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Divergent Views of Migration: A Multidisciplinary Conversation about Human Mobility in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract

How can insights and theories from contemporary migration research inform the study of biblical texts and extant sources about people on the move? Throughout 2024, the four authors of this article—two biblical scholars, a historian, and an anthropologist—have tackled this question from different angles. This article grows from these ongoing multidisciplinary conversations and falls into three parts. First, we sketch in broad strokes how human mobility has been approached in biblical studies until now. Second, we present a case study in which we read the book of Daniel (chapters 1-6) in dialogue with an ethnographic account and analysis of contemporary migration. Third, we reflect upon the achievements as well as the challenges of this comparative exercise. The article is inherently experimental and dialogical in its form. Hence, it ends on a reflexive note on the role of positionality in multidisciplinary research.

Keywords: *migration, Hebrew Bible, multidisciplinary collaboration, social-scientific approaches, ethnographic analysis, book of Daniel.*

Introduction

Movement has always been and continues to be. Yet, there remains a disconnect between the study of present and ancient worlds of motion. In 2015, Brenda Baker and Takeyuki Tsuda wrote, "this temporal division has

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led to seemingly disparate views of migration, creating a conceptual gulf between those who focus on modern migration and those who study it in the past."[5] The work that follows strives to straddle that gulf.

For the past year, the four authors of this article have collaborated to examine and explore migration in the Hebrew Bible and its ancient context from diverse perspectives and disciplines. A central question guiding our work has been: How can insights and theories from contemporary migration research inform our study of biblical texts and extant materials about people on the move? This article aims to present our experiences of approaching human mobility from a truly multidisciplinary perspective and reflect on the insights gained and the challenges encountered in reading the Hebrew Bible alongside ethnographic accounts and analyses of contemporary movers and mobilities.

The context for our work is the Copenhagen-based research project *Divergent Views of Diaspora in Ancient Judaism*, funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark.[6] It investigates the ancient Judean communities in Mesopotamia and Egypt during the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods. A key goal of the project is to identify, map, and understand the divergent attitudes toward living abroad in the Hebrew Bible and archival sources from Egypt (the Elephantine Papyri) and Babylonia (e.g., the recently published Al-Yahudu documents). We intentionally draw on contemporary migration and diaspora research to structure our analysis and enhance our understanding of these phenomena.

The four authors of the article represent different disciplines and research interests. Frederik Poulsen is a biblical scholar focusing on the Hebrew

[5] Brenda Baker and Takeyuki Tsuda, "Introduction: Bridging the Past and Present in Assessing Migration," in *Migration & Disruptions: Toward a Unifying Theory of Ancient and Contemporary Migrations* (University Press of Florida, 2015), 3.

[6] See https://teol.ku.dk/english/dept/diaspora/ for more information; Independent Research Fund Danmark, Grant Agreement no. 1055-00015B.

Bible as literature and its theological messages. Alexiana Fry is also a biblical scholar, specializing in gender studies and trauma hermeneutics. Kacper Ziemba is a historian with expertise in the ancient world and extra-biblical sources. Ida Hartmann is a classically trained anthropologist who is researching migration and religious commitments among Muslims in contemporary Europe. The idea of bringing together this diverse group of researchers is to ensure a study of human mobility and ancient diasporas from a multidisciplinary perspective—because the study of mobilities is inherently and necessarily transdisciplinary. Not only this, but as the majority of the project is focused and centered around ancient migrations and movement while working to bridge these temporal and conceptual gaps, we work against the notion of "disciplinary isolationism."[7]

Weekly seminars provided the framework for our multidisciplinary endeavor. For each meeting, Ida Hartmann offered an overview of a given topic from a contemporary perspective along with a carefully selected range of relevant research literature. These topics included recent trends in migration and diaspora studies, alongside introductions to core themes such as return migration, generational differences, host authorities, religion, gender, multiculturalism, and post-colonialism. For newcomers, modern migration studies can be a demanding field to enter. Migration studies pivot, not around a shared set of theories or methods, but around the multifaceted empirical phenomenon of mobility. Hence, our ambition in these seminars was not to gain a comprehensive overview of the field of modern migration studies but rather to identify theories, terms, and themes that could illuminate biblical and historical representations of ancient mobility in productive and perhaps surprising ways.

[7] "Specialization has become such a central feature of academia that this specialization—or hyperspecialization—often leads to disciplinary isolationism." T.M. Lemos, "'They Have Become Women:' Judean Diaspora and Postcolonial Theories of Gender and Migration," in *Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Essays in Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Saul M. Olyan (SBL Press, 2012), 105.

Together, we analyzed a number of biblical texts in light of modern studies. For example, we read the patriarch Jacob's desire to be buried in the ancestral tomb in Canaan (Genesis 50) in dialogue with studies of how Turkish migrant workers in Western Europe return to Turkey to bury deceased family members in their ancestral villages.[8] We compared the book of Ruth with ethnographic analyses of Nigerian women who, in pursuit of a livelihood, travel to Europe to engage in sex work.[9] We examined how religious authority travels and translates from the place of origin to diaspora and vice versa in Jeremiah 26-29 and Ezra-Nehemiah, alongside research on present-day Kenyan Pentecostal pastors in the UK.[10] We also read the experiences of Daniel at the Babylonian court alongside studies of Muslim women in Europe who, despite secular restrictions, strive to adhere to Islamic prescriptions, including veiling and praying. We will expand on this final example later in the article.

As such, our approach has been distinctly comparative. The anthropologist Matei Candea defines comparison in broad strokes as "the move which brings together two different entities in order to produce some effect (epistemic, ontological, political, etc.) through a consideration of their differences and similarities."[11] When we have read ethnographic case studies alongside biblical and historical representations of ancient mobility, it is not because we think that Jacob shares some organic link with Turkish migrant workers in Europe. Rather, we regard comparison as a "heuristic device"—that is, as a particular kind of thinking or writing

[8] Osman Balkan, *Dying Abroad: The Political Afterlives of Migration in Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). Cf. the forthcoming article by Frederik Poulsen, "'Bury Me With My Ancestors': Return Migration in the Jacob Narrative," in *Religions.*

[9] Sine Plambech, "'My Body is My Piece of Land:' Indebted Deportation among Undocumented Migrant Sex Workers from Thailand and Nigeria in Europe," *Security Dialogue* 54, no. 6 (2023): 586-601. Cf. the forthcoming article by Ida Hartmann, "Migratory thought: Four dialogues between biblical scholarship and anthropology on the topic of human mobility," in *Religions.*

[10] Leslie Fesenmyer, "Pentecostal pastorhood as calling and career: migration, religion, and masculinity between Kenya and the United Kingdom," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24, no. 4 (2018): 749-766.

[11] Matei Candea, "On two modalities of comparison in social anthropology," *L'Homme* 218 (2016): 5. See also *Comparison in Anthropology: The Impossible Method* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

tool that has some effect on how we read the ancient material. Hence, we also maintain that comparison is not the end product but the point of departure. The juxtaposition of distinct representations of human mobility across time and space and the careful consideration of both their differences and similarities opens up a space for reading familiar biblical texts anew.

We have organized our reflections on doing multidisciplinary work into three major sections.[12] In the first section, we outline the primary approaches to studying migration within Hebrew Bible scholarship generally to position our work within recent trends in the field. In the second section, we present a case study to illustrate one of the ways we have facilitated dialogue between contemporary migration research and ancient material. In the third section, we discuss the insights gained from comparing ancient and modern migration and some challenges we have encountered in our collaborative work.

We have maintained our collaborations' dialogical and experimental ethos in writing, so the article is inherently polyphonic. Our distinct disciplinary identities and research interests speak through the text and do not always do so in unison. As such, the article aims not to hammer out a coherent interdisciplinary approach to the study of ancient mobilities. It may be best to read this article as one that demonstrates *how* we attempted to do this work; this is not a methodological prescription but a polished and incomplete peek into what our many conversations looked like. Thus, we aspire to convey the resonances *and* dissonances, the achievements *and* challenges, that arise when one explores biblical texts and historical sources through divergent views of migration.

[12] To us, "interdisciplinary" denotes an aspiration to fuse different disciplinary perspectives to form a synthesized whole, while "multidisciplinary" names a collaboration that aims to create synergies between different modes of analysis while also allowing disciplinary distinctions and disagreements to remain.

Trends in Biblical Scholarship on Migration

The study of migration in the Hebrew Bible is rapidly developing. For the most part, biblical scholars examined the movement of people in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the early sixth century BCE and the subsequent relocation of Judeans to Mesopotamia, a period known as "the [Babylonian] exile."[13] Since the 1980s, however, the scope of studying migration related to biblical texts has expanded significantly, warranting, to us, a schematic division.

We tentatively divide recent approaches to migration in biblical scholarship into three major groups: 1) *Historical-archeological approaches*, which investigate the historical knowledge of migration and movement within the ancient Near East during the period when the biblical texts were written, broadly speaking in the first millennium BCE.[14] 2) *Literary approaches*, which examine the textual representations of migration, focusing on the narratives of biblical migrants and the diverse metaphors and imagery used to convey migratory experiences. 3) *Social-scientific approaches*, which seek to position biblical texts in dialogue with sociological, anthropological, and psychological analyses, reading the migratory experiences depicted in the Bible alongside contemporary social structures, patterns, and migration experiences. The following overview is not intended to be exhaustive but aims to highlight some of the key developments and significant studies within each of the three primary approaches:

1) *Historical-archeological approaches* consider the historical background of migration in the Hebrew Bible. In doing so, there is an immediate acknowledgment of the variety of forms of migration and mobility one

[13] A decent overview of scholarship on "the exile" until 2010 can be found in John Ahn, *Exile as Forced Migrations: A Sociological, Literary, and Theological Approach on the Displacement and Resettlement of the Southern Kingdom of Judah* (De Gruyter, 2010), 8-27.

[14] Hereafter, ancient Near East will be abbreviated to ANE.

can evaluate in the ANE. Archaeological advances such as ancient DNA, isotope, and other data analyses have been challenging our older models and perceptions of the ancient world, pushing for a more complex and rich understanding of what was.[15] Many extant, or "non-biblical," sources about ancient migrations are found in administrative documents, in inter-state treaties, and in royal correspondences that mention instances of movements of either groups or individuals.[16] Using a temporal perspective, we divide migratory movements in the ANE into permanent/long-term and short-term migrations for some semblance of categorization.

The first category, permanent and/or long-term, most often comprises migrations of larger groups due to structural crises or imperial policies of mass displacement and resettlement. Since the beginning of its history, the ANE has been a theatre of large-scale migrations that further changed the internal ethnic composition of the region. One wave of such movement occurred in the late second millennium at the turn of the Late Bronze Age. Scholars attribute the spread of Arameans into the Levant and the Sea Peoples' invasions of Egypt and other Eastern Mediterranean countries to political, economic, and climatic factors taking place in the last centuries of the second millennium BCE that resulted in the so-called Late Bronze Age collapse.[17] Another form of "permanent" migration was the practice of imperial mass forced displacement and resettlement. Three empires of the first millennium—Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian—undertook mass forced displacements and subsequent resettlements of populations on conquered territories.[18] Such policies

[15] See Megan Daniels, ed. *Homo Migrans: Modeling Mobility and Migration in Human History* (State University of New York Press, 2022).

[16] For an overview of migration and mobility in the ANE, see Eric M. Trinka, *Cultures of Mobility, Migration, and Religion in Ancient Israel and Its World* (Routledge, 2022), 55-107.

[17] See Pekka Pitkänen, *Migration and Colonialism in Late Second Millennium BCE Levant and Its Environs: The Making of a New World* (Routledge, 2019); Carolina López-Ruiz, *Phoenicians and the Making of the Mediterranean* (Harvard University Press, 2022).

[18] Bustenay Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Reichert, 1979); Chiara Matarese, *Deportationen im Perserreich in teispidisch-achaimenidischer Zeit* (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2021); Ido Koch, "Mass

could serve as a punishment measure and/or so-called "development-induced" displacement where uprooted communities' members were used as labor. The most widely-known example of this policy—the Neo-Babylonian resettlement of Judeans to Mesopotamia at the beginning of the sixth century—shows that these two policies were not mutually exclusive.[19] When small groups/individuals are concerned, occurrences of elite members moved as a result of dynastic marriages,[20] as hostages, for cultural education/imperial indoctrination,[21] and as imperial tribute obligations.[22]

The second category, short-term migrations, includes movement resulting from trade, diplomacy, communication, and military campaigns. Even the seasonal nomadism of the Persian great kings moving between the capitals of the empire with their entourages is a particular case.[23] Indeed, the individual mobility of state functionaries traveling for various reasons such as scribes for training, functionaries for extraction of resources from the imperial peripheries, physicians, and soldiers or mercenaries (but some members of military colonies could migrate

Deportations – To and From the Levant during the Age of Empires in the Ancient Near East," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 11 (2022): 3-9.

[19] On Judeans in Babylonia, see Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE* (Brill, 2020).

[20] Alan R. Schulman, "Diplomatic marriages in the Egyptian New Kingdom," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (1979): 177-193.

[21] Like Jehoiachin, the penultimate king of Judah. Ernst F. Weidner, "Jojachin, König von Juda, in Babylonischen Keilschrifttexten," in *Mélanges syriens offerts à Monsieur René Dussaud par ses amis et ses élèves 2*. (Geuthner 1939), 923–935; Alstola, *Judeans*, 78.

[22] Such as Herodotus' mention of "five hundred boys for castration" from "Babylon and the rest of Assyria" and "a hundred boys and a hundred young girls" every fifth year from Colchis as a part of regular payment of tribute set by Darius I (Hdt. III.92; 97). The Neo-Assyrian sources also mention the presentation of young girls to the king, see Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennia BC* (University of Toronto Press, 1991), A.0.101.1, iii 67. These practices may also be the background for Esther 2:2-3, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther: Achaemenid Court Culture in the Hebrew Bible* (I.B. Tauris, 2023), 127-138.

[23] Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Eisenbrauns 2002), 186-9.

"permanently/long-term," like the Judean community at Elephantine)[24] are all forms of short-term movements.

Trade and merchants, including the military, could fall into both categories. The Assyrian Bronze Age merchant colony in Anatolian Kanesh proves that trade could create long-term establishments outside the home country.[25] In the context of Judeans in Babylonia, we may mention the family of merchants from Sippar who were "royal merchants" and would travel outside of Babylonia for a shorter period.[26]

From an ancient historical perspective, it is at the very least clear that migrations in the ANE took various forms. Very few could travel for pleasure or out of their own will. Most migration during this time period seemed to involve some form of coercion, whether in the form of state-sponsored forced resettlement or due to political, economic, and/or climatic upheavals in the country of origin.

2) *Literary approaches* to migration in the Hebrew Bible focus on the textual representations of migrants and migration, engaging with methods such as narrative criticism, rhetorical analysis, and metaphor theory. It is noteworthy that different books and passages address migration in distinct ways and employ a variety of literary genres. These include historiographical works, such as the chronicle-like account in 2 Kings 24-25 of the destruction of Jerusalem and the relocations of some Judeans to Babylonia, or Ezra-Nehemiah's description of the "return" of the Judeans to Judah; novella-like stories, such as those about Ruth, Daniel, and Esther which narrate the experiences of individuals in new cultural contexts; laments, such as Psalm 137, which mourn the (imagined) realities of life

[24] Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (University of California, 1968); Gard Granerød, *Dimensions of Yahwism in the Persian Period: Studies in the Religion and Society of the Judaean Community at Elephantine* (De Gruyter, 2016).
[25] Mogens Trolle Larsen, *Ancient Kanesh: A Merchant Colony in Bronze Age Anatolia* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[26] Alstola, *Judeans*, 79-101.

in Babylonia; and prophetic oracles, such as Isaiah 40-55, which envision a return to Jerusalem.

Central to these approaches is recognizing biblical texts as literary creations characterized by a polyphony of divergent literary voices. Increasing attention is being given to the role of language and metaphors in biblical texts about migration. For example, the prophets often express, structure, and cope with migration experiences through their writing.[27] A key idea in this scholarship is that migration in biblical texts does not merely reflect actual traumatic events; "the exile" is also an epoch, creating a literary thematic that the biblical authors addressed and reworked in various ways. Earlier traditions about the ancestors were reshaped and retold to become stories about migration: Abraham and his family traveling as strangers, the escape and return of Jacob, and Moses' "homelessness" in the wilderness and his burial outside of the Promised Land.[28]

In addition to reading these stories *as* literature, scholars examine how these stories were created to address issues and challenges faced by their authors due to their migratory situations and settings. One example is the book of Ruth, which, on a narrative level, depicts a post-migration situation and may reflect the negotiation of social boundaries in the post-exilic period.[29] Central to such readings is the question of how the narrative space is constructed to accommodate communal issues and how the story seeks to shape or alter the perspectives of its first audience. Another example is the literary representation of female mobility in the

[27] Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor, *Enduring Exile: The Metaphorization of Exile in the Hebrew Bible* (Brill, 2011); Mark J. Boda, Frank Ritchel Ames, John Ahn, and Mark Leuchter eds., *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration* (SBL Press, 2015); Jesper Høgenhaven, Frederik Poulsen, and Cian Power eds., *Images of Exile in the Prophetic Literature: Copenhagen Conference Proceedings 7–10 May 2017* (Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

[28] Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor, "Displacement and Diaspora in Biblical Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford University Press, 2016), 498-508.

[29] Danna Nolan Fewell, "The Ones Returning: Ruth, Naomi, and Social Negotiation in the Post-Exilic Period," in *Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible*, eds. Kathrine E. Southwood & Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 53-66.

Hebrew Bible, which invites readers to imagine the diverse forms of women's journeys.[30] Even as fictional texts, these narratives can be seen as documents of cultural history, grounded in the social realities of their authors and revealing ancient attitudes toward travel and movement. Both of these examples reflect attempts to use biblical narratives to "reconstruct" or gain insight into the social realities behind the stories and those who created them.

3) *Social-scientific approaches* place biblical texts in close dialogue with insights and methodologies from modern migration studies and related disciplines. A pioneer was Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, who applied sociological methods to study sixth-century BCE biblical literature.[31] Following these footsteps, John J. Ahn sought to examine the social structures of forced migration. Drawing on contemporary theories and case studies of migration, economics, and generational issues among refugees, he unsettled the monolithic picture of exile into distinct "waves" of forced migrations in the sixth century BCE and hypothesized the identity formation of each successive generation of Judeans living in Babylon.[32] Dalit Rom-Shiloni has applied sociological and psychological methodologies to understand the homeland-diaspora relationship and the internal debate on identity among various Judean groups in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.[33] Finally, a recent volume of articles has explored the potential of social-scientific research on recent migration in the prophetic books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.[34]

[30] Elisa Uusimäki, "An Intersectional Perspective on Female Mobility in the Hebrew Bible," *Vetus Testamentum* 82 (2022): 745-768.

[31] Daniel Smith-Christopher, *Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Meyer Stone Books, 1989); *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Fortress Press, 2002).

[32] Ahn, *Exile as Forced Migrations.*

[33] Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *Exclusive Inclusivity: Identity Conflicts Between The Exiles And The People Who Remained (6th-5th Centuries BCE)* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

[34] C.L. Crouch and C.A. Strine eds., "Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Social Scientific Study of Involuntary Migration," *HeBAI* 7 (2018).

R.S. Sugirtharajah noted in his work on postcolonial criticism that one of the key ways texts were read with "diaspora" in mind was to do so through similar or parallel diasporic experiences.[35] While the above examples reflect this tendency, as many use case studies to articulate their interpretations, this can also be done in divergent ways. One example of this, written particularly about Latine experience, is how Jacqueline Hidalgo and Efraín Agosto discuss the relation to the Bible and its use "in the midst of, or in response to" [their] histories of migration.[36] This does not always leave textual re-reading as paralleling past experiences and studies but as re-reading *with* those in current (also parallel) migratory situations. These approaches ask: How might folks with a particular standpoint and context understand biblical texts that convey mobility?[37] How might current migrants *use* the Bible to understand their journeys? These two questions are not disconnected from one another, and often, this work can also be ethnographic while engaging in reception criticisms.[38]

On the one hand, each of these three approaches tries to achieve different and, to some extent, contradictory things. On the other hand, the boundaries between these approaches are not clear-cut. Many of our difficult discussions revolved around clarifying *what* we are doing and *why*.[39] How can these approaches speak well to each other? In the

[35] R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 188.

[36] Efraín Agosto and Jacqueline Hidalgo eds., *Latinxs, the Bible, and Migration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[37] Some of this can also be similar to "Contextual Bible Study," an oft-used tool in South Africa (and beyond) as seen by the Ujamaa Centre, which also seeks to use the Bible for social justice/transformation: http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/RESOURCES_OF_UJAMAA/MANUAL_STUDIES.aspx.

[38] A project of Ida Hartmann and Alexiana Fry was to see how or if these approaches could dialogue further during a co-lead workshop in September 2024, the proceedings of which will be published in a special issue of *Religions.* https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/1MU6QS0HX5.

[39] Sugirtharajah argues that a future of diasporic hermeneutics would embody much of what we think diasporic *being* is: hybrid, renegotiating, juxtaposition, interrogation, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation,* 191-196. Although the project is working at highlighting divergent views of diaspora in ancient perspective, we are not seeking to create a hermeneutics *per se,* although, this call for a future hermeneutics is a magnificent aim.

following "case study" and subsequent discussion, we work through this question without ever working it out entirely.

Case-Study: *Daniel* and the Proverbial Lion's Den of the Social-Scientific Approach

The book of Daniel includes a fascinating collection of legends and visions.[40] The first part of the book, chapters 1-6, contains a series of scenes or sitcom-like "episodes" that narrate the fates of four Judeans at the Babylonian court. Parts of these stories may have emerged already in the Neo-Babylonian period where the stories take place. As such, they could be read as vaguely reflecting the experiences of the Judeans who were forcefully relocated from Jerusalem by the Babylonians to rural areas of Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, the present form of the material appears to have been reworked and expanded in the following centuries, and the book we now have likely derives from as late as the second century BCE.[41]

Within the last 50 years or so, scholars have approached the book of Daniel as literature about life in the diaspora. At one end of the spectrum, the book has been thought to express an ideal lifestyle in a migratory setting, and Daniel has been perceived as a role model for Judeans of the diaspora.[42] At the other end, the book has been read as resistance against the empire, a desperate cry of a suppressed minority making fantasies about a better life and revenge against its enemies.[43] According to the

[40] Frederik Poulsen, "Daniel mellem to verdener: Diasporamotiver i Daniels Bog 1-6," *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 83, no. 1–2 (2020): 22-40.

[41] For an overview of recent theories, see John J. Collins, Frank Moore Cross, and Adela Yarbro Collins, *Daniel: a Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Fortress Press, 1993), 24-38; Carol A. Newsom, *Daniel: a Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 6-12.

[42] W. Lee Humphreys, "A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973): 211-223.

[43] Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "Prayers and Dreams: Power and Diaspora Identities in the Social Setting of the Daniel Tales," in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception, Volume 1*, eds. John J. Collins & Peter W. Flint (Brill, 2001), 266-290.

latter, chapters 1-6 are satire against the empire, criticizing its rule through humor, exaggerations, and ridicule of its kings.[44]

However, the significant challenge here is that a historical approach may not be attainable. The book itself does not give us much information about the social-historical reality of Judean communities in Babylonia in the sixth century or even at a later date,[45] nor are extant cuneiform sources about Judeans in Babylonia helpful when reading the book.[46] Instead, as readers, one encounters a fictitious world that does not seem to reflect its historical background in any clear or direct way. Its tales are narrated as court stories—an apparently popular genre in the ancient world—and we should, therefore, expect several literary features inherited from this tradition of story-telling.[47]

In some of the stories, Daniel and his friends' efforts to hold on to their ancestral customs within the Babylonian court are drawn into clear relief.[48] In chapter one, Daniel, referring to concerns for his health,

[44] David M. Valeta, "Court or Jester Tales? Resistance and Social Reality in Daniel 1-6," *Perspectives on Religious Studies* 32 (2005): 309-324.

[45] The *terminus ante quem* for the "Tales of Daniel" (chapters 1-6) is their addition to the "Apocalypse of Daniel" (chapters 7-12) by the Hellenistic author, who wrote the latter part between the outbreak of the Maccabean revolt and the Jews' retaking of the Temple in 166-165 BCE, see Newsom, *Daniel*, 114. Most scholars agree that "Tales of Daniel" were written as individual compositions, and some may go back to the end of the Neo-Babylonian period. However, more exact dating is impossible. Moreover, they contain false information from the historical point of view (e.g. Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus, not Nebuchadnezzar, as in Dan 5:11-12). Thus, they cannot be used for any historical reconstruction of Judeans in Babylonia in the Neo-Babylonian period. For chapters 1-6, see Newsom, *Daniel*, 84-92 and brief remarks in Alstola, *Judeans*, 36.

[46] Cuneiform texts about Judeans in Babylonia are discussed thoroughly in Alstola, *Judeans*, 2020. The only sources relating to Judeans in the court are the so-called Weidner Tablets (or Jehoiachin's Rations Tablets), which mention food rations given to the deposed king Jehoiachin and his sons (Weidner, "Jojachin"). Although other Judeans appear on the lists, the texts do not provide us with more detailed information on Judeans' at the Neo-Babylonian court; see discussion in Alstola, *Judeans:* 50-78.

[47] Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (Fortress Press, 1990).

[48] We refer to Daniel and his companions' customs and traditions as "ancestral" because it is the term that best describes Daniel's *emic* view that he is worshiping the God of his father (2:23). Initially, we used the broader and more abstract category of religion but this generated lengthy discussions of whether we could appropriately speak about religion among the ancient Judeans. In Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), he convincingly argued that today, a particular definition of religion has gained salience; one in which religion is, at once, thought to be a *sui generis* phenomenon that exists independent of time and place and, at the same time, is defined very specifically as a domain of life that is separate

requests to consume water and vegetables rather than the food and wine provided from the king's table. In chapter two, the Babylonian king threatens to annihilate all of his courtiers if they fail to retell and interpret a dream he has had. In response, Daniel and his friends seek help in prayer to God and are granted the strength and wisdom necessary to meet the king's impossible demands. In chapter six, Daniel is thrown into the lion's den for ignoring the royal decree that forbids prayer to anyone but the king for 30 days. Instead, Daniel continues to pray to his God, seemingly stressing the visibility, perhaps even the conscious display, of his act of disobedience.

The first part of the Book of Daniel can thus be read as a series of stories that spring from and reflect upon the Judeans' migratory experiences. Together, these episodes raise a string of broader questions: How do people who have been displaced from their homeland negotiate between their ancestral traditions and the expectations and demands of their societies of residence? How do these negotiations change ancestral traditions? How do these societies respond to the arrival of "foreign" traditions and customs?

Anthropological Perspectives on Migration and Minoritized Traditions

For modern migration researchers, these questions have a familiar ring. The interplay between religious commitment and migratory experience has been explored in a wide range of ethnographic contexts, including

from other spheres, most importantly politics, the economy, and science. Such an idea of religion, Asad says, is neither neutral nor natural, but distinctly modern and protestant/secular. Religion, similarly, would not have been seen as a distinct or separate entity in ancient conceptions.

among Indian Hindus in the US, Ghanean Pentecostalists in the UK, Jews in Denmark,[49] and European Muslims.

Jeanette Jouili has, for instance, explored how Muslim women in France and Germany negotiate their religious obligations to pray and to veil within a public sphere where these practices are met with restrictions and suspicion.[50] In line with paradigmatic anthropological studies of Islam,[51] Jouili emphasizes that, for her Muslim research participants, prescribed religious practices are first and foremost means to fulfill divine commands and bodily "technologies" for cultivating and perfecting a pious self in alignment with the Islamic tradition. However, she adds, in a diasporic context marked by growing Islamophobia, Islamic practices also emerge as a key site for negotiating and transforming minority-majority relationships.

To grasp this more politicized dimension of religious practice, Jouili invokes Michel de Certeau's distinction between "strategies" and "tactics."[52] Strategies refer to how persons or institutions in power organize and regulate spaces and social relations according to their ideologies and norms. Tactics refer to the creative but often inconspicuous ways in which individuals and groups circumvent, unsettle, or re-appropriate prescribed conventions.[53]

The notion of strategies enables Jouili to highlight the legal, normative, and affective frameworks that prevent or restrict the expression of

[49] Peggy Lewitt, Melissa Barnett, and Nancy A. Khalil, "Learning to pray: Religious socialization across generations and borders," in *Mobile Bodies, Mobile Souls,* eds. Mikkel Rytter and Karen Fogh Olwig (Aarhus University Press, 2011): 139-159; Leslie Fesenmyer, "Pentecostal pastorhood"; Andrew Buckser, *After the Rescue: Jewish Identity and Community in Contemporary Denmark* (Springer, 2003).

[50] Jeanette Jouili, "Negotiating secular boundaries: Pious micro-practices of Muslim women in French and German public spheres," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17, no.4 (2009): 455-470, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2009.00082.x.

[51] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2005). Charles Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscapes: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

[52] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven Rendall (University of California Press, 1984).

[53] Jouili, "Negotiating secular boundaries," 461.

Islamic commitment in French and German public spheres. A headscarf ban can be seen as part of a strategy, and so can the reluctance to establish prayer rooms on university campuses or the prejudices that assume veiled women to be suppressed and non-modern. With the notion of tactics, Jouili foregrounds the variety of ways in which her research participants vocally challenge or discretely evade restrictions and, in so doing, combine their participation in public life with their adherence to Islamic prescriptions.

The tactics invoked by Jouili's research participants fall within a continuum stretching from a high degree of visibility to complete invisibility.[54] At one end of the spectrum, we have Muslim students campaigning for a designated prayer room at their university, where they perform their prayers collectively at the heart of the university campus. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we have other students who pray in hiding or opt for the Islamically sanctioned practice of "internal praying," that is, going through the obligatory prayer movements in the mind but not with the body. In the middle of the spectrum, we have different modes of veiling, which both signal Muslim identity and attempt to "re-signify" the connotations of that identity, for instance, by veiling in a way that abides by European fashion codes and thus expresses both Islamic modesty, but also the virtues individualism, creativity, and autonomy celebrated in Germany and France.

Strategies, Tactics, and Body Technologies in the Book of Daniel

What happens if we read the book of Daniel through the analytical framework developed by Jouili?

[54] Jouili, "Negotiating secular boundaries," 457.

In chapter 1, we are told that Daniel and his friends belong to a group of handsome and bright young men who are taken to court to serve the king. Here, they are being trained as scribes for three years. They are given Babylonian names, taught the local language and cultural traditions, and provided food from the royal banquet (1:3-7). Inspired by Jouili's reading of de Certeau, we might view the scribal training as a Babylonian strategy for shaping the minds and the bodies of the four Judeans in alignment with Babylonian ideals and customs. As such, the scribal training becomes part of a broader assimilatory project of erasing the Judeans' cultural particularity and incorporating them into the fold of Babylonian subjects.

Alongside the story of apparent "integration" runs a counter-narrative of quiet refusals and open resistances. We may approach these as tactics and, as a thought experiment, try to locate them on the in/visibility spectrum identified in Jouili's analysis. At one end of the spectrum, we could place Daniel, who, in chapter six, prays to his God in "plain sight" despite, or perhaps because, the king has signed a decree forbidding petitions to any God or human but the king.

> "Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. Then those men watched (or rushed in) and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God" (6:10-11 NRSVUE).

We can read this prayer as a well-established technology for cultivating Daniel's attachment to his ancestral God through repetitive bodily supplication. But with Jouili's analysis in mind, we can also ask if, in this very posture of supplication, performed by the "open windows" (6:10) and in knowing contradiction with the king's command, there also lies a blatant act of resistance. Despite apparent differences, there seems to be

a resemblance between the prayer scene in chapter 6 and that described by Jouili of the Muslim students praying in the middle of the university campus. In both instances, performing one's prayers in complete and deliberate visibility emerges as a tactic to claim the right and the space to follow a minoritized tradition.

At the opposite end of the in/visibility spectrum, we could place the prayer in chapter two. Here, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, has a disturbing dream and demands that the wise men in court retell and interpret it. If not, all will be killed. Daniel first uses his diplomatic skill to negotiate with one of the representatives of the Babylonian king—the royal official Arioch—to get more time to solve the situation (2:15-16). Then, he assembles his Judean friends and instructs them to pray to the God of their ancestors to grant them the wisdom necessary to meet the king's demands. The text does not explicitly describe this prayer as secret or invisible. Still, it indicates its concealed nature: the prayer takes place in the home of the Judeans (2:17), and, appearing just before Daniel's night vision (2:19), the prayer also seems to have been shielded by nightfall. Perhaps the Judeans, like Jouili's research participants practicing "internal praying," are deliberately sheltering their prayer as a tactic to continue worshipping their God, but without attracting the attention and wrath of the authorities?

Between these poles of visibility and invisibility, we have the scene from chapter one, which may be read as an act of resignification. Here, scholars have seen Daniel's refusal to eat the king's *patbag*—his food or perhaps a particular meat—as an early testimony to the observance of kosher dietary laws (1:8-12). Drawing on Jouili, we may see such dietary practice as a self-technology through which Daniel tries to cultivate and perfect his body in alignment with the commands of his God. Read in this way, the body becomes medium, not only for expressing Daniel's attachment to his ancestral customs but also for actively nurturing that attachment through

ongoing practice. At the same time, we may see Daniel's refusal as a tactic for negotiating his position at the Babylonian court.

It is especially noteworthy that, in this scene, Daniel re-signifies his adherence to ancestral customs so that they may not set off the Babylonian authorities. In Jouili's analysis, some Muslim women manage to uphold their veiling practice, despite imposed constraints, by "aestheticizing" their style of dressing. To most non-Muslims, their outer appearance now registers less as an expression of religious piety but more as one of "ethnic fashion."[55] Daniel may be employing a similar tactic of "re-signification" when he convinces the Babylonian guard that vegetables and water are a suitable diet for him and his friends, not because it is in alignment with their ancestral tradition, but as a means to cultivate bodily health and strength, assets also valued by the Babylonian court. As such, the quotidian domain of dietary practices emerges as a site where Daniel and his friends, at once, hold on to their ancestral identity while also reshaping that identity to appeal to the host society and its authorities; a domain, in other words, where compliance and resistance are entangled and mutually constitutive. In the case of Daniel and his friends, this successful negotiation of dietary habits earned them both the rewards of God, who gave them "knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom (1:17)" and the admiration of the king, who came to perceive the Judeans as the most talented and loyal men (1:18-21).

To sum up, the analytical framework developed by Jouili enables us to foreground particular narrative contours in the rich and multifaceted tales about Daniel and his companions at the Babylonian court. The conceptual tension between self-technologies and tactics allows us to highlight how a ritual or custom can, at once, strengthen the attachment to one's ancestral God and be a site for negotiating one's relationship with the local political authorities. The fine-grained ethnography, on which

[55] Jouili, "Negotiating secular boundaries," 464.

Jouili bases her analysis, reminds one of the pivotal role of the body in this dual pursuit. In addition, the conceptual pair of strategies and tactics offers a nuanced perspective on the interplay between assimilation and resistance, both mutually exclusive and co-constitutive. This allows us to explore the nitty-gritty details of how Daniel and his friends try to hold on to their identities and their God *within* a Babylonian setting that demands their obedience and how when they succeed in maintaining their ancestral particularity, that also earns them the recognition of the Babylonian king. The analytical framework developed by Jouili can thus serve as a heuristic device for opening up the complexities *and* ambiguities in the text.

Using our reading of Daniel as a jumping-off point, we will reflect more broadly on the strengths and pitfalls of exploring mobility in the Bible through multidisciplinary perspectives.

Achievements and Challenges

There are several gains to reading a biblical text like the book of Daniel in dialogue with research on modern migration:

First, Jouili's work offers a new perspective on a series of biblical stories studied exhaustively for centuries. The heuristic exercise of comparison sharpens our analytical senses, enables us to engage elements in the text that might have been unnoticed, and sparks our imagination to ask better questions. In our case study, reading Jouili's work together with the book of Daniel generates questions such as: would Daniel understand his acts as resistance, or would they be understood as something else? Are there parts of what the Judeans learned in the Babylonian court that they enjoyed, even brought into their own practices? Does Daniel's decision to

eat water and vegetables instead of the King's *patbag,* and the positive effects of this, potentially change the customs of the powerful?

Second, the comparison also provides us with a more analytical language, helping us to avoid simply reproducing the language of the biblical text. The concepts of "strategy," "technology," and "tactic," as well as the continuum of "visibility" and "invisibility" for those subjugated to those in dominant positions of power, create helpful handles by which to have a better understanding of the text. This new language also brings a texture that is too often missed or siloed. It highlights the power dynamics between different communities and the entanglement and mutually reinforcing aspects of embodiment and spatiality. Again, this creates further questions: How might Daniel's actions shift and change the spaces he is in, although minoritized? Could this shift even the perceived, stable hierarchy? Although we see this singular character move all along the in/visibility spectrum in relation to these technologies and tactics, in Jouili's study, many different characters who shared the commonality of practicing Islam navigated their bodies in different ways and in different places at different times. Would it be different if Daniel was a woman?[56] Does the book only depict this negotiation in ways their community would positively receive as a didactic tool? Are there other tactics and technologies that could have been seen historically? In short, engaging with Jouili's study opens a critical analytical space for new interpretations of this text and potentially others.

Third, the act of comparison not only makes us aware of similarities but also reminds us how different the two cases we bring together are. Often, the differences are obfuscated when using a social-sciences approach to reading the Bible. While there is much to gain from reading Jouili's study alongside the book of Daniel, the exercise should foster an awareness of the different conditions in the biblical world compared to ours. The

[56] Is it possible the book of Esther answers this?

differences, or perhaps the inability of some of the book of Daniel to be described in some of this language, could also highlight particularities that are glanced over in the story. We cannot gloss over the realities that Jouili's field study concerns real people in contemporary Europe, while the biblical text portrays fictional characters in a literary universe written at a distance from what is being narrated. On a larger scale of differences, while migrants today move between nation-states, immigration authorities, and national identities, the biblical texts reflect an ancient world with profoundly different social structures without clear borders and defined ethnicities.

We consider this greater awareness or appreciation of the "foreignness" of the ancient world and its literature to be a necessary result of our attempts to read the Bible alongside the experiences of contemporary migrants. On the one hand, this awareness encourages us to be more sensitive when we engage in such comparisons. On the other hand, this gap between our world and the world of the ancient texts points to some prevalent challenges we have encountered repeatedly during our conversations over the past year. This work does not necessarily fill the gap; in some cases, it seems to simultaneously grow and shrink the distance the approach attempts to bridge. These challenges concern this major division between "old" and "new," that is, the ancient world and modern realities. We have wrestled with four of them in particular:

The Modern vs Pre-Modern Context

As hinted at previously, the first issue concerns the differences between the socio-political topographies that ancient and contemporary movers try to navigate. Modern states usually have securitized borders and well-defined policies toward persons arriving on their territories. It applies to

"organized migration," where states expect migrants to arrive[57] and situations like refugee crises.[58] On the supranational level, international conventions, frameworks, and institutions also regulate the status of refugees and asylum seekers.[59] The administration of modern movers is, in other words, centralized, standardized, and minutely monitored. The situation in the ANE was fundamentally different. While we may see some mechanisms regulating forcibly resettled populations in the Neo-Babylonian Empire, we do not know if the imperial administration applied the same standardized framework every time a new community was brought into Babylonia. Angelika Berlejung recently proposed using the World Bank checklist developed to avoid impoverishment risks of the "development-induced displaced and resettled persons" to approach forcibly resettled Judeans at the beginning of the sixth century.[60] Given the discrepancies between the modern and the ancient context, however, such an approach remains risky,[61] and we should be very cautious in projecting modern legal conventions and frameworks and the resulting terminology on the reality of the ANE.

Moreover, we must not forget all the qualitative differences between the ancient world and ours regarding communication and mobility technologies. Modern migrants can easily communicate with their

[57] Mark R. Rosenblum and Wayne A. Cornelius, "Dimensions of Immigration Policy", in *Oxford Handbook of the Politics of International Migration*, eds., Mark R. Rosenblum and Daniel J. Tichenor (Oxford University Press, 2012), 245-273.

[58] Cecilia Menjívar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

[59] Giovanni Cellamare, Pietro Gargiulo, Angela Di Stasi, and Ida Caracciolo, eds., *International Migration and the Law: Legal Approaches to a Global Challenge* (Routledge, 2025).

[60] Angelika Berlejung, "A Sketch of the Life of the Golah in the Countryside of Babylonia: Risks and Options of Unvoluntary Resettlement in the Sixth Century BCE," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 11 (2022), 148-88.

[61] See e.g. Trinka, *Cultures*, 21: "In sum, many migration-informed readings proceed from a good-faith initiative to demonstrate the relevance of biblical texts for historical and theological reflection in the present global moment of migration awareness. Likewise, modern migration theory and terminology have been employed by well-intending scholars hoping to deepen insight to the often opaque category of "exile," as well as to counter flat presentations of human movement in the exilic period with textured accounts of varying agency. Nevertheless, the uncritical application of modern migration theory and terminology often fosters more harm than good. Employing these terms uncarefully or for the sake of generating 'cutting-edge' scholarship ultimately undermines the historical enterprise and, more importantly, trivializes the categories according to which migrants literally live and die."

families and friends in their countries of origin in real-time, making maintaining a connection relatively easy. Although communication in ancient empires could be fast and effective (even over long distances), it was often limited to state affairs and administration. Private correspondence occurred, but usually over shorter distances.[62] Holding on to attachments must have required significantly more work in the ANE.

There is a risk of flattening crucial differences between ancient and modern worlds of motion; however, some differences can also be exaggerated to the effect that they overshadow important continuities. At first sight, the gulf between today's fast-paced and highly technological means of transportation and those available to ancient movers appears vast. And yet, even today, many migrants move by foot or cross the Mediterranean in very basic boats. Hence, movers now as then might share some of the challenges, dangers, and losses that intersperse the experience of being *en route.*

Similarly, it is tempting to overdo the contrast between modern migration as a highly individualistic enterprise and ancient migration as primarily a household endeavor. Although some modern moves result from a choice made by an individual who may travel and arrive at a new place alone, this is often not the whole story. In modern contexts, as in ancient contexts, the household and/or kinship group are pivotal in deciding, planning, and facilitating migration. Migration is often driven not by an aspiration for individual self-realization but by a wish to enhance the livelihood of the collective.[63]

[62] Egypt, with its waterway on the Nile, provides a good example. Persian-period ostraca witness sending short, private messages between different places in the country; for some texts, see Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (Routledge, 2010), 758-61. On communication in the Persian Empire, see Henry P. Colburn, "Connectivity and Communication in the Achaemenid Empire," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56 (2013): 29-52.

[63] On household in the ANE, see J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Eisenbrauns, 2001) and Trinka, *Cultures*, 22-26. On the collective component of modern

Emic vs Etic Terminology

Another challenge arising from the abyss between the ancient and the modern context is terminology. How, and to what extent, can terms and concepts developed to analyze contemporary migration flows be used to speak about pre-modern mobilities? From an anthropological point of view, this is a question of how to think and write at the intersection between *emic* and *etic* approaches. While an emic approach seeks to grasp a society, culture, or group of people on their own terms, an etic approach analyses social life based on more general concepts external to the specific context under study.[64] Although the emic/etic debate primarily grew out of fashion in anthropology in the 1990s,[65] most anthropological analyses are still generated as a dynamic interplay between emic and etic approaches.

Reflecting on and explicitly wrestling through this interplay is especially pertinent if one wants to bring modern migration terms and concepts into dialogue with biblical or historical accounts of mobility in the ANE. As Eric Trinka points out, this necessitates a two-step approach. First, it "requires conveying to readers how specific terms and concepts function in their original disciplinary contexts." Second, it entails "articulating the limits of the terms and theories to describe or interpret phenomena beyond the original fields of study."[66] Skipping these steps and jumping straight to an

migration, see Jeffery H. Cohen, "Migration, Remittances and Household Strategies," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 103–14.

[64] Kenneth Pike, "On the emics and etics of Pike and Harris," in *Emic and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, ed. T. Headland, K. Pike, and M. Harris (Sage, 1990), 28-47.

[65] Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota, "Emic and etic," in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stine: http://doi.org/10.29164/20emicetic.

[66] Eric Trinka, "Migration," in *Routledge Handbook of the Ancient Near East and the Social Sciences,* eds. Jason Silverman and Emanuel Pfoh (Routledge, forthcoming).

"uncritical application of such terms typically obfuscates rather than illuminates historical contexts."[67]

Doing this work will reveal that many terms and concepts are too steeped in the modern context to "travel" more than 2500 years back in time and do meaningful analytical work in the ancient world. This, as already mentioned, applies to the dense terminologies developed by international agencies like the World Bank to categorize and regulate contemporary migration flows. It also applies to more analytical concepts, such as *transnationalism,* which describes the circulation of bodies, money, things, and ideas across national borders.[68] While transnationalism has been a gatekeeping concept in modern migration studies for almost three decades, it loses analytical traction when applied to a setting that was not divided into modern nation-states or interconnected by globalization, capitalism, and modern technology.

In our above reading of the book of Daniel, we found that the analytical framework of strategies and tactics moved more easily across historical contexts. This is perhaps because this framework highlights not a specific historically anchored *phenomenon* but rather a *relation*—in this case, a relation between those who have the power to organize social space "from above" and those who strive to inhabit and remake those spaces "from below." But even so, we experienced that reading the ancient past through this framework comes at the risk of "domestication."[69]

For instance, the notion of tactic easily lends itself to an idea of agency as something that is vested within the individual subject and as something

[67] Trinka, "Migration."

[68] Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton-Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects and the Deterritorialized Nation-State* (Gordon and Breach, 1994).

[69] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Routledge, 1995). See also Catherine Chin, "Marvelous Things Heard: On Finding Historical Radiance," *The Massachusetts Review* 58, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 490. "...domesticating the past is a disservice to the past in a factual sense, but it also a disservice to ourselves in an aesthetic and moral sense."

that is expressed through opposition or resistance against the powers that be. Tactics, in other words, is an analytical concept that rests on and reproduces the figure of the individual autonomous agent. However, as several scholars have noted,[70] such an agent is neither natural nor neutral: she is the child of modernity. Hence, the notion of tactics needs some recalibration if we want to transpose it back to the ancient world. Building on our observations above, in this context, it is perhaps more appropriate to talk about the "doers" of tactics as households, kinship groups, or collectives rather than individuals and to consider if the "end goal" of these tactics is less about resisting repression and more a matter of sheer survival.

Such reflections emerge from the discrepancy between etic terms rooted in a modern context and emic terms anchored in the ANE. Sometimes, the discrepancy is so significant that no meaningful dialogue can be forged. In other cases, fruitful insights emerge from the very discrepancy. If we take the time to dwell on and carefully tease out both the resonances and the frictions between modern and ancient terms and concepts, this opens up a space for nuanced and critical reflection on both the continuities and the divergences between ancient and contemporary mobilities and movers. If we ignore or gloss over the discrepancies, we risk domesticating the past in the image of the present.

Ethnographic vs Historical/biblical Material

Many modern migration analyses and concepts are based on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and interviews among living persons, often documenting their migratory experiences in real-time. Hence, ethnographic material tends to be incredibly fine-

[70] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989). Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Subject of Feminism* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

grained. By comparison, historical sources documenting ancient mobilities, particularly about Judeans, are scarce and fragmented. Material outside the Hebrew Bible consists mainly of administrative documents—such as the Al-Yahudu texts from Babylonia—and therefore seldom describe movement from the perspective of movers but from the perspective of the empires and their scribes. This problem of perspective is, to some extent, counterbalanced by biblical texts, which offer a plethora of seemingly intimate and personal narratives about movers. Yet, the nature of this material is complicated by questions of dating, authorship, redaction, and ideology. Hence, while ethnographic representations of contemporary movers might spark our imagination and help us ask new questions about ancient mobilities, time and again, we have had to conclude that the nature and the scarcity of ancient historical/biblical material often did not allow us to answer those questions.

However, the discrepancy between ethnographic and ancient material should not be overstated. In fact, there is an interesting resonance between scholarly conversations about the truth value of biblical and ethnographic accounts, respectively. As mentioned, biblical scholars disagree on whether and to what extent the Bible can be approached as a historical document or only as fabricated literature. Anthropologists have had a similar discussion about the relation between fact and fiction in ethnographic accounts. While, early on, ethnography was regarded as an objective account of reality, there is broad anthropological consensus that the insights generated through fieldwork are considered "partial truths" or even "ethnographic fiction."[71] Research participants share their specific version of reality with the researcher, who, on her end, shapes and forms the account based on the questions she asks and what she

[71] James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture*, eds. James Clifford & George E. Marcus (University of California Press, 1986), 1-26.

decides to write down, first in her notebook and later in the final publication. Yet, from an anthropological perspective, a text does not lose its truth value because it is not objective. The partiality and positionality of the account mean that, when approaching it as a window into reality, we must bear in mind who told the story, when, where, and for what purposes. For an anthropologist, fact and fiction are thus not mutually exclusive but co-constitutive. Perhaps such an approach could also alleviate the tension between reading the Bible as a historical account and as literature because it reminds us that, at some level, even the most fictitious stories reflect and reshape reality.

Ethics and Epistemology

Returning to Candea's definition of comparison referenced in this article's introduction, we should recognize that comparisons create intentional and unintentional effects. Our purpose with this comparative exercise has been to read biblical texts from a new perspective. But the comparison inevitably recasts the contemporary material in a different light. This raises certain ethical and epistemological concerns, here exacerbated by the fact that we have chosen to compare a text from the Hebrew Bible with an analysis of European Muslims. As such, our comparison may be read as continuing previous, and now rightly strongly criticized, orientalist and evolutionary tendencies within biblical scholarship. As Candea himself also articulates about those making comparisons in the social-sciences that could be said to biblical and ancient scholars, "there is a world of difference between articulating a new purpose and simply refusing to take one's own disciplinary history into account."[72]

In the nineteenth century, biblical scholars turned to rediscovering (or reinventing) the historical reality of the biblical world. This was pursued through archeological excavations and cartographical studies of the Holy

[72] Candea, *Comparison in Anthropology*, 23.

Land, as well as "proto-ethnographic" descriptions of the peoples and customs Western explorers encountered in the Ottoman Empire and further east. When these encounters were approached as a window into the ancient Oriental and biblical past, it rested on assumptions that cultures and societies in the Near East were either stagnant or occupied a less developed stage in the same evolutionary process.[73]

The purpose of this article is not to contribute to these Orientalist and evolutionary narratives.[74] The mode of comparison we engage in here is purely heuristic and assumes no organic link between Muslims in contemporary Europe and the biblical figures or their ancient authors. And yet, the fact that we feel compelled to state this clearly shows that comparative work is not innocent. To some extent, it always entails appropriating the words and worlds of particular peoples and instrumentalizing them for generating a form of knowledge—here about the Hebrew Bible and its context—that they have not consented to.

Carrying out this kind of work responsibly requires, at the very least, reflecting carefully on its potential, unintended ethical and epistemological consequences. Furthermore, it necessitates writing in a manner that makes it explicit that the comparison is the result of the scholarly exercise of bringing otherwise disparate representations together rather than the outcome of some "inherent" similarities between the groups, cultures, or dynamics compared—which can create further essentialist depictions in *both* directions.[75] This, then, requires that biblical scholars who wish to engage in this kind of comparative work

[73] Emanuel Pfoh, "Introduction: Social and Cultural Anthropology and the Hebrew Bible in Perspective," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Anthropology and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Emanuel Pfoh, (Bloomsbury, 2023), 2. It should be noted that the continued use of the category "ancient Near East" is also a continuation of this history: near east from *where?*

[74] See above footnote for one of the reasons we cannot fully claim innocence due to the use of the term ANE throughout.

[75] For a good example of undoing some assumptions with nuance, see Marshall A. Cunningham, "Decentering Exile: Methodology and Alternate Versions of Judean History in Nehemiah 9:5–37," *Vetus Testamentum* 74, 4-5 (2023): 531-560.

reflect carefully on why and how they select their ethnographic cases for comparison beyond finding a case study that sparks the imagination.

Concluding Note

After demonstrating what we have been doing, along with the gains and strains achieved, one might wonder if this endeavor is still worthwhile, with the cautions and concerns outweighing the benefits. This brings us to one of the most important outcomes of our discussions: a growing awareness of positionality. We began this article by pointing out our disciplinary backgrounds, and that, alongside personal experience, has undoubtedly shaped and situated how we approach the work of migration in the ancient world. However, it is not enough to be *reflective* after all is said and done; we must also be *reflexive* throughout. What does it do to have four authors with significant privilege analyze work written on, about, or by those often marginalized and minoritized? What are our assumptions from this position when doing this work? Do we allow the materials and other perspectives we work with, both past and present, to interrogate and challenge, maybe even change us? What does this comparison tell us authors about ourselves? We do not and have not all "landed" in the same space; to some extent, this article aims to preserve the distinct voices of each discipline to honor the dialogical and exploratory nature of our conversations. Multidisciplinary work is demanding but rewarding if one truly struggles through the challenges.