

## The Intersection of Religion and Migration Experience: Lessons from the Scriptures

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**Abstract:** Religion is an integral part of man as a spiritual being. The African man is a spiritually inclined and devoted worshipper of the element of his spiritual belief. This explains why he takes his god, the arrowhead of his belief system with him anywhere he goes. For the African man therefore the issue of what to believe and how to serve the object of his belief were never in contention before the coming of the Europeans with Christianity and Arabs with Islam. It is also the reason the three religions, Traditional religion, Christianity and Islam are strongly upheld by their adherents. This study adopts a qualitative approach which undertakes a descriptive analysis of Biblical figures who brought home development from their land of sojourn as examples from where African Diaspora should draw inspiration to repatriate economic prosperity to their home countries. Drawing inferences from the Bible and the patterns of migration of the Jews, the study discovers that Africans in Diaspora have the potential to bring development to their home countries after retirement from active service in foreign land. It was suggested that African Diaspora irrespective of their religious beliefs should take a cue from Jewish migrants who returned to build prosperous nation which is a reflection of modern state of Israel.

**Keywords:** Beliefs, Diaspora, Migration, Religion, Spiritual.

### INTRODUCTION

Earliest Humans found around Aksum (Ethiopia) were said to have spread from Africa some 200,000 years ago in what is referred to as ‘out of Africa’ theory’ where homo sapiens were said to have dispersed across Eurasia. They were said to have met and later replaced other human ancestors Neanderthals. Although this theory has been challenged by evidence of migrations from Africa to Eurasia some 120,000 years ago, scholars have identified factors like climate, food scarcity/famine, war, colonialism as strong forces that drove migration from ages past. The expansionist tendencies of the Greek dynasty, Ancient Rome and Imperial China through war, enslavement and persecution further gave impetus to migration in those days. Musa Balonde and Sinan Akcay (2023) affirm that the Jews, for instance, fled their

ancestral lands after waves of exile and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE creating a wide spread of diaspora.

Scholars have done extensive research on migration over the years and these have provided enough ground for the emergence of ever evolving theories on the subject matter. These theories have given birth to some other theories in the process of expanding or debunking the very fabric of existing theories. Religion is an integral part of man as a spiritual being. The African man is a spiritually inclined and devoted worshipper of the element of his spiritual belief. This explains why he takes his god, the arrowhead of his belief system with him anywhere he goes. For the African man, therefore, the issue of what to believe and how to serve the object of his belief were never in contention before the coming of the Europeans with Christianity and Arabs with Islam. It is

also the reason the three religions, Traditional religion, Christianity and Islam are strongly upheld by their African adherents.

It is interesting to note that the migration of the Israelites have a pattern that reflects their experiences through long period of sojourn in strange lands especially their many years in Egypt as a fallout of Joseph's sales into slavery by his brothers in Genesis 37-45. There is also the bitter experience of Israelites being forced into captivity by the Babylonians in 586 BC for a period of over 48 years until they were allowed to return during the reign of Cyrus the King of Persia (Kayla Armstead, Jessica Elam Miller 2023). The Biblical account of Daniel and his three other Hebrew brethren, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are foregrounded in Daniel chapters 1,2,3,4,5,6. The forced exile experience of the Jews in the Biblical account of Mordecai, a Benjaminite, Esther's cousin and guardian taken captive into Babylon alongside Jehoiachin king of Judah in the book of Esther also shows a pattern of forced migration.(Esther2)

## **Methodology and framework for the Study**

This study adopts a qualitative approach which undertakes a descriptive analysis of Biblical figures who impacted their host communities and brought home development from their land of sojourn as examples from where African diaspora should draw inspiration to repatriate economic prosperity to their home countries. Drawing inferences and excerpts from the Bible for textual analysis, the study examines the lived experiences of some Biblical figures to determine the effects of migration on them, their host community and their ancestral land.

The analytical tool for the study is Intersectionality Theory. This theory was coined in 1989 by Kimberle William Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate. Intersectionality attempts to describe how a system of inequality on the basis of race, gender, religion, cultural identity, ethnicity, class and other forms of discrimination or oppression intersect to engender entirely new form of oppression in a different gab which cannot be ignored. A typical example is the plight of the emasculated African American men who have to deal with racial discrimination as black Americans and emasculation as subordinated men in their social environment. To fight their racial discrimination will still leave them inadequate without fighting the emasculation status as effeminate men. Intersectionality presents itself as a viable tool to analyse ways in which lived experiences guide migrants to understand how multiple forms of inequality converge to create confusion that at times put him in a difficult position. For instance, the Jews suffered persecution, social injustice and oppression on account of race, religious belief and cultural identities in Shushan in the days of Mordecai and Esther. Hamman hated the Jews because Mordecai, a Jew, would not bow to him on account of religious belief and cultural identity. As a result, Hamman plotted the complete massacre of all Jews in the land. It took divine intervention of Esther before the king to avert a pogrom against the Jews in that land.

## **Intersectionality as a Social Theory**

As a social theory, Intersectionality does not consider homogeneity in the understanding of oppression or inequality experienced by the migrant in the host community because issues confronting him cannot be treated in isolation. That is why a holistic heterogeneous consideration is favored given challenges faced by the migrants across different intersections in order to understand and tackle certain social realities.

The theory advocates that combating one form of discrimination or oppression at the expense of another is like leaving the problems unattended to. A typical example was the experience of the three Hebrew men (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) in the book of Daniel who were thrown into the flame of fire for not bowing to the golden image. The same experience Daniel had in Babylon when he was thrown into the den of lions for upholding the tenets of his religion. In the two circumstances, two issues are at stake, the intersection of race and religion which compounded their migration experience and made them vulnerable to the grand conspiracy that could have consumed them. The law of Persia and Medes was made because of them. The fact that they were not Babylonians put them at a great disadvantage coupled with their resolve to preserve their cultural values, faith and religious belief at the risk of their lives. Dan1: 8 “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.” Dan 3: 7-13

## Migration Praxis and ‘Return’ Discourse

Migration is a form of movement by individuals or group of people from one location to the other. It could be intra or inter depending on whether the movement requires the individual or groups do a cross-border movement from one country to the other or from within a given environment. It is a basic human attribute. To Adler and Gielen (2003), the separation of the human species into its myriad of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and racial groups was---and remains---an outcome of migration. Human beings by their very nature are upwardly mobile either in search of better condition of living, greener pasture or forced into migration by war or natural disaster. The post-modern man is even more mobile since his world has become a global village (Marshall McLuhan 2004). This is made possible by the advancement in technologies that have bridged gaps, shorten distances and interconnected humanity across different divides.

Using Chimamanda’s *Americanah*, Oluide (2021) espouses the epistemology of migration praxis and contends that migration is as old as human existence. He says:

Migration is as old as humanity. Historical records detailing the migrations of people leaving places of origin to settle in the other places abound. Whereas the established migrational praxis was always necessitated by political conflicts, religious crises, or other societal contentions, in the present age it is for the search for a better life that serves as the major motivation for migration due to the fact that more people migrate to countries with better infrastructure, better job opportunities,

better health services and good educational facilities. p.138

According to Audrey, Yue (2000), migration is a process people move from one social, historical, economic, geographical circumstances to another. He sees migration as system of movement that is global in nation in which people move and interact across the wide world as they leave their home to resettle in a different location. As they move away from their homes without high expectations, they inadvertently settle in a new location to be members of another human community in search of better life, peace and plenty. Migration as theme in African literary production lends credence to different forms of movement across the world among Africans. In many African literary works, migration is not treated in isolation but with its corollary of 'returns' and its attendant implications. For instance, Irene's *Sweet Revenge* presents Sota as a man caught in the web of the complications of migration to a foreign land where he tried to establish a home at the detriment of the one he left behind in Benin. However, there came a time he needed to return, according to him, to serve his people. This necessity to return usually comes with different complications as the migrants, especially men keep such foreign family as top secret. Kayode Atilade (2021) citing Mehta (1994: 79) attests to this when he says migration and its psychosocial implications constitute a recurrent theme in contemporary Maghribian fiction written in French. According to him:

Events and people in the literary productions emanating from the Maghreb

have often proplematized the notion of Home in such works. Various committed writers have created psychologically alienated characters who often move from one location to another in search of a place where they could refer to as Home. (p.1)

International migration usually occurs when people move across international borders to establish a new residence in a host community. There is always something in focus, which is the crave to establish a new home or new family. Migration could also be a movement of people across international borders or within a country for the purpose of changing their place of abode.

Musa Balonde and Sinan Akcay (2023) see migration as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by experiences before and after the migration decision. In this context, the post-migration experiences are just as significant as the pre-migration experiences in determining migrants' well-being. Migration makes international maintenance of non-territorial ties possible and supplies instruments for perpetuating such a community (Spiro, 2008).

This is a subtle way of interrogating what the migrant has to deal with post migration and in a larger perspective what happens in the event of consideration of a 'return,' known in Nigerian parlance as *Japada*, no matter how long or short the period of migration is. This is a current discourse in the trending topic of *Japa* and the potential for *Japada*. Among Nigerian migrants, for instance, there is a huge concern for the possibility of a 'return' which compels a migrant to factor such possibility in his

decision to migrate. In the current discourse of *Japa*, potential migrants are beginning to put the option of *Japada* on the table. However, as strange as this reality is, there seems to be wisdom in the Yoruba proverbs that says *Ile labo isimi oko* (home coming is the final rest from farm labour).

There are so many concerns in migration discourse and the most critical is that of the host community. This is because it is generally believed that migration has the potential to increase insecurity and pose threat to the host community. In some host communities, migrants are perceived as threat and therefore to be treated with suspicion by the government and security institutions (Bilgili and Weyei, 2019). Seun (2021) says “migration is usually perceived as a threat to human security, negatively impacting several aspects of life” p.264. Ayokunle (2021) opines that there is a point of attraction for migration in what he tagged migration negation. By implication, he says the migrant must weigh different options before taking a decision to move to a particular location especially across the border. He contends that “while non-diasporic mobility is often propelled by city attractions, diasporic mobility insistently bows to foreign appeals.” p.204. Nurudeen (2021) also believes that migrants are particularly attracted to a place they desire to call home by what is available to better their life. According to him, there is a popular assumption that the countries in the global North offer mouthwatering opportunities--- free and functional education, dignified employment, habitable housing, security of life and property, gender equality and human rights protection p.187. All these

privileges are believed to be the driving force propelling Africans, especially the youth to some of these countries and they also determine the country of choice.

## **Religion as a Cultural Thread in Migration Experience: Biblical Figures in Perspective**

Religion plays a significant role as a cultural thread in migration especially of the Jews. It helps to shape their lives and identity in the host communities they found themselves and serves as a unifying force that helped their return to their ancestral home. Like Africans, as the Jews migrate from one nation to the other or move from one environment to the other within the same nation, they do so with their religious belief and practices intact. Religion serves as genuine identity preservation and provides for them a moral compass to survive in a culturally hostile climate. Religion creates a pathway for them to navigate culturally and religiously strange practices alien to them in the host community where they are in minority. This is irrespective of the factors responsible for their migration in the first place.

For Abram, migration was compelled by divine instruction that he should leave Haran, his place of birth and move to a yet a to be determined destination. “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” (Genesis 12: 1). Even at the age of Seventy, Abram did not consider the potential dislocation the decision might have on him and members of his family, he obeyed. “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five



years old when he departed from Haran.” (Genesis 12: 4)

Abram’s experience with migration here was a command from God to move to a designated destination across the border of his country. It was not as result of war but that God’s promise may be fulfilled. In a way, it could still be said that he was compelled to migrate by God. Abram left Haran in the present day Turkey, some 600 miles to Canaan (today, Palestine, Gaza, West Bank, parts of Syria and Jordan). No doubt, Abram brought with him the Jewish culture as he continued to irk a living and raise family in the new destination.

The commandment that came to Moses to go back to Egypt to lead His people to a land flowing with milk and honey was with proof that God was actually involved because Moses sought evidence of God’s involvement. “Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.” (Exodus 3:1). He obeyed the voice of God after obtaining evidence of God’s divine presence, even with his entire family. “So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. (Exodus 4: 20).

Moses migration is not actually to Egypt but he must rescue the Israelites from Pharaoh who enslaved them for the people to migrate to their promised land. He was a fugitive who was raised in the Egyptian palace but fled to Midian after killing an Egyptian Slave master. Midian is today northern area of Saudi Arabia. The migration experience to Moses is such that he must confront Pharaoh in Egypt, free

Israelites before embarking on a mission to lead the people to Canaan. His own migration experience can be categorized as a divine assignment to lead the children of Israel to a land flowing with milk and honey in fulfillment of God’s promise to His people. Although it was a compelling assignment, Moses hearkened to the voice of the Lord to go back to Egypt on a rescue mission for the children of Israel under the oppression of Pharaoh and his slave masters. For over 400 years of harrowing experience under the slave masters in Egypt, Israelites cried for a deliverer before Moses was sent to lead them to their promised land. The years of toiling and excruciating labour in Egypt did not amount to a total waste because they took some things with them to the promised land. Some of these experiences especially cultural and religious internalization, though made them wrong God in their forty years journey in the wilderness, the people benefitted economically and in terms of skill acquisition (Ex31:1-5). The hardship and slavery experiences actually toughened and prepared them for a new life in their land of promise. All the skills and expertise acquired in Egypt helped them in battle, farming and trade.

Joseph’s migration was a result of the hatred and envy of his brothers who wanted to kill him but later sold him into slavery. In Gen. 37:17-18, Joseph was said to have gone after his brothers who have already conspired to hurt him. “Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him.”

Joseph was sold in Dothan (present day Al-Basha area of Palestine) to the Midianites who sold him to Potiphar in Egypt in Gen 37: 36. He became the Prime Minister, wealthy and influential so much so that he came back to bury his father, Jacob, in Mamre. His migration to Egypt was done by force because his brothers decided to sell him to the Midianites who in turn sold him to Potiphar in Egypt. His migration experience became a blessing not only to him but members of his family including those who conspired to sell him into slavery.

Jacob's migration stemmed from a life threatening famine that pervaded the land for which Joseph his son provided a lifeline by inviting him to Egypt where he was in charge of the distribution of food to nations. The Bible says "So Jacob set out from Beersheba. And the sons of Israel carried Jacob their father, their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to carry him." (Genesis 46: 5). This life line gave Jacob and his household the opportunity to escape the famine that threatened their existence. "Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly." (Genesis 47: 27)

Naomi, her husband, Elimelech and their two sons migrated from Bethlehem in Judea to Moab as a result of famine. However, after ten years of sojourn in Moab, Naomi lost her husband shortly after they got to Moab and years later, her two sons also died leaving behind their widows. This sorrowful event also compelled her to return to Bethlehem in Judea with her two widows and this led to a

new migration experience for Ruth who decided to return to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law. For Ruth, migration from the country of Moab to Bethlehem was a result of the death of her husband. Bible says "But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.'" (Ruth 1: 16). In verse 19, the Bible confirms it; "So they both went until they came to Bethlehem." (Ruth 1: 19)

Esther's migration to Shushan was by conquest when the Jews fell into the hands of the Persian Empire under the reign of King Xerxes, the most powerful king around 486BC. Theirs was not as a result of famine or pestilence but they were forced into captivity as a result of the defeat Jerusalem suffered in the hands of the Persian army. In Shushan, the Jews preserved their culture and religious orientation to the effect that they didn't bow to any man. This religious identity made Mordecai to court Haman's anger who plotted to destroy him and indeed, all Jews. In Shushan. Est3: 14-6

Daniel's migration to Babylon was also by conquest. The Bible says "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand." (Daniel 1: 1-2) "In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a word was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belteshazzar. And the word was true, and it was a great conflict. And he understood the word and had understanding of the vision." (Daniel 10: 1). In the land of

Babylon, the three Hebrew men and Daniel preserved their cultural and religious identities at the risk of their lives. They refused to bow to any other god except Yahweh and retained their mode of worship to the only God they knew. For this resolve, Daniel was thrown into the den of lions while Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into a burning furnace. They all came out unscathed because of the trust they have in their God.

## **Findings, Impacts and Lessons from the Bible**

From analysis of the migration experiences of the selected Biblical personalities, it is established that migration takes different characters and shapes. Some were engendered by conquest, some by divine instructions while others were by divine assignment to rescue the children of Israel, or warn a people from impending doom orchestrated by abominable sins that drew the wrath of God.

Findings also revealed that migration can provide relief from famine and scarcity. "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land" (Genesis 12: 10). In the same vein, people may be forced to migrate as a result of persecution or to avoid conflict as it was in the case of Abram who was at loggerheads with Lot, his brother's son, until they separated.

Migration is also seen to provide opportunity for transfer of knowledge, education and technology. As a result of what the children of Israel have been through in Egypt and the wonderful miracles they have attested to, they have learnt to trust and rely on God for the minutest needs to cope with challenges of life.

In Exo 35: 31-35 the Bible describes how God filled Bezalel with His spirit, giving him skill, knowledge and intelligence in craftsmanship such as stone setting, wood carving and metalwork, some of which were used to decorate the house of God. Bible also confirmed that "...Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was mighty in words and deeds." (Acts 7: 22)

Migration grants access to new economic opportunities and resources. Even in Egypt, Israel was said to be exceedingly rich because Joseph was in charge of agricultural proceed, cattle and the distribution of land so much so that the Bible recorded that "Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the country of Goshen; and they had possession and 'grew;, and multiplied exceedingly" Gen.47: 27. However, when they were mandated to move to their promised land, they took advantage of their many years of hard labour to engage in trade and commerce with neighboring nations some with whom they had economic treaties to facilitate trade in metals, precious stones, ornaments, olive oil, grains, purple dye, timbers, and at times in exchange for agricultural produce internally, or along the Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean seas. Given their experiences in agriculture and animal husbandry in Egypt, the children of Israel blended their nomadic/pastoral culture with the craftsmanship and the industry of the Egyptians to create wealth in the land flowing with milk and honey God promised them. For Abram, the divine instruction to migrate provided opportunity to access divine provision as God promised to bless and make him a great nation. "Go from your country and



your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And 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." (Genesis 12: 1-2)

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Religion plays a pivotal role in the many socio-cultural and economic challenges migrants face in their new land of sojourn. Just like the Jews who preserved their cultural identity encapsulated in the tenet of their religion, the Yoruba in Diaspora especially in Brazil and Cuba are able to pass their culture to the next generation because they preserved their belief system wrapped in their religion. Some Yoruba in Diaspora have commitment, engagement and consultation with Ifa. They believe that Ifa consciously provides a cultural cover for their religious belief like the Jews who refused to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. This study has established that when people migrate, especially with the intention of settling down to start a new life, they must have done so either willingly, by divine instruction, as a result of life threatening famine, through persecution or by conquest. However, if they have any reason to return ranging from any of the reasons earlier identified, there must have been great transformation because of culture contact and interaction over time. So it can be stated that when migrants have occasion to go back like the African diasporas' homecoming, there is the possibility of being empowered to contribute to the economic prosperity of their home country. There will inadvertently be skills and knowledge transfer, cultural exchange, entrepreneurship and innovation

opportunities, opportunity to network, and in this global economic environment, Diaspora's remittances and investment.

It is, therefore, recommended that the African Diaspora should learn from the Jews by preserving their culture and religions identities in this age of immorality and neo-colonization. Now that the LGBTQ+ is legalized and pushed across schools in Europe and America, the African Diaspora with already sound cultural values can morally equip their children from generation to generation to navigate potential acculturation in schools and their social milieu. As the African Diaspora return to their ancestral land, some technologies, culture and elements of development and growth that aid development in their country of residence should be transferred for the growth and advancement of Africa.

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