

Exile and Migration: Toward a Biblical Theology of Immigration and Displacement¹

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The Evangelical Covenant Church is an immigrant church, founded by Swedish immigrants in 1885. At its centennial celebration in 1985, Krister Stendahl exhorted the denomination to maintain its immigrant identity as it moved into its second century. Twenty-five years later, marking its 125th anniversary celebration, the denomination yet again affirmed its character as an immigration church as central to its identity.² The Covenant's 2014 resolution on immigration opens with a summary of this identity, providing the foundation for the ethical discussion and exhortation that follow.³ The aim of this paper is to provide a better understanding of the biblical phenomenon of exile as it relates to immigrant communities so that church leaders might better appropriate this biblical motif for ministry. After providing an overview of the biblical category of exile and related terminology, I examine Jeremiah 29:1–7, a popular exilic text, through the lenses of various recent methodologies.

Why do I choose “exile” in order to understand immigration? First, simply because I cannot do otherwise: I am an immigrant, and this is the

1. This paper is a revision of the lecture “Prophetic Ministry among Exiles: The Contribution of Asian and Latino/a American Biblical Interpretation” given on September 23, 2015, as part of the 2015 Nils W. Lund Memorial Lectureship at North Park Theological Seminary.

2. “Now, as Then, We Are an Immigrant Church,” accessed at <http://covchurch.tv/am2010-immigrant-church/>.

3. “2014 Resolution on Immigration,” accessed at <http://www.covchurch.org/resolutions/2013-immigration>.

context in which I do theology. Exile provides a biblical and theological motif to understand my own identity and vocation. The late Ada María Isasi-Díaz expressed this sentiment beautifully: “And I often continue to turn to Psalm 137 not to try to understand what exile meant for the Israelites and to learn from them, but to find someone who understands me!”⁴ It is not a coincidence that I chose to specialize in exilic and post-exilic prophetic literature. I have found these texts to speak profoundly to my own immigrant experience.

Second, the lived experience of immigrant populations makes them particularly well-situated to read exilic texts for the church since they share common characteristics with ancient Israel’s experience of migration, as well as the metaphorical and theological meanings of exile. Finally, immigration poses tremendous contemporary challenges to our society and the church, and exile constitutes a prominent theme in theological and pastoral reflection today. Engaging the topic of immigration through the lens of exilic biblical texts provides an opportunity for Christians who are deeply committed to the Scriptures to engage in the most pressing issues of our day. For a denomination that self-identifies as an immigrant, Scriptural, and missional people, an understanding of the biblical exile is fundamental to living into its mission.

The Exile in Biblical Studies

In the last three decades, two movements have dramatically reconfigured the landscape of exilic studies. First, scholars have begun to question the historicity of exilic events. For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, there was a scholarly consensus that the exile referred to the Babylonian exile that began with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and ended with Cyrus’s decree in 539. Scholars focused exclusively on life in Babylon since, according to the Chronicler in 2 Chronicles 36:21, the land of Israel was desolate during this period. In 1910, C.C. Torrey made the provocative but largely ignored suggestion that, “The Babylonian exile of the Judean Hebrews, which was in reality a small and relatively insignificant affair, has been made, partly through mistake and partly by the compulsion of a theory, to play a very important part in the history of the Old Testament.”⁵ In the mid-1990s, a number of

4. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “‘By the Rivers of Babylon’: Exile as a Way of Life,” in *Readings from This Place Vol. 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 150.

5. Charles C. Torrey, *Ezra Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910), 285.

predominantly Continental scholars began to write on the topic of the “myth of the empty land.” Most notable is Hans Barstad whose 1996 monograph bears this name.⁶ According to this view, the Babylonian exile never occurred in the manner described by the biblical texts, and life in Palestine did not undergo drastic change in the sixth century BCE.

While many reject the extreme position of Barstad, his proposal has led to a closer examination of the differences between the biblical record and actual historical conditions, as well as a shift in focus from Babylon to those who remained in the land during this period of exile. Barstad argues that if the exile did take place, only the political elites were taken to Babylon. Second Kings 25:12 provides warrant for this view when it states that the captain of the Babylonian army “left some of the poorest people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.” The second movement impacting exilic studies is the increased contribution of social-scientific and post-colonial approaches. Increasingly the biblical texts are interpreted through the lenses of refugees, immigrants, and victims of trauma and hegemonic oppression.⁷

This recent research has made sufficiently clear that there was no singular exilic experience. To assume that all Israelites were weeping by the rivers of Babylon under duress from foreign captors is simply inaccurate. Neither should one assume that every Israelite was able to climb the Babylonian social ladder and influence the royal court in the manner of Daniel and his friends. What these approaches reveal is that migration, while impacting groups, affects people differently at an individual and family level. In addition, generations within families may have experienced the exile in markedly different ways. For the poor peasant, exile may not have meant geographical relocation but rather colonization by the Babylonian economic empire. For a Judean youth from a class of social elites, exile may have meant living in a Jewish enclave in Babylon and exercising a relatively free existence. These differences are expressed

6. Hans M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the “Exilic” Period* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996).

7. Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989); Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); John J. Ahn, *Exile As Forced Migrations: A Sociological, Literary, and Theological Approach on the Displacement and Resettlement of the Southern Kingdom of Judah*, BZAW 417 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011); John J. Ahn and Jill Middlemas, eds., *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon: Approaches to the Study of Exile*, LHBOTS 526 (London: T&T Clark, 2012); Mark J. Boda, Frank Ritzel Ames, John Ahn, and Mark Leuchter, eds., *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015).

in the biblical literature. Some texts possess a deeply anti-Babylonian stance, such as Psalm 137, while other texts possess a pro-Babylonian agenda, such as Jeremiah 29:1–7.

Because of the wide range of Israel's migratory experiences, biblical scholars have deemed the term "exile" too general to accurately describe these events. The Old Testament's eschatological hope is not merely a return from Babylon but rather a worldwide ingathering of Israel. If one works backward and begins with this eschatological vision, then exile includes every Jew scattered among the nations outside of Israel. Viewed in this manner, the "exile" began with the Assyrian annexation of the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century, culminating with the conquest of Samaria in 722 BCE.⁸ The term "exile" (*galah*) is used eight times in 2 Kings 17–18 (17:6, 11, 23, 26, 27, 28, 33; 18:11) to describe the Assyrian king's deporting Israelites to various regions of the Assyrian Empire and resettling Samaria with people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim. Neo-Assyrian political strategy was cross-deportation, the practice of replacing populations in one area with that of another in order to establish economically productive provinces across the empire.

This same word *galah* is used again in 2 Kings (24:14 [twice], 15; 25:11, 21) to describe the Babylonian exile of Judeans. Unlike the Assyrians, it appears the Babylonians did not employ cross-deportation. When Babylon did engage in mass deportations, it was centralized to the heart of the empire in Babylon. They kept local populations intact on conquered lands in order to secure tribute for the capital. If exile refers to the condition of Jews living outside of the land of Israel, it certainly did not end with Cyrus's decree for the Jews to return home in 539 BCE. Scripture and history testify to the fact that Jews continued to live outside of the Promised Land. In the minds of many who did return, the exile was ongoing because so many Jews continued to live in the diaspora among the nations, and those living in the land continued to live under the oppressive rule of foreign kings.⁹

This variation among the migrations of ancient Israel mirrors the

8. According to 4QMMT, the exile was initiated by the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, and brought to completion by the destruction of Jerusalem and captivity of Zedekiah (4QMMT C 18–24, Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: the Qumran Texts in English*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 2:801–803).

9. N.T. Wright has argued that the Babylonian exile was still in effect for the Jewish community living in the land of Palestine into the first century CE, and Jesus's kingdom preaching announced its end. His proposal has been met with much discussion, both critical and supportive. See N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols. (Min-

diverse experiences of migrants today. Just as reading prophetic literature requires attention to the exegetical nuances of myriad migratory experiences of ancient Israel, Christian ministry demands that the church address the diverse experience of migrants and minority populations. It would be no less irresponsible of me to say that the experiences of all immigrants to the United States are the same—even those experiences within a single ethnic group—than to assume that the exilic experiences addressed in Jeremiah, Isaiah, Psalm 137, Daniel, and Esther are all the same. The experience of Swedish immigrants to the U.S. in the late nineteenth century cannot be equated to the contemporary plight of undocumented Latino/a populations in the U.S. or to the global Syrian refugee crisis. Faithfulness requires knowing the particularities of each biblical text as well as the particularities of each individual experiencing migration. To flatten the experiences and texts of migration into one uniform category is not merely an act of intellectual dishonesty; it is an unwillingness to listen to the distinct message of particular texts and a disregard for the unique ways people are impacted by migration. If the Covenant at its core is an immigrant church, we need to get beyond the kind of gross generalizations made about immigrants in U.S. political discourse and gain literacy on what actual migrants experience.

Migrations are typically categorized as voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary migration is often labor migration by which people seek better economic conditions. Forced migration, by contrast, is the result of war or enslavement. John Ahn has employed categories from migration studies to distinguish between the various exilic experiences of ancient Israel.¹⁰

Derivative forced migration results from geopolitical rearrangement. The conquest of Judah by Babylon in 597 BCE would be considered this form of migration (2 Kings 24:10–17). In this case there is no geographical movement; Israel remained in the land but lost their home due to foreign conquest. The post-exilic period, when Israel was allowed

neapolis: Fortress, 2013) 1:139–63; idem, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 268–72; idem, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), xvii–xviii, 126–27, 203–209, 248–50.

10. John J. Ahn, “Forced Migrations Guiding the Exile: Demarcating 597, 587, and 582 BCE,” in *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon: Approaches to the Study of Exile*, ed. J.J. Ahn and J. A. Middlemas; LHBOTS 525 (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 173–89; idem, “Exile,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J.G. McConville (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 196–204. Ahn goes on to provide the following categories of displaced persons: (1) development-induced displaced persons, (2) internally displaced persons, (3) refugees.

limited autonomy in their homeland by Persian authorities, may also be considered this form of migration (Nehemiah 5:1–19).

Purposive forced migration refers to people being forced to relocate physically at the hands of a dominant power. The events of 587 BCE when Jerusalem was destroyed and Judeans were transported to Babylon would fall under this category of migration (2 Kings 25:8–21).

Responsive forced migration describes people fleeing voluntarily to escape tyranny, oppression, poverty, and other threats to their security. Jeremiah's flight to Egypt with a group of Judeans in 582 BCE is an example of this form of migration (Jeremiah 41:16–43:7).

Ahn highlights significant differences in the social, cultural, and political aspects among Ancient Israel's experiences of exile. Exile and forced migration studies reveal that in ancient and modern times, people who experience migration may have to deal with varying challenges: maintaining one's religious commitments, particularly those that are practiced publicly; preserving one's first language while having to learn the language of the dominant culture; limitations on economic success in a foreign economy and political environment; challenges of inter-ethnic marriage and raising children who will be acculturated in foreign customs; preserving a concept of home; and limitations of food and diet in a foreign land.

In the remainder of this article, I will examine readings of a popular exilic text, Jeremiah 29:1–7, through the lens of migration, postcolonial, and refugee studies. This passage is well known for its instructions regarding how Judeans ought to live as exiles in the foreign land of Babylon. From each of these readings I will draw analogies to populations that are experiencing migration today, providing pastoral reflections on exile and migration. It is precisely through reading the biblical texts with and for migrant communities that the church can develop a biblical theology of immigration and displacement.

Jeremiah 29:1–7 and Migration Studies

John Ahn reads Jeremiah 29:1–7 through the insights of migration studies and understands this text to be addressing the social context of 1.5 generation immigrants. Sociologists have observed that 1.5 generation immigrants are often deemed the forgotten generation because the focus is largely on the first generation, who immigrated as adults, or the second generation, who were born in the new land. In contrast to their parents, 1.5 generation immigrants are able to learn the language and adapt to

their new cultural surroundings. Those in the 1.5 generation typically immigrate in their early teen years and are often torn between self-images of their homeland and the culture of the new location. Viewed in this manner this letter is addressed to those who were able to make the trip to Babylon on foot as adolescents or pre-teens. Ahn believes Jeremiah 29:1–7 is the product of this generation who by 582 BCE would have reached their thirties and begun to serve in leadership capacities. As such, the text suggests a more positive experience of exile and represents a pro-Babylonian and pro-Judean sentiment, in contrast to other texts in the book that depict Babylon or Jerusalem in a more negative light.¹¹

Ahn believes the letter instructs Judean exiles to create long-term ethnic enclaves in Babylon. He translates Jeremiah 29:4, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the *immigrants* whom I have sent into forced migration from Jerusalem to Babylon.”¹² In Jeremiah 29:5, the words “build” and “plant” suggest permanence, and the language in 29:6, to “take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there,” implies three generations of settlement in Babylon. Implied in this exhortation to marry is marriage within Jewish ethnicity.¹³ Typically 1.5 and second-generation immigrants marry within the same ethnicity, whereas by the third and fourth generation, interethnic marriage is much more common.¹⁴ Rather than a temporary stay or interim situation, Jeremiah 29:1–7 describes long-term projects: building houses, planting gardens, and benefiting from the land. Ahn surmises that the command in Jeremiah 29:7 to seek the welfare of the city would have been psychologically impossible for the first generation of exiles to obey since they experienced the trauma of the Babylonian conquest, the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, and mass deportation as adults. He believes Psalm 137 reflects the sentiments of the first generation of exiles who weep for Zion and pray for vengeance upon the Edomites. Ahn argues that Jeremiah 29:1–7 does not directly address

11. In Jeremiah 2–20, Babylon is a place of exile and death, but in chapters 21–24 it is a place of hope and life. See Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile, a Theological Interpretation*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 44–68.

12. Ahn, *Exile as Forced Migrations*, 138, emphasis mine.

13. Ahn assumes the narrower definition of ethnicity as those persons sharing a common ancestry. See K.L. Sparks, “Ethnicity,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H.G.M. Williamson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 268–72.

14. These observations would corroborate the circumstances described in Ezra 9–10.

this first generation; instead it is for their children who are more open to embracing a Babylonian existence. One-point-five generation exiles were to flourish as a people *within their own ethnic enclave* so that their children and grandchildren would be well-positioned to impact Babylonian society. In this regard, Daniel and his friends were the exception, not the rule for the 1.5 generation immigrant. Ahn believes Jeremiah 29:1–7 instructs 1.5 generation immigrants to operate largely within their own cultural confines and invest in their children so that they might impact society in a manner their parents were unable to accomplish.

I can vividly recall the response of a pastor of a large evangelical church when asked what he thought of all the ethnic congregations spread throughout Southern California. He replied, “Well, they’re not really biblical” because they targeted a particular population, and in his mind a “biblical ministry” ought to reach all peoples. I’ve spent a good part of my life working within immigrant congregations, engaged in conversations between first generation, 1.5 generation, and second and subsequent generation leaders on what it means to be faithful to the gospel in their context. I’ve often seen leaders from each of these generations frustrated with those of another generation because of differences in vision and purpose. Exilic texts such as Jeremiah 29:1–7 provide typologies for immigrant congregations to see that their ministries, whether they be ethnic specific or not, are certainly “biblical,” and that God’s people have always been an immigrant people, negotiating their identity and vocation in new cultural contexts.

Jeremiah 29:1–7 and Postcolonial Theory

Steed Davidson is a Caribbean scholar who reads Jeremiah in light of postcolonial theory and interprets Jeremiah 29:1–7 as a letter encouraging resistance to imperial powers.¹⁵ This mode of reading is attentive to the ways the Bible can function as a discourse of resistance or accommodation to the realities of empire. Davidson explores the possible political forces that bear upon the writing of the text and its ideological messages from a posture of marginalization. He believes that the term “exile” is a contested claim that is used in an ideological manner to evoke the inequities of geopolitical power and the resistance to hegemonic forces. According to Davidson, Jeremiah’s letter in chapter 29 functions at two levels of

15. Steed Vernyl Davidson, *Empire and Exile: Postcolonial Readings of the Book of Jeremiah*, LHBOTS 542 (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

discourse: one for the dominant power of the Babylonian Empire, and another for the subordinates, in this case the Judean community. This line of inquiry finds support in James Scott's observation that "hidden transcripts" are operative in power relations.¹⁶ In these situations subordinates offer a performance of deference and consent before their power holders, all the while critiquing and resisting hegemonic forces behind closed doors or even in the same breath.

Davidson believes this phenomenon of dual discourses is found in Jeremiah 29:1–7. The letter directly addresses the displaced Judeans living in Babylon, yet according to verse 3 it is sent to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. So while the Jews were the direct audience of the letter, the empire was an indirect audience. According to Davidson, these dual discourses create an ambivalence regarding whose agenda the letter promotes. He then employs Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity of sameness and difference to negotiate the interplay of the multiple dialogues within the same text. According to Bhabha, hybridity can be a product of colonial domination and control, yet it can also serve as a strategic disruption of dominant power.¹⁷ An example of this phenomenon in Jeremiah 29:1–7 is the manner in which home is redefined as Babylon for Judean exiles, and in so doing the letter encourages a colonization in reverse. Davidson interprets the language of building houses, living in them, planting gardens, and eating of its fruit in verse 5 as the creation of settlements. According to Jeremiah 29:1–7, those who have come under the domination of the imperial power are called to migrate to its very capital and, in so doing, destabilize it. Robin Cohen speaks of this migratory phenomenon as "to be in, but not necessarily of, the societies in which they settled."¹⁸ According to Davidson, the exhortation to seek the welfare and pray for the city in verse 7, is couched in religious terms rather than nationalistic, and therefore functions as an act of destabilizing the totalizing forces of the empire.

I believe the same kind of political destabilization Jeremiah 29:1–7 encourages is presently occurring in the U.S. due to the increasing population of ethnic minorities, who soon will surpass whites as the majority.

16. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 3–4.

17. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 112, as cited in Davidson, *Empire and Exile*, 155.

18. Robin Cohen, "Diasporas and the Nation-State: From Victims to Challengers," *International Affairs* 72 (1996): 518, as cited in Davidson, *Empire and Exile*, 163. The

The popularity of political slogans such as “Let’s make America great *again*” demonstrates that the erosion of white supremacy in the United States is palpable. Just as the word “exile” is fraught with ideology, the terms “illegal alien” and “undocumented immigrant” reflect varying political and ideological commitments regarding migrants in the U.S. The continued growth and success of ethnic minority Christians and congregations in North America may be a faithful response to Jeremiah’s exhortation to settle in Babylon, destabilizing white power structures within the church.¹⁹

Jeremiah 29:1–7 and Refugee Crisis

The late Frank Ames, who possessed a medical and health-science background, read Jeremiah 29:1–7 as a practical response to a refugee crisis. This approach places the focus on the physical and social trauma experienced by displaced persons due to war and political instability. Ezekiel 5:12 acknowledges that the majority of Jerusalem’s population will die due to their status as refugees: “One third of you shall die of pestilence or be consumed by famine among you; one third shall fall by the sword around you; and one third I will scatter to every wind and will unsheathe the sword after them.” Whereas attention has typically been focused on either those killed in the conquest of Jerusalem or those deported to Babylon, this approach focuses on the plight of the majority of the Judean population in Judah and its environs who live in the aftermath of war and foreign domination. Refugee studies provide the data to demonstrate that the greater tragedy to war is the displacement that follows. Ames writes, “Displacement weakens and kills, and in the long run may be more harmful than the conflict or disaster that caused the displacement. Bluntly, the aftermath is more deadly than the attack.”²⁰

Modern refugee studies demonstrate that forced migration results in three basic outcomes: (1) a diminishing of resources and security, (2) increased morbidity and mortality, and (3) the alteration of social rela-

similarity of this idea with that of the *Epistle of Diognetus* is striking: “They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory” (*Diogn.* 5.5; ed. and trans., Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers II*, LCL 25 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003], 141).

19. See Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Rescuing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

20. Frank Ritchel Ames, “Forced Migrations and the Visions of Zechariah 1–8,”

tionships and identities. The loss of individual, family, and community resources may be in the form of shelter, land, property, and domestic animals. The relocation to roads and encampments is markedly less safe than prior homes and villages. Women and children are especially vulnerable, and they make up 80 percent of displaced persons in times of war. Ames cites several studies that describe the results of forced migrations:

- In Iraq more than 725,000 people were displaced by sectarian violence between February 2006 and March 2007.²¹ By the end of 2007, approximately 75,000 children were living in camps or temporary shelters.²²
- According to a 2002 United Nations report, 94 percent of displaced households surveyed in Sierra Leone had experienced sexual assaults, including rape, torture, and slavery. In the 1994 Rwandan genocide, 250,000 to 500,000 women were raped.²³
- Because of the loss of family and community members due to violence or displacement, these same households become increasingly extensive to include distant relatives, nonrelatives, foreigners, and adoptees. Because identities are socially constructed, displacement substantially alters the identities of individuals and communities.

Ezekiel's prophecy, "One third of you shall die of pestilence or be consumed by famine among you" (5:12), describes literally the experience of exile. The end result may be post-traumatic stress disorder not simply for individuals but whole communities. For this reason Hyun Chul Kim

in *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration*, ed. Mark J. Boda et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 152.

21. Norwegian Refugee Council, *Iraq: A Displacement Crisis* (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2007), 7, as cited in Ames, "Forced Migrations," 150.

22. Karim Khalil, "Political Stalemates and Deepening Humanitarian Crises: Internal Displacement in the Middle East," in *Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2007*, ed. Edmund Jennings (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2008), 58, as cited in Ames, "Forced Migrations," 150.

23. Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, *Women, War, Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace Building*, Progress of the World's Women 1 (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2002), 9, as cited in Ames, "Forced Migrations," 151.

and Louis Stuhlman have chosen to call the canonical prophets “Disaster Survival Literature.”²⁴

Ames eschews psychological explanations of the text and instead interprets Jeremiah as a response to the diminishment of resources and security, increased morbidity and mortality, and the alteration of social relationships and identities. If the Babylonian deportation is viewed as a human catastrophe, then Jeremiah’s concern is to attend to the most pressing human needs of safety and security. Ames writes, “My conclusion is that forced displacement creates a need for extended families and inclusive communities that transcends ideologies of separation; in short, ideology bends to the pragmatics of survival.”²⁵ He believes Jeremiah 29:5–7 is a call to restore those very things that had been lost due to conquest and displacement. When read in this manner, any diaspora or missional theology implied from this passage must be secondary the the primary function of this text and can only be understood when read in light of its practical concerns.

For millions of people today, exile is not simply a metaphor but rather describes a physical and political reality. By mid-2015, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that 57,959,702 persons were displaced worldwide and that 15,097,633 of them were refugees or people in refugee-like situations, and these figures continue to rise.²⁶ The 2015 photo of Aylan Kurdi lying drown on a Turkish beach helped humanize the refugee crisis. Reading Scripture as disaster survival literature became a reality for me when an older Cambodian gentleman enrolled in my class on the prophets. He had survived the genocide of the Khmer Rouge and shared his story with the class. He vividly recalled how one day soldiers descended upon his village, and in an instant he had to flee for his life on foot. He found his way to a refugee camp on the Cambodia-Thailand border where he would live for the next several years in squalid conditions and uncertainty regard-

24. Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 1–23. See also the work of Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011). Stulman and O’Connor interpret the text through the lens of trauma and violence, yet their approaches focus on internal, mental, and emotional trauma and its effects upon the literary imagination rather than the physical and social challenges facing refugees.

25. Ames, “Forced Migrations,” 159.

26. UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trends 2015*, accessed at <http://www.unhcr.org/56701b969.html>.

ing his political status. This encampment was literally a “no man’s land” between the warring parties, with little political and military protection and thus regularly exposed to indiscriminate bombing raids. He was separated from his family and had no knowledge whether they had even survived the attack on his village. Eventually he was able to immigrate to the U.S. where he was reunited with his sister and mother. It was only then he discovered that his father had been executed by the Khmer Rouge. While he was glad to be in the U.S., it was challenging for him to live and work in a foreign land all the while missing his homeland and coming to terms with all the trauma he and his family had experienced.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to demonstrate that in order to develop a biblical theology of immigration, the experience of migrants must contribute to the interpretive and theological task. The biblical exiles provide helpful motifs from which to develop this theology since these events mirror the experience of migrants in many ways. Given that as of 2015, 244 million international migrants live abroad and these numbers continue to climb,²⁷ the church must develop resources to minister to these populations. While the challenges of migration are daunting, the church with its history and identity as an immigrant and resident alien people, is positioned well to be a gospel witness to these people.

27. United Nations, *International Migration Report 2015 [highlights]*, accessed at http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2015_Highlights.pdf.