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The Migrant Status of Israel in the Structuring of the Biblical Story

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Abstract

This essay investigates the important role the migrant status of early Israel played in the structuring of the biblical story. The story of Israel in the Torah and the Deuteronomistic History are structurally encased within events of migration in and out of the land. After becoming a monarchy, Israel's nomadic origin continued to count as important in her self-definition and as determinant for important faith-based ethical values. The paper claims that Israel came to discover in her nomadic and wandering experiences an understanding of God's call and of her mission to the nations. The interpretation of Israel's history given in this essay invites a religious interpretation of contemporary migration of Africans.

Keywords: Self-definition – Changing views – Plausibilists - Pentateuch – Migrant factor.

1. Introduction

Migration is as old as human existence in the world. In contemporary times, there are several reasons why people choose to or are forced to migrate. Besides globalization, which has made easier the movement of economic migrants, other more negative factors, like political conflicts, violence, escape from extreme weather conditions, lack of access to opportunities and human rights violation have caused the forceful movement of peoples from their native lands to other places. Like many peoples of the world, Israel's life is marked at several stages by experiences of migration, immigration and exile. Migration became for Israel a determinant factor for understanding themselves and their mission in the world.

This essay investigates the important place the migrant stage of ancient Israel is given in the structure and message of the Hebrew

Bible. The Pentateuch presents the patriarchs as the ancestors of Israel who migrated from Ur of Chaldeans in Mesopotamia into Syria-Palestine. The relationship of these ancestors with God, which included promises of land and progeny and covenants, are represented in the Bible as foundational to Israel's life and mission. The Deuteronomistic history continues to narrate the next events concerning Israel's departure from Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land. When one considers the total span of biblical Israel's existence, it is striking that the people spent about three quarters of their existence either on a journey or living like strangers than living as an independent state in their land. The historicity of these periods of nomadic existence has been at the center of scholarly interest.

One important preliminary that must be clarified at the beginning of this essay concerns scholarship's assessment of the historical character of the events of migration in Israel's history. The stories of the migrations of the patriarchs and of Israel's journey from Egypt into Palestine must not be understood as sequence of literal historical events. In spite of the highly contested historical reliability of the accounts, this essay gives much weight to the place which the final canonical biblical text accords to the early stages of migration in Israel's life. The canonical text bears witness to what Israel remembered of their past. Even though the historical details are lost, these events are considered of vital importance for their life and self-concept.

The essay begins by presenting the changing views of scholarship on Israel's beginnings. It continues to expose the structure of the first two parts of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah and the Deuteronomistic History, in order to highlight the important place they give to migration in their opening and closing chapters. The next section of the essay exposes other defining matters of Israel's life which further underscore the importance of nomadic existence in Israel's religion and faith in God. The essay concludes by emphasizing the need to theologically interpret contemporary historical events of migrations and to see in them avenues of God's word for and to us.

2. Changing Views of Scholarship on Israel's Beginnings

This part of the essay traces the history of changing assessments and reevaluations of the patriarchal age and of Israel's emergence in light of archaeological and textual evidences[1]. Before the beginning

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1   Cf. M. BISHOP MOORE – B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past: The Changing Study of the Bible and History* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2011) 43-144, for this review of

of modern critical study of the Bible, the biblical representation of the patriarchs and their settlement were accepted as credible historical accounts of Israel's beginnings. The patriarchs were understood as historical figures who lived in the first half of the second millennium and who migrated into Syria-Palestine during the migration wave of semi-nomadic West Semitic peoples. Similarly, the stories of Israel's exodus from Egypt, journey through the desert and conquest of the land were accepted as historical at face value.

Around the later part of the 19th century and midway through the 20th century, many scholars accepted Julius Wellhausen's and other scholars' claim that the patriarchs were probably literary representatives of early ethnic groups of nomadic Hebrews. This skepticism over the historical character of the patriarchs originated from the conviction that the literary sources and legends, composed more than five hundred years after the patriarchs had lived, cannot give any knowledge of the patriarchs as historical figures. Rather, they are a window view of the religious practices of Israel in the Iron Age[2]. This consensus developed concurrently with a more skeptical view that was prevalent near the beginning through the middle of the 20th century and which based its arguments on evidence from archaeological discoveries. This far leftist view, which disproved the historicity of the patriarchs, shifted the discussion to another level[3].

In the mid-twentieth century, differing construal of evidences from archaeology and extra-biblical texts produced two major scholarly views on Israel's beginnings. The first view came from William F. Albright and most American scholars who held that archaeological data offer parallels that substantiated the historicity of biblical stories and events, and on this basis, they placed the patriarchs in the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000-1500 B.C.) and the conquest at Late Bronze Age[4]. Albright also held that Exodus 15 (the Song of Moses) is a reliable very early report of the exodus. The strongest arguments of this view were based on some aspects of the life of the patriarchs which according to them accurately reflected archaeological depictions of the realities of life in Nuzi and Mari of the early second millennium.

history of stages, according to scholars' studies on Israel's beginning.

2   Wellhausen's reformulation of the documentary hypothesis in his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta, GA, Scholars Press, 1994), received wide acceptance by the beginning of the 20th century. Similar ideas are found in Hermann Gunkel in his *The Legends of Genesis* (New York, Schocken Books, 1964).

3   Cf. M. BISHOP MOORE – B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past*, 48-57.

4   Cf. J. J. McDERMOTT, *What Are They Saying About the Formation of Israel?* (New York, Paulist Press, 1998) 37.

These are: their occupation as nomadic pastoralists, which supported the theory of Amorite migrations from Southern Mesopotamia into Syria-Palestine, personal names, social customs and legal practices[5]. While this view was enjoying scholarly consensus at the time, historians and biblical archaeologists made further effort to discover other evidences of historicity in the wider context of the ancient Near East.

The second view, whose major proponents are Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth[6], made a distinction between biblical history and Israel's actual past. It maintained that the patriarchal stories and Exodus 15 were probably based on older legendary materials, but they reflect the time of the later writers who composed them. The Bible's chronological information makes the dating of these events difficult[7]. Moreover, no evidence exists, and no extra-biblical text corroborates the exodus and wilderness stories. Therefore, even though the narratives give some information on the ancestors and on Israel's beginning, nothing specific can be known about them as historical figures. The biblical record came to be considered more as later literary and ideological portrayals of the time before history[8].

Given the conclusion of Alt and Noth, a revision of the erstwhile dominant Albright view began with some of his first-generation students[9], who came to assert that only the general background and not the patriarchal figures can be established historically. Increased emphasis on the later origins of the patriarchal narratives and settlement stories, as well as reinterpretations considering new archaeological data, brought most historians of ancient Israel to abandon the Albright view. The major supporting elements of the Albright view were further critically investigated and discredited.

Beginning a discussion that would later frustrate all efforts to reconstruct a patriarchal age in studies of Israel's past, two scholars, Thomas L. Thompson and John van Seter, made efforts to eliminate the obsession of using the patriarchal narratives as historical sources.

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5 Cf. M. BISHOP MOORE - B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past*, 49-51, 77-78. Cf. also R. de VAUX, B. MAZAR, Y. YADIN and E.A. SPEISER.

6 Cf. A. ALT, "The God of the Fathers" in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (A. Alt, ed.) (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1966) 3-66.

7 According to 1 Kings 6:1, the exodus occurred 480 years before the fourth year of Solomon's reign. The symbolism of this date (twelve 40-year periods) highlights its religious significance, which outweighs any historical intent. 1 Kings 6:1 (LXX) has 440 years.

8 Cf. W. T. PITARD, "Before Israel: Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age", in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (M. D. COOGAN ed.) (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998) 25-57; M. BISHOP MOORE – B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past*, 51.

9 For instance: J. BRIGHT, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia, PA, Westminster Press, 1959).

In the 1970s, they were able to demonstrate convincingly that the supporting archaeological elements of the Albright view were based on generalizations; none of them fit the actual details of the stories in Gen 12-50. They concluded that certain elements in the Abraham narrative can be dated to the Iron Age; the patriarchal narratives in general are literary creations which are projections of later hopes of Israel in exile[10]. `

Even though conservative responses to the question of patriarchs and history survive[11], the study of patriarchs, stories of Egyptian sojourn, exodus and wilderness wanderings disappeared from reconstructions of Israel's origin from virtually all written histories of Israel since the 1970s. Majority of biblical scholars today think that these biblical stories cannot be used as sources for historical reconstruction of Israel's past, and more likely are late literary compositions that have distinctive ideological and theological purposes[12]. New interpretations of the texts have brought the attention of scholars to the literary nature of the texts, to the power of the stories to create theological meanings and shape the beliefs of the reader without any consideration of historical background[13].

Till now, this essay has appraised the arguments on which skeptical evaluations are made on the historical reliability of the biblical stories that represent Israel's migrant origin. The negation of historical value to the biblical stories, as well as their total exclusion from histories of Israel, is a gross injustice to the Bible whose theological goal is not considered in this evaluation. This essay takes a 'plausibilist'[14] position in claiming that the Bible's representation of Israel's origins cannot be a baseless invention. Although the primary goal of the Bible is not historical information, the stories must contain some kernel of

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10 Cf. T. L. THOMPSON, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives:* The Quest for the Historical Abraham, (BZAW 133: Berlin, De Gruyter, 1974, 2002²); J. van SETER, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975). Cf. M. BISHOP MOORE – B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past*, 56-63.

11 Cf. M. BISHOP MOORE – B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past*, 66-67.

12 See other views by G. E. MENDENHALL, "Law and Covenant in Israel and in the Ancient Near East", *Biblical Archaeology* 17 [1954] 26-79. Cf. M. BISHOP MOORE and B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past*, 85-86.

13 Cf. M. BISHOP MOORE – B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past*, 72-73.84.

14 In spite of ongoing skepticism over the historicity of biblical accounts, some scholars continue to believe that they are reliable historical reports and not the invention of later authors. These scholars operate in between the first and second views and are called "plausibilists". Notable among them are: K. A. KITCHEN, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2003) and J. HOFFMEIER, *Israel in Egypt.* The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997).

historical truth whose importance for Israel's faith is represented in the narratives of the canonical text, especially in the structure of the canonical text.

3. Migration and the Structuring of the Hebrew Bible

Israel's consciousness of her wandering past proves to be determinative in the structuring of early creedal formulas and in the structuring of the canon, as shown below.

3.1. Israel's Immigrant Status in Early Creeds

Form criticism isolated some early creedal formulas in the Old Testament, which contain essential elements by which Israel defines its origin, life and mission. These creeds are found in Deut 26:5-9 and Josh 24:2-13[15], texts which show that early cults in the land include a memorial of God's deeds during the wandering stage.

The context of Deut 26:5b-9 is the ritual offering of the first fruits of the harvest, act of thanksgiving to YHWH for the gift of the land (vv1-3). The central aspect of this ritual act is the recitation of the creed which the petitioner makes before a priest, at the moment of the offering of produce of the land (vv4-5a). Settlement in the land is, therefore, the reason for the thanksgiving and the situation from which Israelites look back at the experience of fugitiveness and wandering that preceded it. There are four constitutive elements of Israel's self-definition in this creed: the wandering of the ancestors, Egyptian sojourn, liberation from Egypt and gift of the land.

Josh 24:2-13 also has a cultic setting. After Joshua had taken possession of the entire land and allotted living spaces to the different tribes (chapters 13-22), he summoned all Israel, now a new generation[16], to exhort them on the ways of the Lord (Josh 23). At the renewal of covenant at Shechem (Josh 24), it was adopted as means for understanding the broader picture of events that led to the immediate situation of possession of the land. This creed also includes essential elements of Israel's self-definition, even though the elements are described in longer details than in the Deut 26 version. It contains references to the migration of the ancestors, liberation from Egypt and gift of the land.

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15 Cf. W.L. HUMPHREYS, *Crisis and Story.* Introduction to the Old Testament (California, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1990) 33-34. Another Creed is found in Deut 6:21-25.

16 Of the generation that left Egypt, all but Joshua and Caleb survived the wrath of God's anger against the sins of his people. Cf. Num 14:26-38; Deut 1:34-40; and Josh 5:2-7.

The two creedal materials presented above consider as essential to Israel's self-definition the periods of Israel's wandering, Egyptian sojourn and possession of land. It must be noted that the non-inclusion of Joshua into the Pentateuch shows that the wandering stage is considered more as a defining element of what constitutes Israel than life in the land.

3.2. The Structure of the Pentateuch and the Migrant Factor

Israel's story in the Pentateuch is structured around two great migrations. The first is the journey of Abram from Mesopotamia towards Canaan (Gen 11:31-12:6) which ends with Israel stationed at the plains of Moab (Deut 34). In between Gen 11:31 and Deut 34, there is another big migration in and out of Egypt that involved the family of Jacob (Gen 46-Exod 15). Faced with the crises of famine that engulfed all surrounding peoples, Jacob's sons joined the groups of other migrants to Egypt who moved in search of food. After two painful journeys to Egypt, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, and then brought Jacob's entire family to Egypt. Israel became a great and numerous people in Egypt, and after the death of the Pharaoh who knew Joseph, the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites in Egypt for about 400 years. The exodus from Egypt is interpreted as the gracious intervention of Yahweh (Exod 14-15). The journey towards possession of land and nationhood began after the exodus Egypt.

The scope and extent of the Pentateuch has been a subject of discussion among scholars, especially on whether the Pentateuch contains all that is essential for defining Israel. This extended narrative was shaped by its final compilers at some time in the 5th century B.C.E. into what has been called the "salvation history". Its audience was the postexilic Jewish community, who knew the glories of the Davidic - Solomonic era and who experienced life as a settled people. It is remarkable, therefore, that the Pentateuch's depiction of the life, mission and vision of Israel is entirely that of Israel on a journey. Israel was still stationed in the plains of Moab when Moses died, and this marks the end of the story (Deut 34:1). A document considered as of utmost importance to the life and faith of Israel, and which contains the most essential aspects of the life and mission of Israel, mentions the land and the kingdom as promises in view of fulfillment.

Exactly because the land is an important aspect of the promise to the patriarchs, some authors had proposed that there was an earlier

existence of a Hexateuch before the canonization of the Pentateuch[17]. They argued, moreover, that the entire story of Israel, beginning from Abraham till the exile, revolves around the land, which was promised, journeyed to, conquered, and which became a kingdom before the people were exiled from it. According to Gerhard von Rad, who subscribed to the hypothesis of a Hexateuch, life in the land must have been part of Israel's story of origins. Proof of this is found in texts which encrypt traditions on the origin of Israel, for instance Deut 6,21-23; 26,5-9 and Josh 24,2-13. Von Rad suggested that these texts embody a form of "historical credo" which concludes with the mention of the gift of the land, a tradition which is not found in the Pentateuch but in the book of Joshua, the sixth book of the Hebrew Bible. Hence, the proposal for a Hexateuch[18].

The foregoing proposal, notwithstanding, the integrity of the Pentateuch is defended with the argument that the promise of the land, and not its possession, is an essential element of the faith of Israel. The exclusion of Joshua from the 'book of the origins' might include several implications: that it is possible to be a member of the people of Israel without having necessarily to live in the Promised Land; and that the crucial constitutive realities about Israel lie in the ancient past. Evidently, the purpose of the writers of biblical history was to meet the religious needs of their contemporary audience who lived with a hope of return or on a journey back to the Promised Land. For this audience without a safe home, the Pentateuch spoke forcefully about the gracious intervention of God in the predicaments of a wandering people. The survival of the wandering patriarchs, the liberation of the Israel under bondage in Egypt, and their passage to the Promised Land — all happened through the gracious will and power of YHWH.

3.3. The Structure of the Deuteronomistic History

The second stage of Israel's history is similarly enveloped by two great movements, the entry into the land after forty years of desert wandering and much later another experience of exile from the land. This stage of Israel's story is described in the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH), found in six books of the Hebrew Bible, Joshua through 2 Kings with Deuteronomy as its theological base. The history of Israel that we find in these books covers a period of time from Joshua,

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17 Cf. J. BLENKINSOPP, *The Pentateuch*. An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible (New York, Doubleday, 1992) 7, for the history of this thesis.
18 Another proposal for the scope of the Torah was initiated by Martin Noth, who said that the history of Israel's origins is contained in a Tetrateuch, that is, in a four-scroll work, comprising books from Genesis through Numbers.

"*After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun…*" (Josh 1:1). The history ends with the Babylonian exile, "*The king of Babylon struck them down and put them to death at Riblah in the land of Hamath. So, Judah went into exile out of its land*" (2 Kings 25:21).

The Bible, as well as scholars, have varying answers to the question of how the land was conquered. The historical reliability of this account has been discussed in the previous section. The book of Joshua records that Israel invaded, conquered and dispossessed the Canaanites of their land through military invasion under the leadership of Joshua, the successor of Moses (Josh 1–12; 11:16-17). According to the book of Judges, instead, the conquest of the land was a gradual process and each tribe fought her way, either alone or joined with other tribes, to conquer a piece of territory (Judg 1:8-36). There are three classic scholarly views of how the settlement might have taken place[19]: (a) military invasion [William Albright]; (b) gradual or peaceful infiltration [Albrecht Alt][20]; and (c) peasant or social revolution [George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald][21]. The peasant revolution idea suggests that Israelites were native Canaanites. It challenged earlier theories by Albright and Alt which say that Israelites came into the land from elsewhere[22]. Israel Finkelstein, who combined Alt's theory with the social science model, proposed that early Israelites were nomads who had lived in the area since the Middle Bronze Age but settled down under economic pressure[23]. Given the weight of the migrant factor in Israel's self-definition, one might adopt theories that argue for a migrant past in Israel's history, without totally negating the possibility of military intervention which made settlement possible. This

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[19] A good description of the three classical models of the settlement is found in John J. McDERMOTT, *What are they Saying about the Formation of Israel?* (New York, Paulist Press, 1998).

[20] The peaceful infiltration theory supposes that the actual history of Settlement took place over several generations through a gradual, nomadic infiltration and was not completed until the time of David.

[21] Together with N.P. Lemche, these scholars used social-scientific models to understand Israel's emergence. Cf. LEMCHE, *Early Israel. Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society Before the Monarchy* (VTSup 37, Leiden, Brill, 1985). Cf. M. BISHOP MOORE and B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past*, 110-112.

[22] Mendenhall's theory was being considered by many scholars when the earlier theories were questioned. Some contemporary historians still believe that the inhabitants of the Iron Age Palestinian hill country were indigenous to Canaan. Cf. M. BISHOP MOORE – B. E. KELLE, *Biblical History and Israel's Past*, 101-102.

[23] I. FINKELSTEIN, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem, Israel Exploration Society, 1988).

is because elements which became determinative for Israel's self-concept are related to a wandering experience in the past.

4. Enduring Elements of Israel's Self-Definition from the Nomadic Existence

Israel's nomadic origin counts as important in their self-definition. In fact, life in the kingdom was controlled by ideals of theocracy and other defining elements of Israel's life which were shaped during the migration stage. These elements retained their vitality during the time of the kingdom; they were integrated into the faith of Israel, and they continued to be important and determinant defining categories. Some of these elements are discussed below.

4.1. "My Father is a wandering Aramean"

This confessional statement makes it plausible that Israel's Aramean origin points to her nomadic character, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien" (Deut 26:5). Although the ancestor being referred to here is Jacob, the same nomadic existence characterizes the rest of Israel's ancestors, as Josh 24 says of the ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In Deut 26:5, the verb אֹבֵד (qal participle masculine singular), translated as 'wandering' actually means 'to go astray', 'to be a fugitive', 'to loose property', 'to loose one's way', to perish' or 'to be ruined'. The original meaning of this verb is well represented in some English translations. For instance, the New Revised Standard Version and the New Jerusalem Bible say, 'wandering Aramean'. Other translations say, "My father was a refugee Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as a resident alien." (NAB); and KJV says, "A Syrian ready to perish *was* my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there".

In the confessional statement, *"My Father is a wandering Aramean"*, Israel acknowledges its Aramean origin. The different shades of meaning of the verb אָבַד include realities associated with a wandering people - loss of property, loss of way and a feeling of being lost, showing that the very experience of migration represents some form of crisis. This might imply that some form of crisis forced the ancestors to begin a journey that would take them to Canaan (Gen 11:31f; 27:41f). The choice of Canaan as a destination is explained not only by the historical event of the wave of migrations which brought many

peoples to Canaan in 2100 - 1700 B.C., but also by the pervasive location of kindred Arameans throughout the Fertile Crescent[24].

Israel's Aramean origin connects her to the genealogy of Shem, where Aram is Shem's fifth and last son (Gen 10:22). The Arameans are regarded as Semites. According to R.A. Bownan, they are part of a nomadic group (*sttyw*) said to have appeared in Egypt, during the first dynasty (ca. 3100 B.C.), and they are mentioned with a similar terminology (*sutîu* or *sutû*) in Akkadian records, dated to around 2700 B.C. This group of people was so identified with nomadic life that in Late Assyrian times, the term *sutîu* came to mean simply 'nomads'[25]. These early records led to the belief that the Arameans formed part of the wave of Semitic migration that moved through the west margins of the Syrian desert towards Egypt, Canaan and eastward along the lands in Mesopotamia. Aram is considered as the Assyrian geographical term for a group of nomads found in North East of Syria; this name was extended to the entire group of invaders. For this same reason, the Amorites of Mari (Mesopotamia) and the Arameans of Syria are called by the same name[26]. Some cultural elements support Israel's consciousness of their Aramean origin in the saying, "My Father is a wandering Aramean..." (Deut 26:5; Gen 28:2,5).

In the Bible, these events of migration at the beginning of Israel's story are given theological interpretation. The experiences of crises in the migrations of Israel's ancestors were converted through God's initiative into narratives of salvation. Abraham had set out with his father, on the journey that took him from Ur to Haran towards Canaan, and at Haran, God's call changed the story of an undefined search to a journey towards the Promised Land. Similarly, Jacob's escape from the revengeful fury of his brother took him to his maternal uncle in Padan-Aram from where he returned rich in wealth and blessing (Gen 28-31). Finally, the story of Israel's mysterious escape from Egyptian slavery and the journey through the desert towards Canaan became events of God's gracious salvific intervention in response to an outcry of human distress (Exod 3:7-9). These events at the beginning of Israel's life represent ways in which Israelites discerned God's involvement in human history. Stories of crises in human experience are re-read and re-interpreted as narratives of salvation which give mean-

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24 Cf. G. FOHRER, *History of Israelite Religion* (London, SPCK, 1973) 31.
25 Cf. R. A. BOWNAN, "Arameans" in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1 (G.A. Buttrick, ed.), (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1962) 190.
26 This connection between the two Arams gives some backing to the geographical destination of the journey of Terah (Gen 11:31). Cf. BOWNAN, "Arameans", 190-191.

ing and identity to the lives of later generations of Israel. Although the people of Israel eventually settled down in Palestine, their nomadic origin continued to count as important in their self-definition, and this came to reflect especially in the structuring of the biblical story.

4.2. The Identity of the Covenant God

The identity of God as "the God of your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" is a defining element in Israel's religion and worship. The proper names used in ancient Israel reveal that each of patriarchal clans has a characteristic term which designates the relationship of the patriarch to God during the nomadic times. God is called the "shield of Abraham" (Gen 15:1), the "fear of Isaac" (Gen 31:53) and the "mighty one of Jacob" (Gen 31:42). In a more interesting manner, there were familial elements in proper names (*āb* [father], *āh* [brother] and *'am* [clan, family]), which either designate or are interchangeable with the name of the deity. For instance, Eliab (my God is my father), Ammiel ([the God of] my clan is my God), Abiezer//Ahiezer//Eliezer (my (divine) father/brother is my help), Abimelek//Ahimelek//Elimelek (my (divine) father/brother is my king[27]. These names show that from the time of the patriarchs and from the nomadic existence, God is understood in personal terms as a family member or real head of the clan, with the effect that the names of the patriarchs appear in God's self-definition. The basic expression that captures this familial, personal relationship and nearness of God is "I will be with you" or "I am with you" (Gen 26:24; 28:15,24; Is 41:10). This expression confirms the assurance of his blessing and protection of the wandering nomads.

This characteristic personal and familial element of relationship with God did not disappear in the official Yahwistic religion; in fact, it became fundamental to Yahwism. God is Israel's father (Hos 11:1), husband (Is 62:4-5) and leader (1 Sam 8:7), and Israel is God's son, wife and people. The covenant formula reiterates the personal familial element: "I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Exod 6:7). God is experienced even until the time of Jesus as Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt 1:23).

4.3. The Model Figures of Faith: Abraham and Moses

Israel's appreciation of its migrant stage of existence also reflects in the importance Israel gave to two most important figures, whose relationships with God are model of life and faith for people. Abraham and Moses are figures identified with Israel on a journey. One is the central character of the book of Genesis, and the other, the

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27 G. FOHRER, *History of Israelite Religion*, 38-40.

central character of the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy to the Deuteronomistic History.

Abraham's narratives are found in Gen 11:27 - 25:11. The primary goal of the call of Abraham is God's intention to bless all the families of the earth through him and his seed (Gen 12:3; 22:18). This divine call set Abraham on a journey that would bring him and his children into contact with the nations. God's blessings to him of progeny and land, and through him to bless all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3), are the motifs that carried the entire narrative from Genesis to beyond the book of Deuteronomy. The theme of blessing continues into the New Testament, where it identifies Jesus as the "seed of Abraham" through whom God's blessings would reach other peoples (Acts 3:25-26; Rom 4:6-9; Gal 3:14). Inner biblical interpretation of the Abraham narrative affirms that the most noteworthy aspect of Abraham's life is his faith. In its appreciation of heroes of Israel's religion, Heb 11 makes Abraham the most important person listed, highlighting his faith as model of relationship to God. Even till New Testament times, sonship in Abraham and identification with his faith continued to be an important criterion for inheritance of promise.

Moses is associated, not only with liberation from Egypt but also with desert wandering and the events narrated in the Deuteronomistic history. All the books of the Pentateuch, except Genesis, are like a biography of Moses, presented in the context of the history of Israel who was strangers and slaves in Egypt and wanderers in the desert. The Pentateuch devotes considerable space to the figure of Moses and to his mission to liberate and lead Israel on the journey through the wilderness. Moses is another Old Testament figure whose relationship with God is proposed as a model for Israelites and for prophetic access to God's will (Deut 34:10-12). The fact that Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land makes his identification with Israel's wandering existence more solid. Israel's inability to obey the law as legislated by him is also one of the reasons why they were exiled from the land.

5. Conclusion

The structure of the biblical story shows how important the migration status of Israel is for Israel's faith and self concept. The essay has shown the ways in which events of migration opens and ends the stories of individual patriarchs and of Israel as a people. The essay shows further how the structure of the biblical story communicates a theological understanding which relates to the character of divine self communication. Israel discovered God's ordering of the history of

salvation in and through the historical events of human displacements and forceful migrations. All the major players in this story encountered God during their experience of migration.

On his way away from his native land for an unknown reason towards Canaan, Abraham heard the call of God to be a means for blessing all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). Jacob received God's call and blessing as he was fleeing from the dead threat of his angry brother (Gen 27:41-28:22); and after the escape from Egyptian slavery, Israel encountered God's liberative and creative acts at the Red Sea (Exod 14-15), and during the wandering in the desert, she was further invited to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation through a covenant relationship with God (Exod 19:5-6). God also gave Israel a mission to the Gentiles after the forceful exit from the land for the Babylonian exile (Is 42:6). At this stage, it becomes obvious the reason why God is interested in the migrant, that is, to promote through wandering peoples his design to bless all the families of the earth. It is presumed that Israel's consciousness of mission as agents of blessing to the nations might have been born and given expression through their experience of long history of existence among the nations. Therefore, the wandering status became an important element of the credo.

Jesus lived as a migrant preacher and stranger, as he rightly said that "the son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt 8:20). Moreover, Jesus' invitation of interested disciples to "follow" (Mark 1:17) him depicts him as someone on a journey. This also informs the image of a good disciple of Jesus, which is, one who follows Jesus on his salvific journey.

The interpretation of Israel's history given in this essay invites a religious interpretation of migration of Africans to different parts of the world. Migration of peoples, especially of Africans, has been considered as one of the biggest challenges of contemporary times. Usually, assessments of why African peoples move focus on economic and political causes, on the negative effects of the brain and talent drain of homelands and on the ethical and human rights of the migrants. Israel's interpretation of its experiences of migration challenges us to theologically interpret contemporary historical events of migration which affect people's lives because they are harbingers of divine self communication. Israel has shown that faith in God is not understood abstractly through situations and experiences, in the present case 'migration', by which the word of God makes itself heard. Theology in Africa should engage in a reflection fashioned of the stuff of living experience through which God makes his word known.