A homeless migrant Aramean

The Bible’s first confession of faith begins with a story of pilgrimage and migration: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien” (Deuteronomy 26:5). We might ask, did that “wandering Aramean” and his children have the proper documents to reside in Egypt? Were they maybe “illegal aliens”? Did he and his children have the proper Egyptian social security credentials? Did they speak properly the Egyptian language?

We know at least that he and his children were strangers in the midst of a powerful empire, and that as such they were both exploited and feared. This is the fate of many immigrants. In their reduced circumstances they are usually compelled to perform the least prestigious and most strenuous kinds of menial work. Yet, at the same time they awaken the schizophrenic paranoia typical of empires, powerful and yet fearful of the stranger, of the “other,” especially if that stranger resides within its frontiers and becomes populous.

The biblical creedal story continues: “When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the . . . God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction . . . and our oppression” (Deuteronomy 26:6). So important was this story of migration, slavery, and liberation for the biblical people of Israel that it became the core of an annual liturgy of remembrance and gratitude. The already quoted statement of faith was to be solemnly recited every year in the
thanksgiving liturgy of the harvest festival. It reenacted the wounded memory of the
afflictions and humiliations suffered by an immigrant people, strangers in the midst of
an empire; the recollection of their hard and arduous labor, of the contempt and disdain
that is so frequently the fate of the stranger and the foreigner who possess a different skin
pigmentation, language, religion, or culture. But it was also the memory of the events of
liberation when God heard the dolorous cries of the suffering immigrants. And the
remembrance of another kind of migration, in search of a land where they might live in
freedom, peace, and righteousness, a land they might call theirs.

We might ask: who today might be the wandering Arameans and what nation might
represent Egypt these days, a strong but fearful empire?

Xenophilia: towards a biblical theology of migration

We began this essay with the annual creedal and liturgical memory of a time when
the people of Israel were aliens in the midst of an empire, a vulnerable community,
socially exploited and culturally scorned. It was the worst of times. It became also the
best of times: the times of liberation and redemption from servitude. That memory
shaped the sensitivity of the Hebrew nation regarding the strangers, the aliens, within
Israel. Their vulnerability was a reminder of their own past helplessness as immigrants
in Egypt, but also an ethical challenge to care for the foreigners inside Israel.1

Caring for the stranger became a key element of the Torah, the covenant of justice and
righteousness between Yahweh and Israel. “When an alien resides with you in your land,
you shall not oppress the alien. 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” (Leviticus 19:33f). “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9). “The Lord your God is God of gods… who executes justice to the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:17ff). “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns… You shall not deprive a resident alien… Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord redeemed you from there” (Deuteronomy 24:14, 17-18).

The prophets constantly chastised the ruling elites of Israel and Judah for their social injustice and their oppression of the vulnerable people. Who were those vulnerable persons? The poor, the widows, the orphans, and the foreigners. “The princes of Israel . . . have been bent on shedding blood… the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you” (Ezekiel 22:6f). After condemning with the harshest words possible the apathy and inertia of temple religiosity in Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah, in the name of God, commands the alternative: “Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness . . . And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Jeremiah 7:6). He went on to reprove the king of Judah with harsh admonishing words: “Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow… If you do not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation” (Jeremiah
22:3,5). The prophet paid a costly price for those daring admonitions.

The divine command to care for the stranger was the matrix of an ethics of hospitality. As evidence of his righteousness, Job affirms that “the stranger has not lodged in the street” for he always “opened the doors of my house” to board the foreigner (Job 31:32). It was the violation of the divinely sanctioned code of hospitality that led to the dreadful destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-25).

The perennial temptation is xenophobia. The divine command, enshrined in the Torah is xenophilia - the love for those whom we usually find very difficult to love: the strangers, the aliens, the foreign sojourners.

The command to love the sojourners and resident foreigners in the land of Israel emerges from two foundations. One, has already been mentioned - the Israelites had been sojourners and resident foreigners in a land not of theirs (“for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”) and should, therefore, be sensitive to the complex existential stress of communities living in the midst of a nation whose dominant inhabitants speak a different language, venerate dissimilar deities, share distinct traditions, and commemorate different historical founding events. Love and respect towards the stranger and the foreigner is thus, in these biblical texts, construed as an essential dimension of Israel’s national identity. It belongs to the essence and nature of the people of God.

A second source for the command of care towards the immigrant foreigner is that it corresponds to God’s way of being and acting in history: “The Lord watches over the strangers” (Psalm 146:9), “God... executes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the strangers” (Deuteronomy 10:18). God takes sides in history, favoring the most vulnerable: the poor, the widows, the orphans and the strangers. “I will be swift to bear
witness... against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and
the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of
hosts” (Malachi 3:5). Solidarity with the marginalized and excluded corresponds to God’s
being and acting in history.

How comforting would be to stop right here, with these fine biblical texts of
xenophilia, of love for the stranger. But the Bible happens to be a disconcerting book. It
contains a disturbing multiplicity of voices, a perplexing polyphony that frequently
complicates our theological hermeneutics. Regarding many key ethical dilemmas, we
find in the Bible often times not only different, but also conflictive, even contradictory
perspectives. Too frequently we jump from our contemporary labyrinths into a dark and
sinister scriptural maze.

In the Hebrew Bible we also discover statements with a distinct and distasteful flavor
of nationalist xenophobia. Leviticus 25 is usually read as the classic text for the liberation
of the Israelites who have fallen into indebted servitude. Indeed, it is, as its famed tenth
verse so eloquently manifests: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the
inhabitants thereof.” But it also contains a nefarious distinction: “As for the male and
female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may
acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens
residing with you, and from their families... and they may be your property... These
you may treat as slaves” (Leviticus 25:44-46). And what about the terrifying fate imposed
upon the foreign wives (and their children) in the epilogues of Ezra and Nehemiah? They
are thrown away, exiled, as sources of impurity and contamination of the faith and
culture of the people of God. Let us also not forget the atrocious rules of warfare that prescribes forced servitude or annihilation of the peoples encountered in Israel’s route to the “promised land” (Deuteronomy 20:10-17). These all are, in Phyllis Trible’s apt expression, “texts of terror.”

This conundrum is a constant irritating modus operandi of the Bible. We go to it searching for simple and clear solutions to our ethical enigmas, but it strikes back exacerbating our perplexity. Who said that the Word of God is supposed to make things easier? But have I not forgotten something? If something distinguishes the tradition is its Christological emphasis. What then about Christ and the stranger?

Clues to address Jesus’ perspective regarding the socially despised other or stranger can be found in his attitude towards the Samaritans and in his dramatic and surprising eschatological parable on genuine discipleship and fidelity (Matthew 25:31-46). Orthodox Jews despised Samaritans as possible sources of contamination and impurity. Yet Jesus did not have any inhibitions in conversing amiably with a Samaritan woman of doubtful reputation, breaking down the exclusion barrier between Judeans and Samaritans (John 4:7-30). Of ten lepers once cleansed by Jesus, only one came to express his gratitude and reverence, and the Gospel narrative emphasizes that “he was a Samaritan” (Luke 17:11-19). Finally, in the famous parable to illustrate the meaning of the command “love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:29-37),” Jesus contrasts the righteousness and solidarity of a Samaritan with the neglect and indifference of a priest and a Levite. The action of a traditionally despised Samaritan is thus exalted as a paradigm of love and solidarity to emulate.
The parable of the judgment of the nations, in the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-46), is pure vintage Jesus. It is a text whose connotations I refuse to reduce to a nowadays too common and constraining ecclesiastical confinement. Jesus disrupts, as he loved to do, the familiar criteria of ethical value and religious worthiness by distinguishing between human actions that sacramentally bespeaks divine love for the powerless and vulnerable from those that do not. Who are, according to Jesus, to be divinely blessed and inherit God’s kingdom? Those who in their actions care for the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and incarcerated, in short, for the marginalized and vulnerable human beings. But also those who welcome the strangers, who provide them with hospitality; those who are able to overcome nationalistic exclusions, racism, and xenophobia and are daring enough to welcome and embrace the immigrant, the people in our midst who happen to be different in skin pigmentation, culture, language, and national origins. They belong to the powerless of the powerless, the poorest of the poor, in Franz Fanon’s famous terms, “the wretched of the earth,” or, in Jesus’s poetic language, “the least of these.”

Why? Here comes the shocking statement: because they are, in their powerlessness and vulnerability, the sacramental presence of Christ. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger [xénos] and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me” (Matthew 25:35). The vulnerable human beings turn out to be, in a mysterious way, the sacramental presence of Christ in our midst.

This sacramental presence of Christ becomes, for the first generations of Christian communities, the corner stone of hospitality, philoxenia, towards those needy people who
do not have a place to rest, a virtue insisted upon by the apostle Paul (Romans 12:13). When, in a powerful and imperial nation, like the United States of America, its citizens welcome and embrace the immigrant, who reside and work with or without some documents required by the powers that be, they are blessed, for they are welcoming and embracing Jesus Christ.

The discriminatory distinction between citizens and aliens is broken down. The author of the Epistle to the Ephesians is thus able to proclaim to human communities religiously scorned and socially marginalized: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens” (Ephesians 2:19). The author of that missive probably had in mind the peculiar vision of post-exilic Israel developed by the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel emphasizes two differences between the post-exilic and the old Israel: the eradication of social injustice and oppression (“And my princes shall no longer oppress my people” – Ezekiel 45:8) and the elimination of the legal distinctions between citizens and aliens (“You shall allot it [the land] as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord God” – Ezekiel 47:21-23). This was not merely theological speculation. Ezekiel experienced himself the tragedy of being an immigrant. He was one of the countless Israelites who suffered forced deportation after the violent invasion of Israel by the Babylonian military forces. Exile and diaspora were the fate of the people of Yahweh and the source of Israel’s sacred scriptures.
An ecumenical, international and intercultural theological perspective

We need to countervail the xenophobia that contaminates public discourse in the United States and other Western nations with an embracing, exclusion-rejecting, perspective of the stranger, the alien, the “other,” one which I have named xenophilia, a concept that comprises hospitality, love, and care for the stranger. In times of increasing economic and political globalization, when in a megalopolis like New York, Chicago, London, or Paris many different cultures, languages, memories, and legacies converge, xenophilia should be our duty and vocation, as a faith affirmation only of our common humanity, but also of the ethical priority in the eyes of God of those vulnerable beings living in the shadows and margins of our societies.

One of the key concerns energizing and spreading the distrust against resident foreigners is fear of their possible consequences on national identity, understood as an already historically fixed essence. These are perceived as sources of “cultural contamination.” What is therein forgotten is, first, that national identities are historical constructs diachronically constituted by exchanges with peoples bearing different cultural heritages and, second, that cultural alterity, the social exchange with the “other,” can and should be a source of renewal and enrichment of our own distinct national self-awareness. History has shown the sad consequences of xenophobic ethnocentrism. There have been too intimate links between xenophobia and genocide. As Zygmunt Bauman has so aptly written, “Great crimes often starts from great ideas... Among this class of ideas, pride of place belongs to the vision of purity.”

Migration is an international problem, a salient dimension of modern globalization.
Globalization implies not only the transfer of financial resources, products, and trade, but also the worldwide relocation of peoples, a transnationalization of labor migration, of human beings who take the difficult and frequently painful decision to leave their kin and kith searching for a better future. We are in the midst, according to some scholars, of an “age of migration.” Borders have become bridges, not only barriers. For, as Edward Said has written in the context of another very complex issue, “in time, who cannot suppose that the borders themselves will mean far less than the human contact taking place between people for whom differences animate more exchange rather than more hostility?”

The intensification of global inequalities has made the issue of labor migration a crucial one. It is a situation that requires rigorous analysis from: 1) a worldwide ecumenical horizon; 2) a deep understanding of the tensions and misunderstandings arising from the proximity of peoples with different traditions and cultural memories; 3) an ethical perspective that privileges the plight and afflictions of the most vulnerable, as “submerged and silenced voices of strangers need to be uncovered”; and 4) for the Christian communities and churches, a solid theological matrix ecumenically conceived and designed.

The churches and Christian communities, therefore, need to address theologically this issue from an international ecumenical and intercultural perspective. The main concern is not and should not be exclusively our national society. In an age where globalization prevails, there are social issues, migration one of them, whose transnational complexities call for an international ecumenical dialogue and debate. As Susanna Snyder has so aptly
written, “a transnational issue requires transnational responses and transnational, global networks such as churches could therefore be key international players.” One goal of that world-wide discursive process is the disruption of the increasing tendency of developed and wealthy countries to emphasize the protection of civil rights, understood exclusively as the rights of citizens, vis-à-vis the diminishment of the recognition of the human rights of resident non-citizens.

Pope Benedict XVI rightly reminded the global community, in his 2009 social encyclical Caritas in veritate, of the urgent necessity to develop an international, ecumenical, and theologically humane perspective of migration:

“[M]igration . . . is a striking phenomenon because of the sheer numbers of people involved, the social, economic, political, cultural and religious problems it raises . . . [W]e are facing a social phenomenon of epoch-making proportions that requires bold, forward-looking policies of international cooperation . . . W[e] are all witnesses of the burden of suffering, the dislocation and the aspirations that accompany the flow of migrants . . . [T]hese laborers cannot be considered as a commodity or a mere workforce. They must not, therefore, be treated like any other factor of production. Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.” (Caritas in veritate, 62)

2 Sodom’s transgression of the hospitality code was part of a culture of corruption and oppression, according to Ezekiel 16:49 – “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” The homophobic construal of Sodom’s sinfulness, which led to the term sodomy, is a later (mis)interpretation. Cf. Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).


4 This periscope deserves to be quoted in its entirety: “The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (Psalm 146:8-9).

5 This text is inscribed in Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell, a venerated US icon.


8 See Clark Lyda’s and Jesse Lyda’s moving documentary, *The Least of These* (2009).


“Xenophilia is commanded us: the neighbor whom we are to love is the foreigner whom we encounter on the road.” Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 268.


A task to which not enough attention has been devoted is the advocacy for the signature and ratification by the wealthy and powerful nations of the 1990 “International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families,” which entered into force on July 1, 2003.


Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church, 205.