



Embrace the Spirit

The Caribbean Initiative

Jacob The Threefold Migrant

By: Doris García Rivera

Group Prayer

Creator God,
open our hearts so we can see you in the eyes of our immigrant brothers and sisters,
eyes downcast for having lived so long in the shadows,
eyes challenging us to join them in the streets or picket lines,
eyes lifted looking for the Christ light in us.
Compassionate God, who has come to dwell among us,
open our ears to hear the cries of your children,
Children being separated from their parents,
rounded up in raids,
led to detention centers,
silently giving up dreams.
God of Justice, who crosses all boundaries,
give us the courage to resist, to say NO
to unfair labor practices,
to unjust laws like SB 1070,
287g contracts.
Give us the strength to stand with and for



your whole love,

faith to believe,

another world is necessary and possible.

Let it begin with us.

Introduction and Context

From the origin of human life on Earth, we have been in movement. Starting with our departure from Eden, there are many stories of migration in the Bible where we perceive the existence of a profound axis related to the divine encounter in the midst of the movement of people and peoples.

In the last decade, we have experienced massive migrations sparked by political instability, climate disasters, armed or religious conflicts, and economic need.¹ Today, there are 1 billion people (1 in 7) who are migrants.² Many of these migrations are intensely painful. The Colombian war alone has displaced more than 7.6 million within and beyond the country's borders.³

When we talk about the challenges of forced migration – refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons – we are facing significant challenges. No country remains intact. Some voices paint the issue as a security threat. Others say that refugees and migrants are a problem and a social burden. Others make it a polarizing political issue, while others emphasize the humanitarian obligation to help the displaced.

Biblical Reflection

Jacob - Three times migrant

The story of Jacob is part of the history of the founding patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel. In Jacob's story, there are three different reasons for their forced displacements: Jacob leaves his land for fear of death; he leaves the land of Laban because of exploitation; and he leaves Canaan due to hunger.

Forcible displacement out of fear

In Gen 27: 42-44 we are told how Jacob goes to Haran at the threat of his brother Esau's death. The fear of loss of life is a powerful engine for the movement of people, families, and peoples throughout history. However, despite the dangers of the journey, it is on the road as a migrant that Jacob wrestles with, is named, and is appointed by God. In the struggle between the Angel and Jacob, there are echoes of the struggles and fears of Jacob, which are essential aspects in the affirmation of his identity. In our study, we want to affirm the capabilities of this migrant who assumed a new identity.

¹ Camarota, Steven. *A Record-Setting Decade of Immigration: 2000-2010*, October 2011, Center for Immigration Studies.

<http://cis.org/2000-2010-record-setting-decade-of-immigration>

² Ibid.

³ Carvajal, Dayra. *As Colombia Emerges from Decades of War, Migration Challenges Mount*. Migration Policy Institute.

<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/colombia-emerges-decades-war-migration-challenges-mount>

In one of the passages (Gen 32:24-29), Jacob asks for a blessing from the deity that just attacked him. The answer from the divine being is to give him a new name, *Israel*, a name that will be grounded not only in the identity of the Israelite people but in their historical, theological, political, and cultural struggles. Names in the Torah are not mere labels but signs of character or vocation. Jacob, who fought in the womb with his brother (Gen 25:22), is now Israel, meaning “the one who wrestled with God and with the human race and won.” Jacob calls the place where the wrestled Penu'el, “*the face of Him/Her*,” reflecting how the divine names are given by the ancestors (who later identify with YHWH); born of profound moments of revelation, salvation, dialogue, and struggle.

The experience of migrants is one of high vulnerability and many fears, but, at the same time, of profound encounters with their own being. This process can affirm or hurt their collective, personal, and religious identity. The migrant's struggles are not only with the coyotes (smugglers) who beats them, robs them, or murders them, but it is also with the customs guards, with the agents in the inhospitable terrain of their sneaky entry, with the bosses, neighbors, and people who humiliate and discriminate. The migrant struggles with the people who are representatives of a human-controlled system, but they also struggle with their God and their demons. In the process of migration, we test faith, hope, will, and resilience. By being marginalized politically, socially, culturally and religiously, the interpretation of reality is transformed. For some, their experience is a test - completed or failed. For others, the experience remains as one of hurt faith and a God who did not open the doors to let them enter or that allowed the destruction of their home.

Forced Displacement by Exploitation

When fleeing from his brother Esau, Jacob goes to the house of Laban, his uncle, for protection, lodging, and security (Gen 27:43). Nevertheless, Laban deceives Jacob. Laban understands that this worker provides unsuspected profits (Gen 30: 27-30). The exploitation of the worker in the biblical context is part of the systems of agricultural production, taxes, and commerce that sustained the flow of wealth to groups associated with royalty, military bodies, palace maintenance, and all of their service personnel to the king.

Israel and Judah make distinct three types of slavery: slaves as property, debt slaves, and forced labor.⁴ The slaves who were property had no rights in the community. They were foreigners without families captured in war, sold, owned, and inherited by the children, employed in agriculture and domestic service.⁵ Debt slaves were the Israelites who were forced to sell themselves or their children as servants to their creditors. Forced labor was common in the monarchy of Israel and Judah to build the projects of palaces and temples (Jer 22:13). The "servant, born in the house" was the slave born to the master and only those born to the Hebrews could go free (Ex 21: 1-4).⁶

The topics of lying, deception, and disappointment that appear from the beginning of this story take an interesting turn. Jacob finds his partner while living in the house of Laban, but that is before Jacob is deceived on his wedding night in the labor agreement and promised profits. Laban changes Jacob's wages ten times (Gen 31: 7) and directly exploits his son-in-law (Genesis 28-31). The text points to the ability and cunning of Jacob to surpass Laban, but in doing so, he loses years of his life. So, too, are many migrants deceived and exploited for months and years, many never finding justice.

⁴ Dexter Callender, “Servants of God(s) and Servants of the Kings in Israel and the Ancient Near East” SEMEIA 83/84 (1998): 73.

⁵ Ibid., 69, 73-74.

⁶ William Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 93.

It is not until Jacob runs away from his father-in-law (Gen 31: 17-21) that he escapes with his goods to a better future. His final wealth is interpreted as robbery (Gen 31: 1-2) and not recognized as righteous. In hard work that is sometimes unfair, the migrant measures strength, creativity, and courage in knowing that God is always present as defender.⁷

Forced displacement through starvation

Jacob, in his old age, is driven out of Canaan into Egypt by severe famine (Gen. 41: 53-57; 42: 1-2, 43: 1, 45: 6, 47: 4). This famine afflicts Canaan and beyond. Media images of drought in the borderlands of Haiti and the Dominican Republic show the desolation of the land and its impact on ecosystems and communities. In the world today, one in eight people go to bed hungry every night, and one in three children are underweight.⁸

The text does not tell us the reasons for the famine,⁹ but in biblical stories, most famines were associated with drought and were interpreted as both punishment and as a sign of the withdrawal of the blessing and favor of the gods. In the text, famine forced Jacob and his family to move and settle in Egypt, a strange land for them. He also achieved family reunification in a saga of fragmentation and destruction of relationships. It is important to appreciate that the mobilization of the household was the last resort. Jacob's family, like those of current migrants, don't want to leave their homes but must, in order to resolve their immediate situations of need.

Jacob sends his children to buy grain twice. On the first occasion, (Gen 42: 9-14) Joseph (Jacob's son, who was sold into slavery by his brothers and made it to the ranks of the palace) accuses them of being spies and demands that the encounter with the younger brother Benjamin is evidence. The accusation of being spies was charged with humiliation, imprisonment, and sometimes with death. Egypt was recognized for its continuous arrests of official messengers from neighboring kingdoms, who were accused of being spies.¹⁰ In the text, we hear the echo of constant accusations made by governments and national groups about migrants. The perception that migrants are responsible for crime and violence is a gross mischaracterization.

On the second occasion, Jacob sends his children back to Egypt (Gen 43: 1-2) to retrieve Benjamin. That is when the plot of Joseph's story unfolds. The story of Joseph and that of Jacob – marked by abuse and mistreatment in Egypt (living in a foreign country and as a foreigner) – is seen as being about the protection of life for the family of Jacob in Egypt (Gen 45: 5-7). God opened the space of protection for this migrant, in a strange land, because God is just and the ruler of the whole earth. The affirmation in Deuteronomy, establishing welcome and care abroad, serves as a mark of God's people.

⁷ In the Codes of the Covenant (Exodus) and Deuteronomy (Exod. 21-23, Deut. 15: 12-18, 24: 14-15) and in the writings of the prophets, the various rights to the workers are expressed.

⁸ What causes hunger?" *World Food Programme*. <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/causes>.

⁹ Famine does not happen randomly and has complex components that add cultural, environmental, economic and political elements. Decisions of governments that define how much, when and how to invest in sustainable development, or in the protection of land and water bodies; Wars that destroy and pollute the land and displaced peasants, instability in food prices, agricultural and chemical methods that drain the life of the earth and other factors, diminish the capacity of nature to produce what is necessary for The human communities.

¹⁰ David Elgavish, "Did Diplomatic Immunity Exist in the Ancient Near East?" *Journal of the History of International Law*. Vol 2 (2000): 80.

Conclusion

Migration has been a global human experience that, in recent years, has been intensified mainly for political and economic reasons. Millions of displaced people are looking for a land, a country, a place to lay their heads, and a safe place for their families so that they may flourish. Millions dream of peace and rest. For Christians who follow a migrant God, this is a space of mission in solidarity, concrete and real, that summons us to mercy, the defense of the migrant, and the service of the Church. Our God was always and will always be a migrant God.

Questions for Reflection

1. What family stories do you have of migration and movement? How do those stories shape your understanding of your family and yourself?
2. The author uses the story of Jacob to highlight several reasons for migration – what other reasons might there be for human migration? Does the motive of the migrant change how we should respond as a community?
3. It is often said that the US is a nation of migrants, how are early generations of migrants depicted in media today? Is it similar or different from how present day migrants are shown? What might be the cause of these differences?
4. What does it mean for us as Christians if we worship a “Migrant God”?

About the Author

Doris García Rivera is a Baptist minister and theologian from Puerto Rico. García Rivera holds a Bachelor's degree in Biology and Chemistry from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR), an institution in which she also obtained a Master's degree in Microbiology and Medical Zoology. She also holds a Master's degree in Arts and Religion in Interculturality from the Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, and then completed a Ph.D. in Biblical and Historical studies with a concentration in Hebrew Bible and Sociology at the Boston University School of Theology.