

“My father was a Syrian refugee”

Deuteronomy 26:5

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“My father was a Syrian refugee.” It is difficult to hear this biblical confession apart from the present immigration crisis around the world, especially the Syrian refugee catastrophe. Syria’s civil war is the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. Over 400,000 people have died. Almost seven million people have been internally displaced. As of June 1, 2016, 4,844,762 Syrians are refugees.¹ More than half of those affected by the crisis are women and children.² The scale of the suffering is beyond imagination.³

One would think that such a disaster would generate an outpouring of sympathy and action. Instead we have witnessed a frenzy of fear and hostility. One need only become a spectator of the presidential campaigns to get a palpable sense of this xenophobia. We now have a presumptive (albeit tenuous) nominee who would have no qualms telling Syrian refugee children “you can’t come here.” “We don’t know where their parents come from. They have no documentation whatsoever.... There’s absolutely no way of saying where *these people* (my emphasis) come from. They may be from Syria, they may be ISIS, they may be ISIS-related.”⁴ This same person has promised to “make America great again” by banning Muslims from entering the United States and by building a “great wall” to our south, to which Pope Francis responded without missing a beat, “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the Gospel.”

In a biting *New York Times* op-ed piece, Bryce Covert agrees that the promise to “make America great again” is not *good news* for women, African-Americans, Hispanics, or immigrants.⁵ Ideologies of exclusion may calm the fears of some, but they do little to address our moral obligation to improve the situation of many in need. They do little to make us human and unite us in authentic ways. Promises to build walls and deport “illegals” do little to ease economic stress and community deterioration. Language against “others” appeals to our worst selves, our fearful selves, not to the people we truly desire to be.

“My father was a Syrian refugee.” This admittedly unusual translation of the more familiar “A wandering Aramean was my father” (Deut. 6: 5) throws into sharp relief the current tide of anti-immigrant zeal and the disparaging language used for Syrian refugees today. The brief Deuteronomic utterance embraces Israel’s identity as an at-risk people. It honors the community’s immigrant roots. It treasures the memory of trauma and survival and refuses to deny the painful realities of loss and marginality. It even dares to see itself in the face of the “outsider” (Aram or Syria). Such provocative language of vulnerability—“My father was a Syrian refugee”—captures something core about Israel’s faith and sacred texts. In some respects, this ancient statement also anticipates the scandal of the Gospel which shatters cultural barriers, sees the essential dignity and value of “others,” and identifies with the broken and vulnerable, “the least of these” (Matt 25:31-46).

One might think that this confession is a peripheral voice given Deuteronomy’s

strong insider-outsider distinctions. But much suggests otherwise. At the outset, the pronouncement draws upon the ancestral traditions (Israel's birth narratives) to remind the community of its immigrant roots. The cryptic language — “my father was a Syrian refugee” — likely alludes to desperate Jacob, a man on the run who journeyed back to Syria to secure a home for his family, fled his furious father-in-law Laban “the Aramean,” and eventually migrated to Egypt in search of food and security. Jacob/Israel the individual, the progenitor of the nation, appears in the text as endangered, displaced, and broken. The affirmation “My father... a Syrian refugee,”⁶ however, might very well refer to his grandfather Abram/Abraham who sojourned from Haran/Syria to Palestine. Or it might fold all of the ancestral migrations into a singular memory of loss and liminality. Regardless, each rendering presents earliest Israel as a landless people, caught between worlds. Interestingly, the writer of Hebrews captures this marked sense of displacement when depicting Israel's matriarchs/patriarchs as “strangers and immigrants on earth... looking for a homeland...” (11:13-14).

We can also discern the import of the brief statement by the distinctive role it enjoys in the liturgical life of the community. Upon entering their new homeland—or from an historical perspective, when reentering the land from exile—the priest instructs the worshipping community to call to mind Israel's painful past:

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make the response before the LORD your God: My father was a Syrian refugee; he went down to Egypt to live there as a resident alien. (26:1-3)

The confession resists the temptation to deny Israel's ruptured history. It refuses to suppress language of loss, trauma, and marginality. Instead it makes the nation's hardships part of its public narrative and in so doing breaks the silence that often debilitates victims of violence.

In classic Deuteronomic form, this confession of vulnerability is not merely a testimony of the past; it defines the present identity of God's people. Within the context of worship, when Israel sees life most clearly, the community acknowledges its suffering and need for God. No bravado, nationalism, or militarism here. No grand celebration of power and position. This survival liturgy reenacts Israel's peculiar identity as a wounded community. And this communal awareness of loss gives shape to a Torah ethic of compassion: “You are to love the refugee, for you were refugees in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19; 15:15). Israel recognizes its own pain and brokenness in the face of the refugee and so imitates God who “loves the refugee, providing them food and clothing” (Deut. 10:18; 24:14, 17, 19-21).

The broader literary setting (*Sitz im Buch*) lends additional force to the import of this terse affirmation of an imperiled Jacob/Israel. In context this image concludes the law book of Deuteronomy (chapters 12-25) and introduces one of Israel's central recitals of faith (26:5-10a). Mark Biddle observes that “[w]ithin the space of five short verses, this confession summarizes much of Israel's story from the patriarchs to the entry into the promised land.”⁷ The credo, like its introductory statement, acknowledges the community's history of suffering. It recognizes the centrality of the lament in the life of God's people. It celebrates the gracious intervention of the living God. And it revels in the wondrous gift of land as a fulfillment of God's loving promises.

On the heels of this core statement of faith is a call for generosity to those who easily fall through the cracks: temple workers, immigrants, orphans, and widows (11-14). It is noteworthy that the word *ger*, translated immigrant, refugee, stranger, or resident alien, occurs three times in these few verses.

“My father was a Syrian refugee” is therefore no literary island. This stunning confession of vulnerability belongs to a grand narrative which reminds us that God chooses the despised, the war-torn, the refugee, those whose lives are shattered by violence and whose voices are shamed into silence—or as St. Paul writes, “the foolish in the world..., the weak in the world..., the despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are...” (1 Cor. 1:27-29). Such language of loss unites ancient text and modern reader perhaps like no other: it sets our feet on common ground—wounded ground—with the rest of the world. And it urges us to act as God’s surrogates in behalf of the weak and broken, the displaced and disabled, the excluded and degraded on account of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or religion.

Reading the text as literature of loss challenges us all, but it is particularly problematic for those who interpret the Bible as a story of the winners. Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche, a network of communities for persons with disabilities, speaks much about the allure of the “religion of winning” which is fostered by a culture that honors success and power. I think of this brawny interpretive perspective every time I drive by a giant statue of Jesus on I-75 in Ohio. If you haven’t seen the sixty foot (super-hero) action figure of Jesus, let me tell you, it doesn’t trade in subtleties. Some insist that the Bible inspires this kind of triumphalism with its vignettes of power: of multitudes leaving Egypt as a massive military machine, walloping wicked Canaanites and occupying their land by divine decree; of a victorious nation appointing renowned kings who erect world-class temples and palaces. And perhaps they’re right to a degree, but this view is not without serious problems. Let me mention three.

Such a perspective is *strained historically*. Douglas Knight and Amy-Jill Levine remind us that ancient Israel was actually “a tiny country buffeted by geopolitical forces it could scarcely repel.”⁸ It was “invaded and occupied repeatedly, each time becoming small provinces in vast empires.”⁹ Any plausible *historical reconstruction* must take into account the enormous toll exacted on this “tiny country” by empires on the Tigris and the Euphrates. And any moving literary or theological construction must take seriously Israel’s protracted history of war, exile, and captivity.

Not only is reading the text as a narrative of the winners historically problematic, but it is also saddled with *profound ethical burdens*. Such a view has a long and sad history of generating violence against women, people of color, gays, lesbians, and countless others. It is not difficult to recognize its influence in our own communities. From pulpits, for example, we still hear gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people stigmatized and condemned, often in the most demeaning terms imaginable. As parents of gay and straight children, we’ve experienced this up close, and I must say, still bear its scars. And as a professor on a college campus, I am painfully aware of the enormous toll it has taken on many of our young people. My point is this: reading one’s sacred text as an expression of power from a position of power is a deadly combination. It incites hatred, bigotry, and intolerance, often in the name of God.

Besides its historical and ethical problems, reading the text as a story of the winners *ignores much of the Bible*. Instead of depicting Israel as triumphant, we encounter in the scriptures a people on the margins: dislocated and out of sorts, colonized yet

defiant, caught in the crossfire of empires, vulnerable yet resilient, at risk and traumatized by war, victims of history, yet survivors against all odds. Consider the Genesis narratives that portray God's people as endangered by infertility, famine, and family conflicts, or remember the Exodus narratives which are entrenched in suffering. Note the many faces of grief in the Psalter, as if Israel at worship is always Israel at risk. Encounter suffering Job whose pain still haunts us, sometimes back to God.

Similarly striking are the expressions of loss in the prophetic literature which Paul Kim and I have called "a meditation on the horror of war,"¹⁰ for these prophetic works constitute the disaster literature of those who survived military assaults by the superpowers Assyria and Babylon (as well as the "more benign" rule of Persia). The two pivotal points of this corpus are the fall of Samaria in the eighth century B.C.E. and the defeat of Jerusalem in the sixth century. Both incursions leave indelible marks of violence and pain on the text.

Although the book of Isaiah is best known for its lyrical expressions of hope, these uplifting oracles are hardly decipherable apart from the harsh realities of military defeat, forced migration, and resettlement. Jeremiah gives testimony to a wounded people, a scorched earth, a tormented prophet, and a suffering God. Ezekiel bears the scars of war in his body. The Book of the Twelve is defined by the horrors of war and the struggle to survive them. In other words, the entire prophetic corpus depicts Judah/Israel as the historical losers, which clearly complicates theological constructions.

To speak of Judah or Israel as wounded and war-torn is one thing; to speak of Judah/Israel's God as part of the fray, at times even traumatized by human whims, is too much for some to bear. But loss, as we know, is difficult to parse. It is often too raw and unwieldy to control. And even if it were not, this language of human and divine vulnerability which we discern in Deut. 26:5 articulates something primal about being human and elemental about the scriptures. William C. Placher describes it beautifully: "To read the biblical narratives is to encounter a God who is first of all love.... Love involves a willingness to put oneself at risk, and God is in fact vulnerable in love, vulnerable even to great suffering."¹¹ Richard Rohr says it more pointedly: "Once the victim becomes the Lord, we will have a healthy mistrust of all attempts at domination, exclusion, and victimization of others."¹²

This language of vulnerability, inherent in the image of the refugee, is a good antidote for the almost irresistible "religion of success," which ignores the weak and belittles the poor. It subverts our propensity to read the text as an expression of power from a position of power. And on occasion it even inspires us to embrace a life of hospitality over hostility. Henri Nouwen points out that the term *hospitality* evokes images of "soft sweet kindness, tea parties, bland conversations and a general atmosphere of coziness."¹³ However, the practice of hospitality in the Bible is rarely benign: it dares us to welcome "others" into our lives, to seek their welfare and peace, and to receive their blessing (Gen. 18: 1-15; 1Kgs 17:8-24; Luke 24: 13-32). It calls us to *reach out* to people rather than build walls around ourselves. It implores us to be vulnerable enough to make loss part of our personal and communal narrative: "My father was a Syrian refugee."

Still we revel in winning. We love the rush of adrenaline. We're convinced that it's the key to our wellbeing. I was reminded of our preoccupation with winning from two very different arenas. The first again comes from the world of politics and

the presidential campaign in particular. And again, I'm afraid, Donald Trump enjoys center stage. By his own admission, Trump likes only winners. He shows contempt for those he considers weak and vulnerable. He mocks the disabled, scorns those suffering the wounds of war, demeans immigrants, and bullies his opponents. I've never seen anything like it and find it alarming at best. Peter Wehner, who has served in three Republican administrations, has called this fascination with raw power a "Nietzschean morality" (a celebration of the "*Übermensch*"), an approach to life that is incompatible with a Christian ethic which honors human dignity and embraces the poor and weak.¹⁴

I was also reminded of this preoccupation with winning in a far more constructive setting when attending a Super Bowl Breakfast. The sponsors had the best of intentions when they talked about winning for Christ. But I found this notion no less disturbing than the giant Jesus action figure on Interstate 75. I thought to myself, maybe I should put together a breakfast for losers, for those on the margins, for "il-legals," for the despised and the demeaned. But then again who would attend? Still in my more lucid moments, I'm convinced that it is this very language of loss and vulnerability, brokenness and trauma, that unites us across time and place with our wounded selves and our wounded world. The striking confession "My father was a Syrian refugee" is rooted deeply in this streaming tradition. Jesus the refugee embodies it. Paul expresses the mystery when he writes about God's solidarity and love for the "weak of this world." Bruce Springsteen gives voice to it in his song "Land of Hope and Dreams." Springsteen imagines a train that carries

saints and sinners
losers and winners
whores and gamblers
lost souls...
and broken-hearted
thieves and sweet souls departed....

This train, my sisters and brothers, is the Gospel Train. And it is indeed good news for *everyone*. *All aboard!*

Notes

1 According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

2 <https://www.worldvision.org/wv/news/Syria-war-refugee-crisis-FAQ#sthash.CuJwsBWw.dpuf>

3 "The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR); Susan F. Martin, "The Global Refugee Crisis," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 17/1, Winter/Spring 2016, 5, 7, 10.

4 Donald Trump, February 8, 2016.

5 "Make America Great Again for the People It Was Great for Already," *New York Times*, May 16, 2016.

6 The Hebrew nominal predicate is a "verb-less" construction.

7 Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Smyth & Helwys: Macon, Georgia, 2003), 383-84.

8 Douglas A. Knight and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 143.

9 *Ibid.*, 27.

10 Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You are My People. An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 2010), 6.

- 11 William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God. Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, Kentucky, 1994), xiii.
- 12 Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World. The Sermon on the Mount* (Cincinnati, Ohio; St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996), 10.
- 13 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out. The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Image Books; Doubleday: New York, 1975), 66.
- 14 "The Theology of Donald Trump," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2016.