraham narratives, in a way that may give special purchase on some of the most vexing issues that may be experienced in the face of global migration.

Habel notes that in the Abraham story, the land is "a host country where immigrant ancestors find God at sacred sites, discern promises of future land, and establish peaceful relations with the indigenous people of the land."⁶ Thus a biblical contribution to current angst about the intrusion that "immigrants" may represent to existing residents is that the arrival of the others does need to be taken as inherently hostile. This is emphasized as well in the way the issue of entitlement to the land is expressed for Abraham. "Where land is in dispute, he negotiates peaceful settlements. When the land is attacked, he fights for the peoples of the land. When he needs a burial site for Sarah, he buys land in accordance with the local laws of land purchase. Abraham is a peaceful immigrant who willingly recognizes the land entitlements of the peoples of the host country."⁷ At least in the light of this stratum of "promised land" theology in the Bible, Christians may reassure the wider community that the influx of migrants is not inevitably aggression against the interests of those already arrived.

Thus a theology of migration informed by the theme of "promised land" will function to help understand both migrants and host peoples. Regarding those on the move, it will see in their movement the implicit promise of God that they will be shown to a land in which they may have security, livelihood, and well-being. Regarding those in the host or receiving land, it will testify that as God sent Abraham into Canaan peacefully and in full recognition of the needs of those abiding there, contemporary migrants may be received with the same, responsive hospitality.

Notes

1 Daniel G. Groody, "Dying to Live: Theology, Migration, and the Human Journey," *Reflections*, Vol. 95, no. 2, (Fall 2008) New Haven, Yale Divinity School, 31.

2 Ibid.

3 Nina Bernstein, "Leaning on Jail, City of Immigrants Fills Cells with Its Own," *The New York Times*, (December 27, 2008).

4 Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 35-52.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), xiii-xvi.

6 Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 135.

7 Ibid., 146.