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THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MIGRATION DYNAMICS: THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse migration in the Old Testament and its implications for Nigerian migrants in their destination countries. Despite the rising instances of racism, stringent visa interviews, restrictions, and violence against migrants, Nigerians continue to migrate to other countries. One might ponder the reasons behind this phenomenon. The Old Testament will be invoked to provide insights into this situation. The Jews and their neighbouring communities were considered to be communities characterised by mobility. From Abraham, the initial forebearer of the Jews, to Ruth, a precursor in the lineage of Jesus in Christianity, migration has been a journey influenced by social, economic, and political consequences for survival. These same factors appear to underpin the migration of Africans, both in organised and spontaneous forms, to various destination countries. In this perspective, the migration of Nigerians will be analysed using the framework of the Old Testament. A literary analysis of selected narratives in the Old Testament reveals that migration was engaged in as a divine command, as a socioeconomic tool for survival, and to gain refugee status. This is similar to the motivators for the migration of Nigerians to destination countries, which include migration based on social, economic, political, and religious tensions. Examining the proportion of the migrant population reveals a predominance of young individuals. It is crucial for the government to explore avenues to absorb university graduates, perhaps by establishing a system for providing small or soft loans. This would empower graduates to initiate micro-businesses.

Keywords: Abraham, Ruth, Jacob, migration, Nigeria, perspective, Old Testament, youth,

Introduction

Human beings, since the period of the Israelites in the Old Testament, have been insatiable entities, which make migration an innate fulcrum of humanity. Marcel, bearing in mind the migratory tendencies of man, refers to human beings as “migratory species.” This shows that human beings are always on the move. Notwithstanding the increasing racism, strict visa interviews and restrictions, and violence against migrants, Nigerians are still migrating to other countries. While migration is a universal aspect of human existence, the increasing urgency to depart from Nigeria for virtually any other part of the world has transformed into an apprehensive and stressful quest for self-preservation in recent years (Agbo, 2023). This makes one wonder the reason for this phenomenon. The Old Testament will be appealed to in the bid to shed light on this trend. Both in the Old Testament and the Nigerian context, during migration there is always a clash of cultural, religious, and political identity. In fact, sometimes individual identity has to be compromised to facilitate the migration process. This is mostly the case with irregular migration, which involves the movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the state of origin, transit, or destination (IOM, 2023). The Old Testament has a plethora of narratives on the phenomenon of irregular and regular migration.

The Old Testament is one of the twenty books of the Christian Bible believed to contain narratives of Jewish history and their survival techniques. It is appreciated when the characters, plot, structure, themes, and historical settings are taken into cognizance in the process of interpretation (House & Mitchell, 2023). The Jews and the surrounding people were believed to be people on the move. Beginning with Abraham, the first ancestor of the Jews, down to Ruth, the progenitor of Jesus Christ, migration has been an adventure sustained by social, economic, and political outcomes and survival. These factors seem to have also sustained the migration of Africans, regularly and irregularly, to destination countries. In this context, the migration of Nigerians will be examined through the lens of the Old Testament.

Many Nigerians are migrating to different countries, usually South Africa, Europe, and America. There is no popular country in the contemporary world that has not witnessed at least the presence of one Nigerian. Some of these Nigerians migrate for personal and family reasons. Just as in Old Testament migration, Nigerian migrants have one or two reasons for their migration to other countries. Going to visa offices and airports, one could see Nigerians, young and old, men and women in their hundreds, seeking to leave the country. One begins to wonder if the socio-political and economic environment of the present Nigerian society has any impact on these movements.

The aim of this study is to analyse migration in the Old Testament and its implications for Nigerian migrants in their destination countries. First, this study discusses the Old Testament and migration. Second, it gives a discourse on the challenge of migration in Nigeria. Third, the migration of Nigerians is analysed in the context of the Old Testament migration narratives.

Old Testament and Migration

The Old Testament is filled with migration narratives. The various migration periscopes have divergent aims and *modus operandi*. They are arranged in the sub-headings below:

Migration as a Divine Command

The story of Abraham tells of a divine command for migration. God calls Abraham to leave his father's house for a place He will show him. It was a form of forced migration from divinity. According to Dias (2020), Terah's family migration can be placed within the context of societal and historical patterns of movement common in the ancient East. As a divine command, Abraham took his wife Sarah and his cousin, Lot, and they migrated from Haran to Shechem; from there, they migrated to the Oak of Moreh. It was at the Oak of Moreh that God appeared to Abraham, and he built an altar to God. From there, he, Sarah, and Lot migrated to the east of Bethel. This, Abraham's migration, attributes the authorship of migration to God, as indicated in Genesis 15:7 (Dias, 2020). At times, the patriarchs' migrations led them to interact with settled communities. Both Abraham and Isaac, during certain periods, resided in Gerar on the southern coastal plain when Abimelech ruled as king (Genesis 20; 26). Generally, the relationships between the patriarchs and their urban counterparts seemed amicable, as illustrated by Abraham's purchase of a burial site for his family from the Hittites in Hebron (Genesis 23). The cave of Machpelah, situated in Ephron's field, served as the final resting place for Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah (Brisco, 1998).

Migration as a Socioeconomic Survival

The story of Elimelech and Naomi concerns migration on the basis of survival in the land of Moab. According to Magezi, it was a famine that forced them to migrate to another land (Magezi, 2019). The narrative is about Elimelech, who migrated from Judah to Moab in search of a good living. He had two sons: Malo and Chilo. Both sons died. Elimelech also died. However, the two sons married two Moabites: Ruth and Naomi. Naomi is left in the state of a widow. According to Bergant (2003:52), Naomi is the one who is left widowed and childless with no possibility of remarrying and thereby regaining some form of male protection. Thus, in times of migration, women and children are the most affected.

Migration for Refugee Status

Esau and Jacob were children of Isaac. However, during the dying blessing of Isaac to his two sons, Jacob stole the blessing of Esau. This is in consonance with the prophecy given before the birth of the two sons that the junior would be superior to the senior. Esau, having learned of the miscarriage of justice, chased Jacob, and Jacob ran for his life. He migrated to Haran in Mesopotamia and lived with the Aramaean tribe of his ancestors. However, years later, Esau and Isaac reconciled (Goldingay, 2020). The fact established here is that Jacob fled due to the danger to Haran and took refugee status. This was because his life was under threat. Driven by the threat of harm from his brother (Genesis 27:41–45; 28:1–3), Jacob leaves his homeland. It is during this escape that he encounters God in a dream, transforming a mundane event into a supernatural experience. In this encounter, God introduces himself to Jacob and pledges companionship, guidance, and protection (Genesis 28). Jacob proceeds with his journey to his mother's homeland, where he seeks refuge in the home of his maternal uncle, who later becomes his father-in-law (Dias, 2020).

The Challenge of Migration in Nigeria

There are so many issues that have been systematically retarding the country. From insecurity to gross corruption, and from employment to poverty, Nigerians are seeking and appropriating modes of survival. The linkage between the above-named factors has sustained the increasing inflation and dollarization of Nigeria's economy. Available statistics show that the inflation rate surged to 20.52% in the last quarter of 2022, making the cost of living difficult, and also increasing the unemployment rate, as well as the incontestable epileptic power supply (Oluwafunmilayo, 2022).

Many groups are involved in the migration process to different countries. Some migrate on an individual basis. This is on the basis of the migrant rendering assistance to their family in the country. Also, individuals migrate on the basis of subsequently bringing in their loved ones such as wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers, to their destination country. People may migrate as a group. There are instances where families migrate to destination countries, selling off the entirety of their property in Nigeria. The most preferred locations for group travel are Canada and the United States.

There are increasing applications for visas and passports by Nigerians. Some of these visa and passport applications are made on the basis of short visits, with the paper intention of coming back. However, the actual intention is for permanent residence in the destination country. Nigeria is a country infamous for systemic frustrations, general lawlessness, and the miscellaneous trials and tribulations that are all in every day's existence here (Nwaubani, 2022). There have been situations where lecturers go to destination countries on paper with

the intention of returning after one or two years (for master's students) and three or four years (for Ph.D. students). However, available statistics show that most of the Nigerian migrants, that is, the lecturers, are not willing and able to return to Nigeria after their stay in the destination country.

There are so many causative factors for this trend of increasing migration from Nigeria. It is believed that there is a lack of opportunity in Nigeria. The social tension among Nigerians is that the environment is not conducive for survival. There is an understanding that there are neither jobs nor social security. People also feel that jobs in Nigeria can also be done based on class suicide. The situation is so precarious that in Nigeria, graduates freely commit class suicide and resort to doing jobs considered way below their qualifications as they take up jobs reserved for artisans just to survive (Sunday, 2023). In some markets, you see graduates of law school and medical college selling in markets and on the streets. This is because there are no chances of them getting better jobs.

There is also the corruption pandemic ravaging all sectors of the Nigerian nation. This includes the political, economic, social, and educational sectors, among others. Political corruption, including bribery, embezzlement, misappropriation of funds, money laundering, extortion, nepotism, and conflicts of interest, continues to be a major factor contributing to the significant infrastructure deficiencies across all sectors in Nigeria (Gbajumo, 2023). In the political sector, the only concern of the political office holders is how to syphon the resources meant for the betterment of the people. Money that could have been used for the provision of electricity, goods roads, better hospitals, and also good schools is coerced into personal pockets for personal benefits. Also, jobs that could have been created by the provision of these amenities are lost. The social tension thus pushed Nigerians to seek other countries where they could have these amenities.

It is also worrisome that geo-political and religio-political tensions have aggravated the increasing number of Nigerians trying to migrate outside the country. Nigerian politics revolves around geographical terrain and religious affiliation. During elections, people campaign on the basis of their region or state and also on the basis of their religion rather than their personal testimony and manifesto. In the words of Akeredolu (2022), "religion is currently being deployed most shamelessly by the elites to gain unmerited advantage." This has ensured that bad leaders and those with ulterior motives have gained their own political seats. Thus, underdevelopment becomes the order of the day in Nigeria because bad leaders are elected into one political seat or another. In order to seek paradise, where leaders are controlled by the constitution, Nigerians migrate to Europe, the UK, and the US, where it is believed that things work well.

There is growing insecurity in Nigeria. It began in the northern part of Nigeria before it encompassed the southern part of Nigeria. Most of these conflicts are orchestrated by political gladiators trying to score cheap political points. In these conflicts, there is the destruction of lives and properties, with the citizens at the receiving end. It is enough to state that the misuse of religion has led to extensive loss of life and property. In the midst of tumultuous religious conflicts, numerous individuals have suffered fatalities, injuries, and mutilations. Additionally, there has been significant disruption of economic endeavours, adversely impacting productivity on a broad scale (Jegede, 2019). This has forced many Nigerians to migrate to other countries because they feel that their lives and property are being threatened. Furthermore, there is an increasing level of kidnapping of Nigerians, and this has made the rich and the poor in society uncomfortable remaining in the country. On

a monthly basis, there is one news story or another of people who have been kidnapped and millions of naira demanded from their families.

Religion is a critical factor in Nigeria's lifeline. There is no decision that has been implemented that does not have an iota of religious undertone or the other. Thus, some of the crises that have been witnessed in Nigeria are caused by religion. Christianity and Islam are the two dominant religions, although African traditional religion still has a handful of people who are loyal to it and still practice it. Due to the increasing religious crisis seen in different parts of Nigeria, some Nigerians prefer to migrate to a destination country where there is rarely destruction of lives or property based on religious reasons.

Nigerian Migration in the Lens of the Old Testament

People migrate on the premise that migration is a divine command. This was the case of Abraham, who migrated from Ur of the Chaldeans, the Haran, and then to Shechem. In spite of the risks associated with journeying in advanced years through unfamiliar and potentially hostile terrain, Abraham placed his trust in God. He embarked on his journey to the Promised Land, bringing along his entire family, including his father and nephew, Lot, as well as his personal belongings (Knox, 2020). This is similar to the situation in Nigeria, where people migrate on the premise that God told them their destiny is not in Nigeria. There have been cases where Nigerians migrate to other countries for missionary activities, and, after they are done with their missionary activities, refuse to come back. Some of them established churches there. There are others who are sent by churches to take care of the church branch outside Nigeria. Some of the churches claim that it was God who instructed them to send the pastor outside Nigeria to take care of the church. There have been cases where these missionary pastors end up taking the church away from the mother church in Nigeria.

Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, migrated to Moab for economic survival. First, there was famine in Israel, which forced them to move to Moab. Second, in the destination country, things turned out for the worse as Naomi lost her husband and two sons. This is similar to the migration dynamics in Nigeria, where many of the Nigerian migrants do so on the basis of their inability to meet the financial vigour in Nigeria. Also, some of these Nigerian migrants feel that they can do better economically if they leave the country. Just as Naomi lost many things in the destination countries, some Nigerian migrants have ended up not having jobs to do in the destination countries. This is the reason that some of them end up as drug lords and prostitutes, especially in Italy and Spain. Some Nigerian migrants in destination countries live in shelters (Gbadebo, 2023). Naomi summoned courage and returned to Judah, with the wives of their sons. Some Nigerian migrants feel that it is better for them to remain in the destination country than return to the country. Some of them are afraid that the shame will be much on them, so the best for them was to remain in the destination country and manage whatever they see there.

Jacob ran away from the presence of Esau for his life. He discovered that the environment could harm him based on the conflict he has with his brother. He engaged in migration for refugee status. It was also in this vein that Nigerian migrants also engaged in migration for refugee status. Some Nigerians, due to threats to their lives based on religion and ethnic status, migrate to destination countries. Some of these Nigerians also migrate because there is conflict in their community or land, and they feel that their lives are no longer safe. Most times, during elections, Christians in the northern part of Nigeria are

threatened if they refuse to vote for a Muslim candidate. For instance, after the 2011 presidential elections in Nigeria, Muslims in northern Nigeria felt that Christians voted for Jonathan, who is a Christian. This led to the destruction of lives and property worth millions of naira. Some Christians migrated to other countries, such as Niger, Cameroun, Mali, and Chad, so as to save themselves, families, and their loved ones.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are made as a way of solving the increasing state of migration from Nigeria:

1. Looking at the percentage of the migration population, more of them are youth. There is a need for the government to find a way to absorb graduates from Nigerian universities. This can be done through the institutionalization of small or soft loans to graduates to enable them establish a micro-business.
2. Migration in itself is not a bad development, but irregular migration is against national and international norms. There is a need for Nigerian migrants to engage more in regular migration. One only migrates when the person has one or two things to do over there. If there is nothing that the person is going to do, such as business, education, or visitation, there is no need to migrate to places like Europe, the US, or the UK. This is because the person may return more miserable than when he left Nigeria.
3. There have been pockets of violence in different parts of Nigeria, especially in the north. There is a need for the government to make provisions so all those who have been displaced in one way are made to return home. This could be done by reconstructing their houses or business centres that have been destroyed.

Conclusion

Old Testament migration narratives have implications for Nigerian migrants. Just as Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth migrated to destination countries based on divine protection and economic factors, so too do Nigerian migrants migrate based on socio-economic and political factors. Nigerians, in their thousands, are migrating to different countries. This is sometimes due to their inability to get jobs that befit their status; while some go as missionaries sent by churches or on individual basis, others go as a result of threats to their lives and property. Unfortunately, some of these Nigerian migrants have little or nothing to do in their destination countries, yet they insist on migrating to countries where they are physically, socially, and sexually abused. This paper advocates for Nigerian migrants who may want to engage in improper migration or those who may want to migrate with nothing in mind to do in their destination country to have a rethink so that they do not place themselves in more terrible life situations. The Nigerian government, on the other hand, should provide more infrastructural needs for the people, such as electricity, accessible roads, and access to loans, so that the youth, in particular, can engage in small and medium-scale enterprises, shedding them from thinking about migrating to destination countries.

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