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'THEOS'

The Bible and Migration

I. The Age of Migration

We are living in a period of unprecedented migration. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs there were 190.84 million living in a country other than that of their birth in 1990. By 2024, there were 281.96 million people living in a country other than that of their birth.[1]

While this may seem to be a small proportion of the global population (less than 5%), Europe and North America are now seeing historically high levels of migration and many countries now have migrant populations in the mid-teens and above, as a percentage of their total population.

The age-old reasons of poverty, persecution, and war cause many to migrate today. It is also likely that reduced poverty and growing global interconnection also encourage greater levels of movement. Although migrant routes remain incredibly dangerous, travel in general has become cheaper and easier. Despite political controversy, many countries nonetheless actively encourage migration to meet skills shortages. The majority of migrants to the UK come with visas for purposes of work or study. We live in an economically interconnected world.

As high levels of migration have become the norm, many democracies are being forced to answer new questions: what coheres diversifying societies; how are resources fairly apportioned; and how should governments maintain security? These questions are made sharper by periods of relative scarcity.

Recently, US Vice President J.D. Vance, invoked the Thomist concept "ordo amoris" (which translates as "order of love") in an online post about immigration and foreign policy. The term points to a hierarchy of loves, where some obligations take precedence over others. This subsequent, explicitly theological, discussion between Vance and the podcaster and former MP Rory Stewart captured the zeitgeist, in which the particular and the local are being reasserted above the universal and the international, and where theological ideas have emerged as significant in the debate.

II. Migration to the UK

Migration has long been a politically charged issue in the UK and remains one of the country's most prominent political concerns. While politicians often signal a desire for control in line with public opinion, actual policy has seen numbers of migrants trending up over time. This gap has contributed to a growing mistrust between voters and political leaders.

Immigration levels began rising in the late 1990s and early 2000s, especially following EU expansions in 2004 and 2007. The Conservative-led Coalition Government (2010–2015) pledged to reduce net migration to the "tens of thousands," but it increased from 157,000 at the start of that period to 298,000 by 2014. This goal was reiterated in the 2015 Conservative manifesto.

The 2016 Brexit campaign centred heavily on issues of sovereignty and border control—core concerns for Leave voters. In contrast, Remain campaigners warned of the economic costs of ending free movement and reducing labour market flexibility. Immigration became a key factor in the referendum result.

After the Brexit vote, the May-led government was notably restrictive on legal migration and asylum.

1 See UN World Migration Report, https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/

However, under Boris Johnson, policy liberalised again: healthcare worker visas expanded, post-study work visas returned (after being removed by Theresa May as Home Secretary), and bespoke schemes for Hong Kongers (BN(O) visa) and Ukrainians were introduced. As a result, over 900,000 people arrived in the UK in the year to June 2023, though some—such as international students—will leave after a temporary stay.

Despite the dominance of legal migration, political focus has intensified around small boat crossings in the English Channel. These have grown significantly since 2018 and could surpass 50,000 in 2025. Although those arriving in small boats constitute a small proportion of total migration to the UK, this type of migration carries high financial and political costs. For instance, the National Audit Office reports that in 2024-25, the Home Office spent an estimated £1.7 billion on the Asylum Accommodation Support Contracts, and its current estimate of total spend over 10 years is £15.3 billion.[2]

In response to public concern, the Conservative government led by Rishi Sunak introduced measures such as the Illegal Migration Act (2023) and the controversial Rwanda policy. At the 2024 General Election, however, immigration still ranked among the top three voter concerns, alongside the NHS and the economy.

Some voters value an open, welcoming, and multicultural society, but others argue that we have 'gone too far too fast' and feel that successive governments have been insensitive to concerns around high migration (pressure on housing and public services, cohesion and identity, or crime and security).

When combined with a pervading sense that the social contract is broken, there is a real need for new language and leadership on these questions.

III. Migration in the Biblical Narrative

The Bible is a book of migrations.

In Genesis, the Patriarch Abraham, in covenant with God, had embarked on a migratory journey from Ur, to Haran, to Canaan. His descendants were forced by famine to Egypt, where they settled as resident aliens, and grow to become 'a great nation.'

Exodus is the story of another migration. Israel is brought out of oppression in Egypt and into a promised land, one "flowing with milk and honey" – a new Eden. This migratory story doesn't end there: when spiritual and political corruption lead to God's judgement (and military defeat) the people – or at least a proportion of them – again find themselves as forced migrants in Babylon – a new exile. Their experience of this exile is closely narrated in Lamentations and Psalms (e.g., "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" in Psalm 137:4). The prophet Jeremiah calls for them to seek the 'welfare of the city', though its rulers have oppressed them (Jeremiah 29:7), and prepare for an extended (though still ultimately temporary) stay.

Prophetic texts announce God's plan to restore people to their land. Subsequently, there is partial return, described in the parallel stories of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah (though some remain in vulnerable exile, with such a narrative in the book of Esther). These stories of return culminate with some success, but also ethnic conflict and unfulfilled hopes. There is an ongoing metaphorical 'exile,' while the people remain under the power of successive imperial regimes, finally Rome.

Jesus' own ministry and teaching, which is itself pictured as wandering, if not homeless: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20). Ultimately, he does not resolve his contemporaries' 'political' hopes for the end of exile, but he does address the deeper

2 National Audit Office, 'The Home Office's asylum accommodation contracts,' 7 May 2025. https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/home-offices-asylum-accommodation-contracts.pdf

exile affecting all of humanity (see below). The New Testament contains many threads which indicate the universality of Jesus' work and message, fulfilling prophetic anticipation that all nations would be drawn into relationship with Yahweh, the God of Israel. The gentiles are woven into covenant partnership with God alongside the faithful of Israel.

IV. Migration as the human condition

There is a larger global narrative behind Israel's story – the story of migration begins not with Abraham but in Eden. Humans, made in the image of God, have a vocation to fill and rule the earth (Genesis 1:28). Human rebellion undermines, but does not erase, this vocation. Adam and Eve do leave the garden, not to confidently fill and rule, but in vulnerable exile.

After the flood narrative, humanity seems to be back on track, again filling the earth in Genesis 10. However, we have the idolatrous settlement of Babel, which in turn results in the scattering of nations and the confusion of languages. The effects of the fall continue to rebound not just in individual lives but at the level of human purpose and the nations. The division of human culture into groups is both an act of God and a response to human sin (see Acts 17:26), a tension we must retain as we think about nationhood from a biblical perspective.

Multiple movements of migration and settlement form the backdrop of God's redemptive purpose. These migratory stories have many elements we could see as examples of either moral excellence or moral failure: consider how the initial hospitality of the Egyptian empire in a time of famine reversed into imprisonment and forced labour – and note how this is driven by Pharoah's fear of Israel's multiplying (Exodus 1:20). This, however, is not their primary purpose. Rather they show us that movement and settlement alike are aspects of God's providential work in history. Deuteronomy 26:5 offers a picture of the people of God in three states: *'A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous.'* The covenant with Abraham results in a tension between the exceptionalism of Israel, and the fact that the covenant is intended for the blessing of all nations. Israel is repeatedly called to remember that God loves the stranger.

Ultimately, the church is intended as a picture of a newly formed humanity. All the nations are called to discipleship of Jesus (Matthew 28.19). The confusion of languages is symbolically reversed at Pentecost. People from all ethnic backgrounds share a heavenly citizenship (Philippians 3:20). National and ethnic identities are part of social reality, but they are relativised for those that are 'in Christ.'

Biblical migrations providentially reveal God's purposes and point to our need for a transcendent home. From Genesis to Revelation, God's people are often depicted as travellers, sojourners, and exiles. Spiritually speaking, all of humanity exists in a state of migration from the garden of Genesis to the garden city of the New Jerusalem. The story of the biblical people of Israel is the experience of exiled humanity in microcosm.

V. Theological Principles

This biblical narrative shapes the prophetic witness of the Church to the wider world. What the gospel says and what the church does is a 'sign' of the Kingdom – though not its full and final reality. As we track the narrative of Scripture, we can pick up themes, resonances, and ideals which might shape temporal politics.

How could citizens and politicians apply this as they think, work, campaign, and vote? They should consider the following principles.

1. HUMAN DIGNITY

Readers of the Scriptures will recognise a strong emphasis on the dignity of human beings. They are made in the image of God. This, rather than their social, economic or national background determines their equal worth, a principle which has shaped

contemporary approaches to fundamental human rights.

There is no straight line from the principle of human dignity through to particular migration policies or frameworks – both 'liberal' and 'restrictive' policies, depending on context, could recognise dignity – but it follows that dignity is a key criterion for evaluating them. For instance, we should ask whether libertarian approaches that see migrants as a fungible resource sufficiently recognise human dignity. We see, for instance, the egregious abuse of migrant labour in some Gulf states, or even the exploitation of care workers in the UK. Even well-meaning policies may fail if they reduce migrants to mere economic assets.

This also has implications for how we hold the debate. Public discourse around migration has become more polarised. Echo chambers make genuine debate harder. Policy challenges are simplified, and the arguments of our opponents are exaggerated. While disagreement is inevitable – even appropriate – political leaders can help ensure that policy and language work towards greater, though imperfect, recognition of this dignity. While policy may be legitimately contested, we should resist the dehumanising rhetoric around migrants.

2. HUMAN SOLIDARITY

We may think of migration differently if we see that the whole of humanity exists in some sense as in exile from its true home. We should be careful not to divide the world into 'settled' and 'migrant.' God's people were called to welcome the stranger not from abstract principle, but because they knew what it was to be strangers.

The early church was equally reminded to see itself as made up of strangers (1 Peter 2:11, Hebrews 11:13). How is our status as strangers experienced in practice? We can be reminded that on some level we are all dependent on the hospitality and care of others – these may include family, close friends, local communities, and fellow citizens. It also includes many others across the world, with whom we have no conscious relationship. We must understand that we are necessarily bound to others – those near and far – and that we must invest in their flourishing. No nation bears a singular responsibility for the world, and no nation is omnipotent, but the direction of our national approach should be to work with others for common flourishing.

3. THE PRACTICE OF NEIGHBOURLINESS

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is often invoked as an important text in thinking about our moral responsibility to perceived outsiders (for instance, in the Vance/Stewart debate). It is the Samaritan, the despised other, that treats the robbed man as a neighbour by caring for him.

The parable does two things. On the one hand it dissolves in/out group dynamics and universalises a duty of compassion. But on the other, Jesus also shifts from debate around the principle of moral responsibility to a focus on relation and action. The Priest and the Levite would have undoubtedly *known* the Law, but the Samaritan does the Law. Likewise, the scholar of the Law who has initiated the debate is told, "Go and do likewise."

We are familiar with the way that this parable expands moral duty beyond the in-group, a key marker of Christian ethics. However, it is not mere universalism. Our neighbours could be *anyone*, but they are always *someone*, and our status as neighbours is not a factor of our opinion about them so much as our relationship with them and action toward them. We ought not have systems which encourage high levels of immigration but then withhold from the responsibility of creating a common life. A very strong reason to control and reduce overall numbers is so that we can build meaningful community with those who come to the UK, whereas large scale and rapid migration makes that much harder.

VI. Conclusion: Biblical wisdom for a complex debate

The biblical theology of migration does not provide a direct blueprint for immigration policy. However, its powerful stories of migration, through which God's redemptive plan is woven, ought to shape our imaginations and values. We can also recognise our own status as strangers who might receive God's hospitality: *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household* (Ephesians 2:19).

The role of any government or political actor will be limited: they can't make every sad heart glad. Rather, the goal is a just framework. We conclude with some possible policy directions.

1. PRIORITISE DIGNITY

Migrants have the dignity of being made in the image of God. This may mean working to make the asylum system more efficient, delivering better decisions more quickly. When it comes to legal migration, we should tackle the exploitation of migrant workers.

2. BALANCE NUMBERS WITH ABILITY TO INTEGRATE

All things being equal, migration levels ought not go beyond a country's reasonable capacity to retain community. Civil society, including churches, will do a lot of the heavy lifting on integration - government should enable rather than replace their work.

3. REFRAME THE DIVISIVE PUBLIC DEBATE

Encourage a more respectful and honest debate, which speaks about the goals, advantages and disadvantages of migration. Rebuild public trust through realistic and humane debate. Avoid a rhetorical race to the bottom.

4. SHARE GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

Work with the broader international community to address root causes like poverty and conflict.

5. FOSTER MUTUAL BELONGING

Encourage civic participation from migrants and offer clear citizenship pathways. Asylum seekers can be enabled to make a contribution. Hospitality must be paired with shared responsibility.

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