My Father was a Stranger: Biblical Teaching on Migrants

The sage Qoheleth said: “There is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said ‘See; this is new?’ It has already been; in the ages before us” (Ecc1. 1:9-10).
It is inevitable; however; that we all forget the events of the distant past, and then we find ourselves in situations which appear unusual; exceptional; and without parallel; their presumed abnormality becomes a source of anxiety.

Among such surprising and unnerving events, we can include that of the waves of migration from Africa; the Near East; and Eastern Europe in recent years, which flow like an unstoppable tide towards the shores of a land of hope – our own.

unfolds. Let us see how we can be guided by the Biblical narrative.

Our origin as migrants

Israel’s is the story of a “different” people. They tell it not for vanity’s sake, for they recognize their own sin and smallness (Dt 7:7, 9:6). They are not willing to merely claim their right to exist, neither to support only an idealized moral need to respect all minorities as bearers of unique values.

The Israelites tell the story of a chosen people, called to give witness to the truth revealed by God, to let everyone know the tangible benefits of welcoming the different, the stranger, or the other who does not look like me, speaks another language, observes different traditions and worships other gods.

In addition to the static view of Genesis, where each ethnic group is confined to its own territory, the

Bible presents a dynamic and relational perspective, because this is the authentic path of universal harmony. And in radical opposition to the imperialist image of Babel – aimed at realizing a unifying project destined for a monumental failure (Gen 11) – it presents the figure of Abraham the border-crosser, to highlight that his diversity is the source of a universal blessing.

Abraham is set in motion by the Lord, who tells him: “Go forth from your country … to the land that I will show you” (Gn 12:1). It is true that migration had begun with his father Terach (Gn 11:31), but this migratory process becomes a “calling” only when it is taken personally by our father in faith as a decision for the good.

It should be noted that Abraham does not leave Mesopotamia because of economic hardship: it is reported that he was rich in livestock and gold (Gn 13:2). Nor does he suffer harassment or threats in his country of origin; he is therefore not a refugee fleeing from conflict areas. He does not abandon his homeland to escape from idolatry, since the land to which he is directed is inhabited by the Canaanites (Gn 12:6), followers of deities other than the Lord he obeyed.

Abraham is thus presented as exemplar of the pure migrant, in which all migrants can recognize themselves, aside from specific motivations. He is no figure of misery, but of election and blessing, so that everyone is encouraged to accept it: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gn 12:2-3).

The fate of the world, according to the Bible, depends on the figure of this migrant, Abraham, who agreed to give up the title of citizen and risk his life by taking on the status of immigrant instead. God makes a covenant with him (Gn 15:7-20; 17:1-8); in a way, in fact, it is through him that the Lord is identified, and through him he can bring life for the multitude of nations.

The patriarchs are depicted as shepherds in constant search of pastures, who have to follow the rhythms of seasonal grazing needs. However, they are not nomads, but are simply foreigners who settle where and how they can, in foreign land (Canaan, Syria, Egypt) as immigrants. This is the origin of Israel, from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through their descendants, who dwelt in Egypt for four hundred thirty years (Ex 12:40).

Indeed, according to Leviticus, even when the people of God took possession of the land of Canaan, they were called by the Lord to be guests in a land that God claimed as his property. The Israelites were in fact with him as “aliens and tenants” (Lv 25:23). Therefore David said, repeating a formula from the prayer tradition of Israel (Ps 39:13; 119:19): “for we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors” (1 Chr 29:15).

Anyone who receives the spiritual heritage of Israel, whoever is rooted in this tradition of faith (Rom.11:17) becomes, by vocation, an immigrant who accepts, in total meekness, the hospitality of others.

Like a stranger knocking on a door, requesting a space in a land where others already reside, asking without expecting, waiting for his guest to show human compassion, leaving him a bit of space, alongside, or rather, in the midst of the citizenry.

God raises this figure. The immigrant who has come to dwell within the gates of the city, sometimes even inside the house where he is employed, is an envoy of the Lord who brings peace to all (Mt. 10:5-15; Lk 10:1-12).

Probably, someone will suggest that in ancient times all this was easy. Hospitality was a customary practice, universally recognized as a sacred duty, and the result of the spontaneous solidarity that comes when everyone is experiencing the same needs. The Bible, however, denies this alleged irenic condition for the stranger.

The story of Israel's origins recounts how the patriarchs were repeatedly harassed: local kings took their wives (Gn 12:11-20; 26:1-14); native residents took possession of the wells, displacing immigrants who had dug them (Gn 21:25; 26:15-25); and those who entered a city, like that of Sodom, had to endure the shameful indignity of violent subjugation.

Sodom and Gomorrah become the symbol of the cursed Canaanite cities because they practiced abuse instead of hospitality. Yet the same crime was also perpetrated by the Moabites and the Ammonites (Dt 23:4-7), and even by the Israelites themselves against brothers from other tribes (Jgs 19:11-30).

Even greater suffering was experienced by Hebrew immigrants in Egypt (Wis 19:13-16), and the children of Abraham in the diaspora of the exile (as narrated in the books of Daniel, Esther and Tobit) experienced suffering and sorrow. This history, once called "sacred history," is entrusted to us to remember the tragedy of the many migrations of peoples, and to put before our eyes the painful experience of those who are not welcomed.

Every era, until the end of days, will be judged by its real capacity for hospitality. This is not something taken for granted: it is rather the expression of a personal ethical conscience, and the result of free and courageous decisions. Holy Scripture helps us to take these decisions, raising awareness about our identity as foreigners and immigrants, which makes us equal. We can therefore understand and love those who are immigrants in our land.

We know the biblical precept, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lv. 19:18; Mt 22:39), and perhaps ignore that there is also the command to love the stranger who seeks to reside in our land: "For the Lord your God … loves the strangers, provides them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Dt. 10:17-19).

The love of the Israelite believer for the stranger is an imitation of God's feelings, and should therefore result in similar actions to those of the Lord (Ps 146:9). This is incisively expressed in chapter19 of Leviticus, a few verses after the passage that requires the love of the "son of your people" (Lv. 19:18): "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lv. 19:33-34). The distinction between citizens and aliens is not abolished, but is emphasized to enhance the quality of love that makes others similar to me, in the very act of benevolent welcoming.

Abraham was called upon to symbolically assume the figure of the stranger to show that God constantly goes out to encounter people under the guise of an immigrant. Abraham is the immigrant

who represents the Lord who asks to be welcomed in order to bring salvation; if he is rejected, the outcome is desolation and death.

The New Testament will continue in this line: in Matthew's Gospel, in particular, we are told that Jesus identifies himself with the stranger, welcomed or rejected (Mt. 25:35,43), and this alternatively brings blessing (Mt. 25:34) or eternal curse (Mt. 25:41).

On the other hand, Abraham, because he is a believer in the Lord, given that he consented to be landless, has developed a heart able to welcome the traveler passing him by. While the city of Sodom offends those seeking refugee (Gn 19:1-11), Abraham's tent opens to receive, as a gift, the presence of some foreigners (Gn 18:1-8); these mysterious characters will be seen as angel (Gn 19:1; Hb 13:2), that is, an image of the divine that visits men, bringing great fertility to the welcoming home (Gn 18:9-14) and unleashing catastrophe on the inhospitable city (Gn 19:15-29).

The heart, the Bible says, will show signs of compassion to the extent that it guards the memory of its origin and suffering. Anyone who is able to identify with the immigrant – whose eyes express a compound of pain and desire – becomes a brother to every stranger. "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Ex 23:9). From this founding experience, that each generation must adopt as their own spiritually, rules can be deployed favoring the foreigner who, for various reasons, comes to live, at least for some time, in another's country.

The loving wisdom of God first gave the experience of migration, and then prepared in the law a number of useful measures in favor of foreigners. This Biblical law is linked to the socio-economic conditions of ancient times. However, even today it may suggest perspectives and initiatives respecting migrants. It is not enough, in fact, to extemporaneously demonstrate sympathy: those who want to be faithful to the biblical message are called to obey the command, interpreting, creatively, the ideas offered by the legal code of Israel, so as to give it complete fulfillment (Mt. 5:17-19).

Rules favoring immigrants

Even if in ancient Israel we do not find the masses of immigrants comparable to those of today, we have to consider that the problem of migration was always difficult due to an unbalanced proportion between the small resident population and the large groups of foreigners, who came to settle in the Hebrew towns and villages, especially for reasons of economic hardship. Obviously, we do not have statistics: we can only imagine the relevance of the question by the quantity and variety of the precepts regarding the care for the immigrant handed down by the Law of Israel.

Each code[3] inculcates the need for maximum availability towards strangers, inviting them to enter into the spirit of hospitality that individual precepts suggest. This spirit of love is clear in the lack of public sanctions for their non-compliance; God is the only guarantor as the only one to know the conditions of every Israelite and the only one who can pour out his blessing on those who generously act according to his will.

We can group under three main headings the many precepts regarding foreigners. This is not exhaustive, but we can give a sense of the expectations that the ancient legislators intended to promote

by their standards.

Sharing in the economic sphere

In Old Testament codes, the immigrant is systematically included among the economically disadvantaged categories, along with the widow and the orphan (the very symbols of those in need of sustenance and protection), and is associated with the Levite (the priestly tribe who, not owning land, were subsidised by the faithfull (Dt 16:11,14; 24:11-14; 26:12 etc.).

By placing the stranger on the list of the needy, among whom are clearly members of the Jewish people, the legislator equates all the poor, considering them bearers of the same individual right: there stranger, as needy, is like one of the family, the alien in origin or custom is to be considered as your brother because he is poor.

It is significant to note that the law of Israel does not recommend alms – this practice, traditional and customary in the ancient world, is not absent from the Jewish and Christian living (cf. *Ps* 112:9; Sir 3:30; 29,12; Tb 12:9; *Mt* 6:1-4; *Rom* 15:26; 1 *Cor* 16:1-5; 1 Pt 4:8). In the face of urgency it is obvious that immediate help is expected (*Pr* 3:28). However, the Torah calls for compassion to the poor in forms that are less occasional and that safeguard their dignity.

Scripture invites us first of all to provide for the indigent through a loan. This may appear less perfect compared to the giving of a grant. However, we have to note that in Israel the loan is a free act, because the lender is likely to lose his goods without obtaining profit, given the waiver of interest as such would equate to usury (*Ex* 22:24; *Lv* 25:35-38; *Dt* 23:20-21; *Ez* 18:8,13,17: 22:12; *Pr* 28:8).

In addition, using the loan gives credit to the neighbor in his ability and willingness to repay; he is thus treated as a responsible person, stimulating his wisdom, hard work, and honesty, and therefore able to capitalize on the gift received. Finally, through the loan the cycle of the gift comes full circle, because even the poor person, who has received the loan, will, with God's favor, one day be able to give back what he has received, recognizing, in the very act of giving back, the benefit he obtained.

If – continues the law – it is licit to demand from the debtor a pledge as a guarantee of repayment of the loan, the lender must still have respect for the needy: it is not permissible that you enter the house of the poor, effectively arresting him, rather, you must wait outside (Dt 24:10-11). The coat given as deposit (an extreme example) must be returned at sunset, because it is the blanket of the poor (*Ex* 22:25-26; *Dt* 24:12-13); neither are you allowed to confiscate the stones of domestic mills, as "it would be like taking life" (Dt 24:6) in pledge.

Generosity in lending, to which the law calls us (*Dt* 15:10-11), should be complemented by the generosity in cancelling the debt. Too often, insolvency forced a man to give his children or himself as a slave. The repetition of this painful experience led the legislator to introduce a rule that periodically provides for the remission of any debt: every seven years, the lender will waive the right to repayment (*Dt* 15:1-3), so that poverty is eradicated and God's blessing can reach everyone (*Dt* 15:4-6).

Other provisions of the Torah ask to that a certain amount of economic resources be dedicated to the poor, especially immigrants. The fruits of the fields are, for ancient Israel, the first and most fundamental form of wealth, to be interpreted as a symbol of all that is “collected” as a result of one’s own work and of divine blessing.

The Law demands that such proceeds are not completely monopolized by the owner of the land, but that part is left, as if forgotten, in the same field, so being made available to the poor and immigrants.

The Bible says that when you reap you should not worry about taking everything and you shall not go back to glean the ears of corn left in the field; the same thing is also said for the olive harvest and the vineyard (*Dt* 24:19-22; *Lv* 19:9-10; 23:22). This provision has extraordinary symbolic value, for those who can read and interpret it.

Taken literally, the prescription may seem petty and insulting to the poor (as if he were an animal who has to accept the leftovers from the tables of the wealthy), but, properly interpreted, it means that the blessing that God has granted to the landowner must also be shared with the poor discretely.

The book of Deuteronomy, the most sensitive to immigrant status, goes beyond the discipline of sharing in the harvest time: imagine that the owner stores in his house, along with his possessions, the fruit of the earth and of his labor: in the name of the God of the poor, the legislator intervenes to pave new ways of giving.

The law of the first fruits (*Dt* 26:1-11), establishes that the first fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land should be put in a basket and taken to the priest, so as to be distributed to the Levite and the stranger (*Lv*.11). Only if you understand the value of the first fruits can you understand how important and courageous this rule is: the heir of the promise is asked to give the foreigner the best products of his own land, which, once collected and distributed, are the only ones available. In fact, some misfortune could destroy the rest of the crop. The poor immigrant therefore does not have to make do with the remains left in the fields: he is “served” with the same delicacies that give joy and hope to the owners.

Then there is the law of tithing, which is a systematic deduction from income. A significant part of all that has been made must be devoted to the poor. A special tax is collected every three years, and is intended for the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow (*Dt* 14:28-29, 26:12-13; see also *Tb* 1:8).

We do not know how this system for the collection of goods and the redistribution of wealth would work in practice. In particular, we do not know to what extent the execution was compulsory and therefore enforceable by the competent authority.

It is certain, however, that the Jew believes that what is reserved for the poor is considered “holy” (*Dt* 26:13), and disobedience of this divine law would result in profound guilt. In order to provide the necessary public services and to respond to basic needs of those without income; the modern rules of wealth taxation correspond to the intention of the legislator. There is still a wide margin for the free and courageous initiative of individual social workers, called to share their heritage with the poor in a spirit of trusting generosity.

These rules have a religious origin, for the reasons that inspire them and the context in which they are located. They presuppose faith in God and his providence. The biblical legislator then adds an explicit link between the religious world and the willingness to share, making them converge in the sanctuary, making the liturgical celebration a good occasion to help the poor.

The sanctuary, we know, was the place where the ancient believers gathered to thank God and implore him. Offerings and sacrifices were the concrete expression of prayer, besides being necessary nourishment for the priests, those who helped in the worship, and also for the many poor who came to the sacred places (*Dt* 12:12). The temple was the heart of the celebration of life, not only in the spiritual sense.

In fact, especially for the great agricultural festivals, the sacred space was organized in a way that bread, meat, wine and intoxicating drinks could be distributed. The joy for the communion with the Lord and his blessing was shared by the entire community, with the explicit presence of the immigrant (*Dt* 16:11-14). The one making the offering, present with his family, became then father of the poor, brother of the stranger.

Legal protections

The particularly suggestive economic measures in favor of strangers are also articulated in the biblical law, in other important norms that guarantee the rights of immigrants in their life and in their different needs. In this context, the immigrant is treated as a citizen: “There will be for you one law for the stranger and for the native” (*Lv* 24:22).

There are two areas in particular that should be defined: A) legislation in the workplace; B) the rights of the stranger in the courts.

A) We have said that the immigrants belong to the class of the poor, because they do not have stable resources from the possession of land. The most lucrative craft, on the other hand; is not left to foreigners. Israel’s Law does not say anything on labor for immigrants; probably there were no concrete ways to regulate this sector. What is protected is the guarantee of wages; and their timeliness: “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers; whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset; because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt” (*Dt* 24:14:15).

The precariousness of the immigrant’s life, and the grave risk produced by the lack of a just wage are manifest in this quote.

We note, once again, that, on this point, brother and stranger are equal before the law, and in the eyes of God. The Law of Moses also protects the employee’s rest: the tradition of the Sabbath, even for the immigrant, is enshrined in the Ten Commandments (*Ex* 20:10, *Dt* 5:14; see also *Ex* 23:12). In the formula “so that they may rest like you,” we recognize the idea of equality between father and son, master and servant, between indigenous and foreign, in grateful remembrance of God the Creator of all

and the Lord liberator of slaves.

Of course, the respect required today for the immigrant worker cannot be limited to these points, but the spirit of the law is to introduce, where possible, the principle of equality and fraternity, to avoid grave sin of oppression of the stranger.

B) A right, although recognized by custom, is not really protected if it is not affirmed by a judicial institution. Consequently, the right of immigrants to a fair wage, weekly rest, but also to freedom of movement, autonomous business initiative, marriage, and so on, including the legal defense before a court, is essentially assumed by the Law of Israel and reiterated on several occasions in its codes.

Deuteronomy, once again, is the book that most clearly highlights the issue of immigrant rights. In the judicial institution narrative, Moses orders the judges to be absolutely impartial and fair in judging: "Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien" (*Dt* 1:16).

It is not only the citizen who is protected, but whoever is right, because who judges has a duty to "listen to the small and the great" without fear from anyone, "for the judgment belongs to God" (*Dt* 1:17). Deuteronomy considers very serious "the distortion of immigrant right," and on this point even includes a commitment sworn by all Israel (*Dt* 27:19).

Cultural integration

There persist many elements of difference between the status of the Hebrews (brothers) and that of the immigrants (strangers). Therefore, the Law envisages rules aimed at mitigating such inequality, and introduces corrective principles that promote equality and fraternity.

It affects, in this regard, the fact that the Torah does not talk about immigrants as a marginal reality, confined to ghettos, but about the people who live in the midst of Israel. This connotation is important to show that hospitality reaches its perfection when it manages to integrate the strangers, to incorporate them, to treat them as part of the same community.

It must be presumed that the strangers in Israel were trying to become part of the country by learning the language, and accepting the customs of the people who received them. We have already seen that the foreigner participated in the harvest festivals and the weekly working cycle, adapting to the rhythms of production and the typical Israeli approach to rest.

It seems clear that the immigrant, especially if generously received, tended to adopt the legal and religious values of the host people, not only for a better understanding, but also because he recognized the moral ideal to which he aspired, and because he came to know a God in whom it was good to trust.

There was not, during the Old Testament period, a significant movement of proselytization. But, even if Israel was not looking for followers, there were those who were living in the midst of the Jews and wanted to be part of this people, assuming bonds of greater solidarity. For this reason, the term *g?r*,

which for a long time was only used to refer to an ‘immigrant,’ would be interpreted as ‘proselyte’ in later texts; this latter was someone who was completely immersed in the life of the people of Israel, fully accepting the Law.

The admission of immigrants, if circumcised, in the celebration of Passover deserves particular attention (*Ex* 12:47-49; Nm 9:14): this is an opportunity, not an obligation, based on a request which Israel must allow so as not to retreat into an ethnic isolationism.

It is not surprising the immigrant desires to celebrate the feast of liberation from slavery, accomplished by God, author of a law of liberty and dignity.

Similarly, it should come as no surprise that the immigrant asks to be circumcised, considering it the distinguishing sign of the migrant Abraham (*Gn* 17), while it might be remarkable that the Jew agrees to share with the stranger the sign of his privileged covenant and his special blessing.

The common celebration of Passover is an event which affects one’s entire existence. What lies behind it is a common covenant, an ongoing communion of life.

The progressive religious integration seems to be well represented in a late text of Deuteronomy, which indicates the foreigner as a full member of the people of the new covenant, the one that goes beyond the Sinai covenant (Dt 28:69): “You stand assembled today, all of you, before the Lord your God – the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp, both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water – to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God” (*Dt* 29:9-11; 31:12).

The true people of Israel welcome as full members those who come from an unknown reality to share the relationship with the true God, the wisdom of his Law and the blessing which follows.

In conclusion, the ideal suggested by Scripture is offered to all as a path of goodness. As a father transmits the law to the children to achieve harmony in the family and proper respect for every individual, in the same way the Jew transmits his law to the foreigner as a means of communion. In this way, the one who has been welcomed and ennobled can become in turn a mediator of welcoming benevolence.

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cfr G. Sale, “I profughi in Europa e la ‘Via Crucis’ dell’accoglienza”, in *Civiltà Cattolica*, 2016, II, 251.

cfr “La tragedia dei bambini migranti” in *Civiltà Cattolica*, 2016, II, 314.

In the Old Testament we have three collections of laws that scholars assign to different periods in the history of Israel. The oldest collection is believed to be the Covenant Code (Ex 20-23), followed by the Deuteronomic Code (Dt 12-26) and Leviticus (Lv 17-26) in the post-Exile. Each of these codes is characterized by its own way of formulating the rules and a dedicated organization of legal material. All this shows how unceasing legislative work must adapt and refine the discipline and also how

attention to the poor immigrants constituted one of the main duties of an Israelite.

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