

## Special Issue 4.1: Mobility and Migration in the ANE and Bible

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### Editorial

#### Methodological Inheritances and Interventions: Interdisciplinary Study of Mobility, Migration, and Diaspora

Eric M. Trink<sup>1</sup> and Alexiana Fry<sup>2</sup>

At the founding of *Avar* in the winter of 2020, one of the editorial team's stated goals was that, in addition to serving as a home for interdisciplinary ANE scholarship, the journal would publish thematically-oriented issues in which experts from other fields would share methodological reflections and offer constructive interventions for scholars working on various areas of the ancient past. This issue of *Avar* is the first manifestation of that goal. Editors Alexiana Fry and Eric Trink have compiled essays by specialists in the fields of migration, captivity, and diaspora studies with the intention that their work might illuminate new methodological pathways and further expand ongoing discussions of the interdisciplinary study of mobility and migration in/and the ancient Near East and Bible.

The editorial in *Avar*'s inaugural issue introduced the framework by which the founding editors envisioned a relational approach to interdisciplinary

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<sup>1</sup> Eric M. Trink, Emory & Henry University, Emory, VA. Email: [emtrinka@emoryhenry.edu](mailto:emtrinka@emoryhenry.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Alexiana Fry, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, DK. Email: [alexianadry@gmail.com](mailto:alexianadry@gmail.com)



scholarship.<sup>3</sup> One of the expectations put forth was that interdisciplinarity required multi-directional methodological exchange. Scholars of the Bible and the ancient Near East have often drawn from disciplines beyond their own in attempts to enrich textual and historical interpretations. In most cases, specialists from the borrowed disciplines are not invited into robust conversations about the application of their work to other fields. Models for doing this work are not completely absent, but neither are they as robust as we would like.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, this special issue not only brings together the scholars of the Bible and the ANE with specialists from adjacent mobility and migration disciplines, it also includes an editorial rejoinder that synthesizes a path forward for constructively continuing this work.

Writing social history(ies) of movement can be a daunting enterprise. There are by now more than fifty years of research on the movement of goods, people, animals, and ideas in the ancient Near East. Scholars certainly cannot be accused of overlooking the importance of movement as a catalyst of evolving processes of economic development, cultural exchange, social cooperation, and conflict.<sup>5</sup> Yet, while discussions of power, hegemony, imperialism, and even colonization have pervaded many reflections on ancient movement, scholars have, in fact, done little to clarify their theoretical and methodological moorings on the social processes and paradigms that govern perceptions of movement. While the terms mobility and migration are increasingly present in journal and monograph titles, discussions remain tethered to kinetic description rather than propelled toward metaphysical analysis. In truth, both scales

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<sup>3</sup> Isaac M. Alderman, Shane M. Thompson, and Eric M. Trinka, "Interdisciplinarity as Departure and Return: Methodological Boundary Crossing in the Ancient Near East," *AVAR* 1, no.1 (2022): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.33182/aijls.v1i1.2087>.

<sup>4</sup> Eric M. Trinka, "Interdisciplinary Mutuality: Migration, the Bible, and Scholarly Reciprocity," *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025): 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel1605608>.

<sup>5</sup> Eric M. Trinka, "Migration," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Ancient Near East and Social Sciences*, eds. Jason Silverman and Emanuel Pfoh (Routledge, Forthcoming); Eric M. Trinka, "Migration and Refugee Studies as Interpretive Heuristics for the Hebrew Bible: A Review of Recent Scholarship with Commentary," *Currents in Biblical Research* (2025): forthcoming.



of approach are necessary. Ideally, along with the task of description, scholars would contextualize their interpretations of the evidence at hand with analysis of the underlying cultures of mobility they find at play in their own work and in the contexts from which the evidence comes.

Scholars, like infants, emerge in preexisting worlds of language, praxis, hierarchies of power, and other foundational assumptions about the way things are and the way they should be. Different academic disciplines have developed their own “structured structures” that have become “structuring structures,”<sup>6</sup> their own “plausibility structures.”<sup>7</sup> As in all other aspects of our socially-constructed existence, we undergo the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization of the theory and methods of our particular disciplines. It is easy to think of the ontological and epistemological disciplinary structures as sheltered from external influence. Their reification as “the way we do things around here” is often bolstered by the facade of objectivism; these are the ways of thinking and doing that are protected from unwanted external influences, and so they lead us to more accurate conclusions about reality. However, it takes very little time as a member of a scholarly community to realize the permeability of each guild’s socially constructed world. What is striking is that much energy is spent avoiding or even downplaying this permeability for the sake of preserving the notion that a discipline has undergone a coherent trajectory of internal development. Thus, we can write histories of our fields that chart theoretical and methodological shifts without so much as glancing beyond our own disciplinary navels to recognize plausibility structures in other disciplines or lived (in)experience that influence our own methodological worldviews.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford University Press, 1990), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Anchor, 1967), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Although much of the time, the discussion about the so-called bias of experience is wielded against survivors and those who are minoritized; on the “prejudices about who is prejudiced,” see Rebecca Solnit, “Does Experiencing Harm Make You Biased and Untrustworthy? Some Think So,” *The Guardian*, Opinion, November 22, 2021,

While internal disciplinary debates often center around theoretical and methodological best practices, challenging paradigms in a field is not synonymous with excavating the very plausibility structures that sustain that field. Moreover, even though scholars recognize and often chart the developmental trajectories of their fields as prolegomena to their own work, they frequently do so while assuming a certain degree of stasis in other fields, particularly when borrowing from them for interdisciplinary projects. Occasionally, we might speak of seismic shifts that impact a range of fields such as the “turn to the subject,” “the spatial/material turn,” or even the “new mobilities turn.” All too often, though, the fruits of these cross-disciplinary shifts are integrated without discussing the manifold inputs that contributed to their developmental trajectories or the internal spectrums of methods and theory that each represents.

For many, the task of study requires setting things in place. How can one preserve objectivity if the object under observation is constantly changing or moving? Stasis is often seen as the friend of the scholar; static subjects to interview, static textual canons to interpret, static archaeological sites to excavate. All of these help us generate static accounts of reality that pass as structured structures among our plausibility structures. We remember, however, that the predilection for stasis is nothing new when we recall the Aristotelian dictum that the essential state of nature is rest, which unfortunately long lingers among academics and non-specialists alike. Yet, physicists and scholars of mobility know that the natural state of the material world, down to the smallest level, is motion. The appearance of objects at rest—namely, the perceived stasis made possible by gravitational pull—is itself a product of motion. Without motion, there is no space or time. Just as physicists have long worked to understand and explain the essential characteristics of motion and of a world made possible through it, we must seek to

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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/22/does-experiencing-harm-make-you-biased-and-untrustworthy-some-think-so>.



understand movement, migration, and mobility as emergent processes that are part of a kinetic universe. By starting with movement as the compositional reality of reality itself, we hope to challenge the metaphysics of sedentarism that pervades both biblical scholarship and many of the (social) sciences. We recognize that there are deeply embedded tendencies to approach migration and mobility as extra-normal patterns of human behavior imposed on the surface of “normal” life. Thus, we seek to normalize mobility and migration in a broader historical perspective by (re)directing scholarly attention to a wider range of mobile lifeways and theoretical frameworks of analysis. In doing so, we hope to center the socially-constructed classifications of movement and movers, and to deepen discussions of continuities and changes in experiences and perceptions of mobility across time.

We would like to clarify our working definitions of some key registers of movement. *Movement* is a conceptual container for the spectrum of human kinetic experience. As an ontological reality, movement is subject to epistemological framings that arise from intersubjectivity and a matrix of socio-environmental conditions. That is to say, movement is never really *just* movement; rather, it is experienced and interpreted according to patterns within broader plausibility structures of reality. The inescapable fact is that one’s metaphysics of movement shapes their approach to investigating various registers of movement.<sup>9</sup> *Mobility* is the term we use to express the above named socially-constructed and entangled nature of movement as governed by power relationships. We employ the relational framework of *cultures of mobility* to describe the socially cultivated and enforced norms of space and movement.<sup>10</sup> *Migration* is a category of movement differentiated most commonly by causative and chronological scope, and often by geographical scale. It is typically recognized as a

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<sup>9</sup> Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (Routledge, 2006); Michael Flamm and Vincent Kaufmann, “Operationalising the Concept of Motility: A Qualitative Study,” *Mobilities* 1 (2006): 167-89; John Urry, *Mobilities* (Polity, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Eric M. Trinka, *Cultures of Mobility, Migration, and Religion in Ancient Israel and Its World* (Routledge, 2022), 14-26.

longer-term re-locative endeavor, though migrants may also seek or need to return to their place of departure. A prevalent catalyst of migration is insecurity, which can be experienced in economic, social, and physical dimensions, and is often a combination of more than one factor. Communities maintain varying levels of resiliency to disruptive or insecurity-inducing circumstances. Barriers for relocation are high, and persons tend to move only when the insecurity of their present situation becomes intolerable, when they have the appropriate resources to do so, and when the socio-cultural contexts of movement are favorable toward migration.<sup>11</sup> Migration decisions and experiences are shaped by cultures of mobility that persist among a given group. Movement, mobility, and migration are, to some degree, co-constitutive and are not always easily separated in analysis. The idea here is not to artificially differentiate them for the sake of tidy scholarly categories, but to highlight how scholars should be attentive to the different elements that comprise the social construction of movement.

Given that the universe and all of its parts are in constant motion, and that objectivity is relative to objects in motion, why do we seek to study movement past or present without situating method in relation to movement? It seems that many scholars of the Bible and ancient past have accepted the plausibility structures that *real* society is sedentary, and that knowledge construction should function differently from other human enterprises, at least differently from other forms of cultural production. For even while recognizing the socially constructed nature of our daily comings and goings, we seek to safeguard the realm of scholarship from other socio-cultural patterns of behavior so as to preserve its authenticity. This stance strikes us as problematic for a

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffery H. Cohen, *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico* (University of Texas Press, 2004), 30-48; Jeffery H. Cohen and Ibrahim Sirkeci, *Cultures of Migration: The Global Nature of Contemporary Mobility*, (University of Texas Press, 2011), 1-19; Ton van Naerssen and Martin van der Velde, "The Thresholds to Mobility Disentangled," in *Mobility and Migration Choices: Thresholds to Crossing Borders*, eds. Ton van Naerssen and Martin van der Velde (Routledge, 2016), 3-14.



number of reasons, namely because it stands at odds with the recognition that culture is inherently unstable<sup>12</sup> and that humans are adept negotiators of cultural dynamism. Our default social tendencies are not toward fixity or stasis. We might not seek continual change but our cultural repertoires demonstrate preferences for comprehensive constellations of practices, assumptions, and entangled relationships rather than singularly cogent cultural systems. So, what keeps us from doing scholarship that aligns more closely with the ways we function in other social settings? Or, what keeps us from humanizing the tasks of inquiry and analysis? In many ways, as Megan Daniels hints at in this volume, it is the creep of scientism and the lingering effects of positivist empiricism in the (social) sciences that causes us to think in terms of objective fixity rather than intersubjectively and reflexively according to relational networks of thinkers, interlocutors, ideas, and evidence. Similarly, Ipek Demir shows us how the overarching social structure of our present experience, the nation state, shapes our assessments of movers and movement just as she critiques our own propensity to forget the complex historical and methodological trajectories that have led to contemporary movements and cultures of mobility. Among scholars of the Bible and the ANE, the lingering problem is that many proceed in their work without having questioned the metaphysical assumptions about movement that they hold or have been educated into. We've aimed with this issue to increase awareness of the ways cultures of mobility shape the questions and concerns of the fields of biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies.

Like all research endeavors, interdisciplinarity requires delimiting sources and deciding what theoretical or methodological foundations one will build their inquiry upon. Without intending to scandalize colleagues in the guilds represented by this journal, it must be said that interest in mobility and migration as investigative frameworks has far outpaced

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<sup>12</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 6.

initiatives from scholars to properly ground themselves in the fields of mobility, migration, or diaspora studies. The result has been a tendency for scholars to commit two analytical missteps. The first is the creation of scholarship that often reproduces or retrojects present cultures of mobility onto the past. The second, a pattern that emerges from the first, is methodological proof-texting, which we would define as mining the vast bodies of work on mobility and migration for case-studies that support one's unchecked presuppositions about mobility and migration in the ancient past.

Biblical scholarship provides an excellent, albeit unfortunate, example of an academic propensity to read presiding cultures of mobility into the textual record. Among scholars of the Bible, there is a tendency to think of migration largely in terms of crisis, and of migrants primarily as forced migrants or refugees. Understandably, those studying periods of Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian domination must reckon with the realities of hegemonic powers with extensive mobility regimes that facilitated large displacements. There are indeed moments of crisis that must be attended to in those and other eras. Nevertheless, other forms of mobility and migration took place before, during, and after these periods that must also be attended to. Failure to account for the full spectrum of movers and movement leads to a tidy yet false dichotomization of migrants as either victims of their circumstances or as victors that represent idealized types of movers or movement.

If one begins with (largely unfounded) assumptions that migration is always induced by crisis and induces crisis, that migration is at an all-time high, that migrants are predominantly the poorest members of society, or that migration is criminal activity, one will likely go in search of academic work on crisis-related migration. The results will be self-confirming. Reading broadly in migration studies and its related fields, however, one would quickly see that the majority of migration past and present is induced by insecurity but is not necessarily crisis driven. They would find





that different communities and individuals have varying toolkits and capacities for mitigating insecurity (*motility*), and that migration is one of many strategies for navigating insecurity. One can rightly say that migration is a marginal activity, since only a small percentage of any given population actualizes long-term and (sometimes) long-distance movement. The limited occurrence of migration is not confirmation of a sedentarist bias, though. Persons and societies are essentially mobile but not all members of society are migrants. Accurately situating migration in the broader spectrum of mobilities and social conventions, attitudes, and depictions of movement is the goal.

In a similar vein, biblical scholars often attempt to interpret ancient movements through modern nation-state categories. This tendency likely arises from an awareness that mobility and migration are explicitly and implicitly taxonomized within broader cultures of mobility. Yet, pursuing methodological reflexivity means that before work begins, scholars should judiciously evaluate the sources and range of intended uses for any taxonomic category of movement or movers. One step in this process is to ask what terms movers might use to self-describe and how those selected identifiers might relate to others employed by scholars, policy analysts, members of the media, governing bodies, and non-governmental actors. Uncritical adoption of theoretical or terminological frameworks rarely results in insightful scholarship. Most often, it simply retrojects present cultures of mobility onto the past. This is why it is so important for scholars to practice self-awareness of our own cultures of mobility that shape our interpretations and responses to movement.<sup>13</sup>

Considering mobility and migration from the perspective of a world of/in motion is the starting place for developing a kinetic consciousness through which scholars attune themselves to the layers of motion and mobility that compose their own worlds. Mobility is not a *sui generis*

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<sup>13</sup> Ida Hartmann, "Migratory Thought: Dialogues Between Biblical Scholarship and Anthropology on Human Mobility," *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025): 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050540>.

phenomenon. The universe may be composed of objects in motion, but those objects maintain relationships to one another in material terms and through ascribed human meanings. Therefore, scholars of mobility and migration, whether working in modern or ancient contexts, must be attentive to the intersectional dynamics of space and place—and by extension, presence, absence, and time—for, these too are the products of motion and factors in the ideological calculus of meaning-making. We must be attentive to the ways our scholarship reproduces particular cultures of mobility, for there are no unbiased descriptions of movement “as it is,” rather, all descriptions emerge in entanglements of knowledge and power.

It is decidedly easier to consider a world in/of motion from the macro level. From high above, charts and graphs of migration data are easily overlaid on maps or the imagined movers they tabulate. The challenge is to integrate these larger quantitative bodies of evidence with qualitative inquiry by descending with data in hand to examine the everyday realms of mobility and migration witnessed in the textual and material records with the goal of humanizing movers and movement. At the micro level, we proceed cautiously with the work of analysis and comparison, attempting to reconstruct lived experiences of mobility in the ancient past. While it is most often not possible to put ourselves entirely in the shoes of ancient persons, we still work toward developing a peripatetic perspective that positions us to see mobility and the physio-cultural environment not primarily through our own cultures of mobility but through those of the ancients and through the macro-data we have on hand. It is our hope that the articles in this special issue move us closer toward realizing these methodological positionings.

