

From welcomed migrants to alleged terrorists: A missio-political reading of Exodus 1:8-2:10

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Abstract

This article examines the plight of migrants by conversing Brian Wren's poetic song, *Travellers*, with a missio-political reading of Exodus 1:8 – 2:10. Most migrants are people on the move fleeing from untenable threats to their lives from dysfunctional states of the Global South. The article argues that the socio-economic and political forces that deny the Hebrew migrants in ancient Egypt fullness of life as described in Exodus 1:8-2:10 are still at work in the threats that contemporary migrants face. Wren's poetic song offers a life-affirming discourse that postulate an alternative missio-political response that affirm human dignity, human rights, human respect and a commitment to justice that facilitate "fullness of life".

Keywords

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Brian Wren; "Travellers"; politics of migration; refugees; human dignity

"Some are far from the people they love, driven by family need, tired and exploited, doing their job, thinking of children to feed" – Brian Wren.¹

1. Introduction

The state of global security is gradually decreasing with people who are living on the margins, especially within the Global South² experiencing deadly threats to life. EL Odeh states that:

1 [Online] <http://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-1990/poet-faith-interview-brian-wren> [Accessed: August 4, 2015] B Wren, 1986. *Travellers*, Stainer Publishers & Bell, London.

2 They are primarily developing counties that exist in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, most of Asia and the Pacific Islands.

While Global North countries are wealthy, technologically advanced, politically stable and aging as their societies tend towards zero population growth the opposite is the case with Global South countries. While Global South countries are agrarian based, dependent economically and politically on the Global North, the Global North has continued to dominate and direct the Global South in international trade and politics.³

The contemporary socio-economic landscape of the Global South is heavily shaped by the impact of economic globalization and its accompanying security apparatus of militarism that has resulted in increasing state fragility, violent conflicts, and disintegration of the environment and of local communities. Key institutions that were once trusted to uphold ethical, moral and legal standards to serve the people have been seriously compromised. For example the states of Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, Nigeria, South Sudan and many others have been compromised by life denying forces that transcends national boundaries. Their contexts serve as a magnet for the toxic mixtures of life denying forces that feed on unresolved ethnic, religious, political and economic tensions. Rogue political leaders have put their egos ahead of the interest of their people. They have used proxy security forces to protect their hold on political power. In some cases it has resulted in the consummation, birth and developments of groups that have mutated into regional terror conglomerate that no longer listen to the voice of their global sponsors. This genie is no longer willing to return to the proverbial lamp because, “The magic turns on the person who plays with it, and the cook of the poison will taste it.”⁴ The evil acts of political, economics and religious sponsored forms of violence are used to destroy peace-building measures in many communities. 2014 statistics point to over 4 000 deaths in Ukraine caused by East/West tensions and over 3 000 deaths in Syrian civil war. The contemporary rise of Islamic State in Syria

3 Odeh, LE 2010. “A Comparative Analysis of Global North and Global South Economies.” *Journal of Sustainable, Development in Africa* 12(3):338-348 at 338.

4 Barnard, Anne. “Blamed for Rise of ISIS, Syrian Leader Is Pushed to Escalate Fight.” [Online] http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/world/middleeast/assad-supporters-weigh-benefits-of-us-strikes-in-syria.html?referrer=&_r=0 [Accessed: August 12, 2015]

and Iraq (ISIS/ISIL⁵) has created a new world order in which there are no rules, no limits, no barriers, and no respect for life! In their attempt to achieve total control hundreds of thousands of persons are chased away from their homes, enslaved or killed in their addiction to overcome all threats that stand in the way of achieving their political objectives. All of these factors in additions to other local contextual socio-cultural and economic contributors have created a global upheaval of people on the move becoming migrants and experiencing hostile and unwelcoming environment wherever they journey. The reasons for leaving their homes to settle in new contexts may be different but what is common with ancient and modern migrants is that “home” is no longer able to provide them with “meaningful life”.

This article argues that the contemporary movements of people especially from the South who are classified as migrants, constitute the result of an unjust and systemic deficiency within the global political and economic order that perennially contribute to the upheaval of people, especially those within developing countries of the Global South. This article uses the poetic song of Brian Wren⁶ a provocative British poet and hymn writer from the Congregational and Reformed ecclesial tradition and whose writings focus on people who are deprived or denied the opportunity for gainful work, suffer homophobic violence, struggle for equal rights and justice to expose the plight of migrants and to postulate an alternative vision of radical hospitality in relating to them. This phenomenon of people being displaced and exploited by uncontrollable global forces is further interrogated with a missio-political reading of the biblical narrative surrounding the dilemma faced by ancient migrants that settled in Egypt as described in Exodus 1:8 – 2:10. Brueggemann perspectives on the book of Exodus argue that it is a, “... literary, pastoral, liturgical, and theological response to an acute crisis. Texts that ostensibly concern thirteen-century matters in fact are

5 All of these terms refer to the terrorist that declares a new Islamic caliphate over parts of Iraq and Syria.

6 Brian was born in 1936. Ruth Van der Hart, “Poet of Faith: an Interview with Brian Wren.” [Online] <http://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-1990/poet-faith-interview-brian-wren> [Accessed: August 4, 2015]

heard in a sixth to fourth-century crisis”.⁷ Therefore every era necessitates a rereading the text and to ask fresh question about issues of liberation and freedom that are grounded in faith, in response to imperial power systems. The contemporary world with its diverse political contexts that give rise to the flow of migrants is different from that of ancient Egyptian world welcomed migrants settling there. However the common factors of these migrants are related to how imperial political systems of governance, economic, policies, environmental and climate change issues and food sovereignty influence the movement of people.

The term “missio-political” embodies the mission of God⁸ with political change of righteousness and justice in the world. It refers to how God’s word is incarnated in the lives of those that seek to overcome systemic political actions that deny people and creation ‘fullness of life’.⁹ The missio-political hermeneutical lens embraces an understanding of the biblical texts as “social production that emerges out of socio-political and material setting”.¹⁰ Missio-political therefore explores how God’s mission in the world negotiates power relations and people’s social identity regardless of the era in which people live, ancient Egypt or the 2015 world of migrants. Those that respond to God’s missional call to “fullness of life” therefore must become involve in the political sphere of life because no area of life falls outside of God’s sovereignty. The missio-political lens¹¹ therefore does not allow the option of neutrality in the context of oppression. Wren’s song seems to assert that both ancient and modern migrants, experience unreceptive inhospitable environment wherever they travel as they cross dangerous landscapes and seascapes in search for a better life.

7 Walter Brueggemann, 1994. Exodus. In *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 680.

8 David Bosch describes God’s Mission (Missio-Dei) as, “the eternal outreach of Creator, Liberator and Sustainer to the created cosmos in which the church participates”.

9 Hewitt, Roderick 2012. *Church and Culture*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. 34.

10 Weems, Renita 1992. “The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1.” In *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts*. Edited by David Jobling and Tina Pippin. *Semeia* 59:26.

11 Hewitt, Roderick 2012. *Church and Culture*. Cluster Publications: Pietermaritzburg.

2. Trav'ling, trav'ling over the world

As an emerging hymn writer in 1986, Wren wrote a song called “Travellers”¹² that spoke poignantly to the world of migrants, people on the move and ‘out of place, dashing for freedom, looking for work’. When transported into the contemporary landscape in which the scale of movement of migrants has reached catastrophic and uncontrollable levels all over the world, it is pertinent to use the poetic imagination of Brian Wren to converse with the narrative of Exodus 1:8-2:10 and the contemporary global context surrounding the plight of migrants. In his poem “Travellers”, Brian presents a graphic picture of people on the move:

Trav'ling, trav'ling over the world,
 People can be out of place,
 Dashing for freedom, looking for work,
 Needing a friendly face.

Break the bread of belonging; welcome the stranger in the land.
 We have all been a stranger we can try to understand,
 Break the bread of belonging, fear of the foreigner still blows strong;
 Make a space for the strangers; give them the right to belong.

Some have fled from terror by night,
 Hiding from bullets by day,
 Weary and hungry, in fear of their lives
 Seeking a safe place to stay;

Some are far from the people they love,
 Driven by family need,
 Tired and exploited, doing their job,
 Thinking of children to feed:

Trav'ling trav'ling over the world,
 No one should be out of place.
 What would we say, then, if we were alone
 Needing a friendly face?¹³

12 Text © Copyright 1986 Stainer & Bell, PO Box 110, Victoria House 23, Gruneisen Road Finchley, London N3 1DZ U.K.

13 Wren, B 1986. *Travellers*. Stainer & Bell Publishers: London.

The simple, yet profound use of language to describe the plight of migrants and refugees in the mid-1980s is even more telling in 2015 when it refers to the awesome condition of Syrian and Iraqi refugees seeking refuge in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Europe from the inhumane violence meted out on them by the different groups fighting a civil war. The same is true for the thousands of desperate people exploited by organised human traffickers that charge them exorbitant prices to cross the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa regions of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in their quest for a better life in Europe. It is estimated that more than 2 000 migrants have died between January and July 2015, trying to make the hazardous journey to Europe when compare to 1 607 for the same period in 2014.¹⁴ Conceptually, there is a difference between who should be considered a migrant and who is a refugee. A migrant is identified as someone who has intentionally left his or her country to seek a better way of life in another social and economic context. A refugee on the other hand is someone forced to leave home and country because of fundamental threats to life.¹⁵ However, in the contemporary global context this division is often blurred because of growing anti-immigration climate that has taken over the political discourse of many countries, especially in the global North.

The TV screen aptly reveals people described by Wren:

Some have fled from terror by night,
Hiding from bullets by day,
Weary and hungry, in fear of their lives,
Seeking a safe place to stay¹⁶

Millions of internal migrant labourers have left their families in rural China and head for the cities seeking work and are only able to see them for maybe once a year for one or two weeks. There is a phenomenon within some rural communities known as “left behind children” that suffer

14 For more information see, Aljazeera, “Mediterranean migrant numbers hit deadly milestone” [Online] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/mediterranean-migrant-numbers-cross-2000-mark-150804133755593.html> [Accessed: August 4, 2015]

15 Settlement Services International, What is the difference between a refugee and a migrant? [Online] <http://www.ssi.org.au/faqs/refugee-faqs/148-what-is-the-difference-between-a-refugee-and-a-migrant> [Accessed: November 11, 2015]

16 Wren, B 1986. *Travellers*. London: Stainer & Bell Publishers.

untold hardships living alone or with grandparents as their parents move far way into cities to seek for jobs that are often low-paid.¹⁷ These migrant labourers and their “left behind children” would agree with the words of Brian Wren:

Some are far from the people they love,
 Driven by family need,
 Tired and exploited, doing their job,
 Thinking of children to feed:

The challenge of slowing down migration from the developing countries of the South and the response from the developed countries of the North with draconian restrictions suggest that this intractable problem has exposed some fundamental and systemic injustice built into the global economy. Wren’s poetic song argues for a different approach to such persons on the move that value their human dignity and rights and offers a response that is life affirming, family supporting and security protecting. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron refers to the desperate migrants at the French port of Calais as *swarm*, suggesting that they are like insects wanting to invade the United Kingdom through the Channel Tunnel.¹⁸ The Foreign Secretary of Cameron’s conservative government singled out the African migrants among all of the other thousands of migrants at Calais and claimed that they – the African migrants – posed a real threat to the standard of living and social structure of the UK and the rest of Europe. Unlike the political leaders of his country, Brian Wren’s song asserts that human beings are all migrants ...on the move and therefore the human rights status of all contemporary migrants should influence a more welcoming response to them.

3. A new political landscape that does not respect human rights

It is this precarious nature of people on the move and finding themselves as strangers in hostile environments and prone to be exploited by power

17 New China, 2015. “What’s being said on Twitter about China July 25, 2015” [Online] http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/25/c_134446341.htm [Accessed: August 5, 2015]

18 Fraser, Giles. “A 21st-century Exodus: what the makeshift Calais camp church means”. *The Guardian*. [Online] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/04/a-21st-century-exodus-what-the-makeshift-calais-camp-church-means> [Accessed: August 4, 2015]

hungry and greedy leaders that use their political and economic system to commoditised vulnerable migrants that sets the stage for this missio-political reading and conversation with the biblical narrative. This text is pertinent for reflections because of its focus on the consequences of political and economic responses to issues surrounding the presence of “foreign migrants” within the North African nation of Egypt. Egypt was an imperial civilization that once ruled the ancient Middle-Eastern and North African world.¹⁹ The power of the River Nile that empowered its agrarian-based economy had shaped its civilization and made it the crossroads for the meetings of diverse cultures from Asia, Europe and Africa. The Egyptian economy accommodated peoples on the move and this became evident in the diverse ethnic mix of its people.

Contemporary Egypt has remained a very diverse and plural nation that continues to be the cross roads for numerous migrants and refugees that are passing through the nation seeking in their quest for a better life. What a paradox that even in 2015 Egypt after the era of Presidents Mubarak and Mursi and the Arab Spring, the nation is still struggling with issues of human rights, gender justice, issues of insecurity and political and religious pluralism?²⁰ The narrative of Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 describes the vulnerable world of migrants and their politics of resistance in the struggle for fullness of life. It echoed the contemporary crisis of migrants and the reactionary political right and conservative media in Europe calling for migrants from Africa and the Middle Eastern countries to be turned away from entering their nation.²¹ The threats to life are indeed real for these vulnerable migrants, who through no fault of their own find themselves displaced from their homes and become nomadic refugees.

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- 19 Schillaci, Michael A; Irish, Joel D and Wood, Carolan CE 2009. Further Analysis of the Population History of Ancient Egyptians. Department of Social Sciences, University of Toronto Scarborough. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. 139(2):235-243.
- 20 Moghadam, MV 2013. What is democracy? Promises and perils of the Arab Spring. [Online] *Current Sociology*. 61: 393-408. [Accessed: August 10, 2015]
- 21 Fargues, Philippe and Fandrich, Christine. Migration after the Arab Spring: Migration Policy Centre (MPC) Research Report 2012(09). [Online] <http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/23504/MPCRR-2012-09.pdf?sequence=1> [Accessed: August 10, 2015]

4. Unstable political climate creates migrants and refugees

The Exodus narrative reported that a new King/Pharaoh had taken over leadership in Egypt and surprisingly, this regime was unaware of the contributions of Joseph and the Hebrew migrants who had earlier settled in the country and made invaluable contribution to the political and economic development of the nation. The migrants had arrived in Egypt generations before because crop failure had compromised the people's food security. With a failed economy and fear of famine, the people were forced to seek food in the more stable economy of Egypt (Ex 1:1-5). They were welcomed and given space to settle and flourish because one member of their ethnic group, Joseph, had made an immeasurable contribution to the nation that was celebrated and honoured by the previous Pharaoh that ruled the country. According to John Holbert,

“this 'new king' did not know Joseph, the previous pharaoh's right hand man, he looks at these Hebrews with very different eyes. No longer does he see the heirs of the mighty Joseph, whose shrewd policies had saved Egypt in the midst of the country's terrible famine, whose family had come to live among the Egyptians in peace in the lovely land of Goshen”.²²

The choice of using Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 to converse with contemporary political realities takes into account that the book of Exodus is not primarily history writing but more so theological proclamation that communicates the salvation story of a people.²³ Therefore it offers legitimate space for missio-political reflection and conversation with contemporary struggles of migrant people.

5. Creating “False differences” in others to legitimize security fears

This new Pharaoh who was chosen as King of Egypt and “did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8) exposed his insecurity in leadership by unleashing

22 Holbert, John. Pharaoh Goes Bonkers, or Stupidity of a Tyrant Reflection on Exodus 1:8-2:10. [Online] <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Pharaoh-Goes-Bonkers-John-Holbert-08-18-2014> [Accessed: November 12, 2015]

23 Birch, CB; Brueggemann, W; Fretheim, ET; Petersen, LD 1999. A *Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*. Nashville: Abingdon Press Nashville. 103.

mayhem on the lives of the migrant people who were, a generation before, regarded as welcomed residents. It is unclear whether he “chose not to know Joseph”, considering that the royal records of the Kings of Egypt would have recorded all important palace appointments. Celebrating Joseph’s past contribution to national development was not strategic to his political agenda. His narrow political objectives were nationalistic and influenced his conservative government to solidify its political base with a strategy of identifying an enemy within the state.

He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” (1:9-10 NRSV)

He scapegoats a vulnerable group of migrants who for a generation had made Egypt their home and contributed positively to its national development. He used his propaganda machine in the media to communicate negative messages about the Hebrew migrants that triggered xenophobia on these foreigners in the country. The political agenda was to heighten the perceived differences between the citizens of Egypt and the migrant population and to use those differences to legitimize security clamp down on the migrants.²⁴ Such behaviour rings a bell with the 2008 and 2015 xenophobic attacks in KwaZulu Natal and Gauteng provinces which were triggered by irresponsible comments from high political authorities.²⁵ The Egyptian Home Affairs and National Security branch of government identified sensitive security threats, creating “false fear” and magnified the Hebrew migrant minorities’ presence in the country as a threat to the safety of the majority.²⁶ They falsely accused them of the potential of being a “fifth column” or “Trojan horse”, “possible terrorists”, and therefore “The enemy within” who would

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- 24 Weems, Renita. The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1. In *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts*. 28.
- 25 Chinomona, Elizabeth and Maziriri, EugeneTafadzwa 2015. Examining the Phenomenon of Xenophobia as Experienced by African Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Johannesburg, South Africa: Intensifying the Spirit of Ubuntu. *International Journal of Research in Business Studies and Management*. 2(6):20-31.
- 26 Weems, Renita The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1. In *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts*.28-29.

compromise their national security if a war were to break out. The political authorities promoted a negative campaign against the migrants castigating them with unjustified accusation that they could not be trusted to defend their adopted country during war against foreign states. All of this was not based on factual evidence but false accusation from their political leadership designed to meet some narrow political objectives. Imperial power systems tend to create fear as an instrument to control people.

6. In one moment people's life situation can radically change

The appointment of one new political leader had devastating impact on the lives of a migrant people, pushing them from a status of wellbeing and security into insecurity and vulnerability. In one moment of political decision the lives of the Hebrew migrants radically changed because of imagined fears of political leaders. Foreign migrants can easily lose land, houses, financial investments and other personal possessions if an insecure and vindictive political ruler seeks to use them as scapegoat to gain nationalistic votes to strengthen his weak political base. Idi Amin in Uganda did this against the Indian population in the country.²⁷ Haitians that have lived in the Dominican Republic for many decades understand the perils of the Hebrew migrants through their experience of being expelled from their adopted countries and declared to be non-citizens.²⁸

Foreign migrants lose their acquired passport with one stroke of a pen and declared to be a non-citizen if accused of crime by their adopted state. When divinity (*respect for the sacredness of human life*) is removed from humanity then systems of governance invite the worst forms of atrocities and those that live on the margins of society are usually the first victims. Getting rid of people deemed to be undesirable has plagued human history. Rogue leaders such as Hitler have devised heinous plans to get rid of others by engaging powerful political, economic and military forces to exploit public sentiments concerning their national security to declare war and

27 Patel, Hasu H 1972. General Amin and the Indian Exodus from Uganda. *A Journal of Opinion*. 2(4):12-22.

28 Fletcher, Laurel and Miller, Timothy 2004. New Perspectives on Old Patterns: Forced Migration of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 30(4):659-679.

create enemies based on false evidence. Pharaoh concocted a terroristic threat that he claimed could threaten Egypt's security and way of life (Ex 1:10) and migrants paid the price for his policies.

7. Economic enslavement and population control

Many migrants lived on the margins of the society and therefore become vulnerable to economic exploitation. Pharaoh's State ideology decided to commoditise the vulnerable migrants through economic enslavement in order to control the population and to benefit from their presence instead of deporting them. He instructed his officials to organised work-gangs and put them to hard labour:

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Ex1:13-14).

The enslaved population had to work very long hours daily for minimum wages in order to meet the economic objectives of the Pharaoh. The hope was that through hard work it would severely reduce the capacity of the enslaved population from producing more children to increase their numerical strength in the country. Against the odds, the resilient Hebrew women became key game changer in this drama and overcame the dehumanizing system to give birth and maintain the strength of the migrant population.²⁹ The diabolic economic system based upon exploitation, wanted a large, cheap and replaceable labour force to produce high priced goods, cheaply. This insatiable desire for unstoppable economic growth, which can never be met came at a high cost of sacrificing the most vulnerable group of people within the society. Pharaoh's economy was therefore built on life denying policies and strategies against the Israelite migrant labourers. Although previous administrations had recognised their valuable contributions to the economy of the nation, the new administration sought to devalue their presence and contributions. Pharaoh was in for a shock because he did not realize that he had set himself

29 Lapsley, JE *Whispering the Word Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 70-71.

up for a fight with the *God of life* that protects the poor and marginalised that call upon him for protection against unjust systems of power.

8. Politics of economics, gender and health

The intense oppression against marginalized migrants did not prevent them from increasing their population (Ex 1:12). The poor usually see children as their hope of overcoming oppression, their insurance policy and pension fund for old age and illness. Children are symbols of hope for a better future and a ray of hope of divine intervention that produces a liberator to overthrow the unjust political system that oppresses them. Usually children and women are the first to suffer at the hands of rogue leaders of unjust political systems. Pharaoh ordered his government to put in place another plan to ensure a halt in the population growth among the Israelites. The government officers were instructed to kill all new male babies born among the migrants to prevent race/ethnic continuity: “If it’s a boy, kill him; if it’s a girl, let her live” (1:16). The assumption of Pharaoh’s government system was that male children constituted more of a threat to empire.³⁰ The girls were allowed to live because they served a social agenda of being absorbed into Egyptian patriarchal social structure in which toxic masculinities ensured female at the bottom of life. Like ISIS today, Pharaoh also used the most vulnerable in his society for political and economic objectives. Children and women are regarded commodities that are economically and sexually abused. In some countries where the economic value of the boy is much higher, medical services is used to determine gender selection before birth and the girl foetus is aborted and the boy is allowed to live. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), this has resulted in a distortion of natural sex selection and therefore producing gender imbalance. Also it has impacted on the social structure of nations by “reinforcing discriminatory stereotypes towards women by devaluing female gender”.³¹ According to Renita Weems,

30 Weems, Renita. The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1. In *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts*. 28.

31 According to the World Health Organisation, sex selection involves inappropriate control over nonessential characteristics of children and may place a potential psychological burden on, and hence cause harm to, sex-selected offspring. See WHO,

...the entire narrative (Exodus 1) pivots on the axis of assumption about difference. Difference is inherent in the culture of the story: differences between Egyptians and Hebrews, differences between slaves and slave masters, differences between Egyptian women and Hebrews women, differences between male and female children, difference between women and men.³²

9. Political and economic goals decide who should live and who dies!

Affordable and accessible health care constitute one of the important human rights that is least available to those who live on the margins of society, especially the migrants. Women and children are the social group most affected when developmental related diseases such as waterborne pathogenic microorganisms transmitted in contaminated water and infect people that use the water. The spread of ebola in some countries of West Africa exposed the vulnerability of people that live in context of poverty. As global panic grew over the capacity of the medical experts to control its spread, nations created barriers than banned travellers from West African nations. Morocco for example pulled out of hosting the Africa Cup of Nations football tournament in 2014 due to the ebola epidemic and fear of having travellers from West Africa visiting their country. The authorities responded by banning Morocco from the next two African Nations Cups and an additional fine of one million USD for pulling out of hosting the competition and eight million Euros compensation for losses.³³ The crisis in the countries most affected exposed how the right to life can be selectively applied according to race, class, colour, religion, economic status, passport, gender and geographic location. The ebola virus is fundamentally a global scandal about the politics of inequality and underdevelopment linked

Gender and Genetics. [Online] <http://www.who.int/genomics/gender/en/index4.html> [Accessed: August 8, 2015]

32 Weems, Renita. The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1. In *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts*. 30.

33 Press Association. Morocco banned and fined \$1m over Africa Cup of Nations withdrawal. [Online] <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/feb/06/morocco-banned-and-fined-africa-cup-of-nations> [Accessed: August 10, 2015]

to race. James Ashton, writing in the *Independent Newspaper* on “Ebola virus: What price for a miracle cure”, argues that the ebola crisis is a global scandal about the politics of inequality because big Pharma companies:

“... spending more money on finding cures for first-world ailments such as cancer and heart disease, or on lifestyle drugs such as viagra, but the truth is that even the experts did not put ebola high on their list of priorities until this latest outbreak ...”³⁴

This gross political and economic neglect has resulted in thousands of unnecessary death. According to the Centre for Disease Control, the global number of deaths up to August 7, 2015 stood at 11 298.³⁵ Ebola has produced a moral, ethical and cultural crisis for African families and medical workers, forcing them to choose between compassion and self-preservation. Even after death, ebola robs the human being of their dignity. The limited experimental drugs that are made available will result in decisions being made concerning who will live and who will die. The ebola crisis reflects a wider global crisis in which the political and economic agenda of empire³⁶ deem some people who are usually the poor, to be excess and therefore unnecessary to their project and can be easily thrown away if they do not meet required political and economic value.

According to Bono the leader singer of the music group U2:

34 *The Independent*. Ebola virus: What price for a miracle cure? [Online]<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/ebola-virus-what-price-for-a-miracle-cure-9785917.html> [Accessed: November 1, 2014]

35 This updated case count from WHO situation reports is valid up to August 7, 2015. See the recent report by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Ebola Outbreak in West Africa – Case Counts. [Online]<http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/outbreaks/2014-west-africa/case-counts.html> [Accessed: August 8, 2015]

36 The concept of empire was popularised in the ecumenical debates and became embedded in the Accra Declaration (2004) of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) to represent the ‘convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic and military imperial interests, systems and networks that seek to dominate political power and economic wealth. It typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities and countries to the more powerful. Empire today crosses all boundaries, strips and reconstructs identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation states and either marginalizes or co-opts religious communities. *The ACCRA Confession*, Developed and published by the North American Covenanting for Justice Working Group, (RCA Communication and Production Services, 2007). 6.

The ebola outbreak in West Africa and the world's inept initial response to it, shows how fragile we are on all fronts. Because the epidemic isn't just a failure of health systems in poor countries, or of leadership and coordination by wealthy ones, it's also a failure of our value system. If governments the world over had kept their promises to fight extreme poverty and diseases, the three countries most affected would have had stronger national immune systems.³⁷

10. Allegiance to the *God of Life* means disobeying unethical political orders

The Exodus narrative offers us a model of how ordinary citizens can engage in political resistance against the forces of death unleashed by empire. Against great odds ordinary women³⁸ refused to join in Pharaoh's imperial project of throwing away vulnerable life. It is interesting that Pharaoh feared the potential threat posed by male resistance that resulted in the order to kill all of the male babies. However, it was the daring resistance of two midwives, Shiprah and Puah (Ex 1:15) who refused to obey an unethical law that called for their participation in killing innocent babies. Their allegiance and fidelity to "the *God of life*"³⁹ empowered them into righteous disobedience to unethical political authority in order to protect life. Lapsley argues that exodus text does not give clarity on the ethnic identity of the midwives, whether they were Egyptian or Hebrew, but they made deliverance of vulnerable children a priority over allegiance to ethnic solidarity.⁴⁰ These two ordinary civil servants had clarity about the core question that they faced: To whom does life ultimately belong? For them it was not Pharaoh but the *God of life!* Their fear of God *shaped the quality of their hearts* and the moral character of their conscience. Their

37 Bono concludes that Ebola happens when promises are broken. Paul David Hewson (Bono). Ebola is What Happens When Promises Are Broken. [Online] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bono/ebola-is-what-happens-whe_b_6193506.html?ncid=tweetInkushpmg00000067 [Accessed: November 1, 2014]

38 Bird, AB 1997. *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 43.

39 Keum, Jooseop 2013. *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*. Geneva: WCC Publications. 5.

40 Lapsley, JE. *Whispering the Word Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 72-73.

nursing profession had educated and nurtured them to give respect and honour to the protection of life. They refused to sell their souls to life denying political power and did not do what the king of Egypt ordered. They let the boy babies live. When they were challenged on their failure to do as the King demanded, they employed wisdom and responded using the king's prejudicial sense of the relationship between Hebrew and Egyptian physical differences, reproductive health and ethnicity.

So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous (*stronger in bearing life*) and give birth before the midwife comes to them" (Ex 1:18-19 NRSV).

In their official report to the government the Midwives concluded that the Hebrew women were "full of life". In the DNA cell structure of the vulnerable Hebrew women it seems that the Creator of their reproductive health had designed ways for easy uncomplicated births that resisted death within a context of oppression! God took notice and later honoured the brave selfless acts of these midwives and blessed them with families of their own (Ex 1:21). God was pleased with the midwives' act of civil disobedience (1:20). Their courageous action resulted in saving the life of baby Moses who was later rescued and adopted by Pharaoh's own daughter! What a paradox that the son of migrants who became their liberator, grew up within the very imperial palace of the king that engaged in ethnic cleansing against his own people. God had the last laugh in using the Pharaoh's daughter to be his instrument in protecting life.

11. Take risk and act to change the course of history

The midwives' saving of vulnerable lives by engaging in risky, daring and bold action embodies what could be described as missional discipleship. Moses' liberative work happened because some ordinary government workers took a stand and defied imperial powers. Had it not been for their radical disobedience, Moses would have been killed at birth along with other children that were murdered. Two ordinary women said "no" to an act of injustice and their nonviolent act of disobedience saved lives of those condemned to die. They lied to their government and broke unjust laws to

save lives. Their brave behaviour is affirmed in Scott Eddy's dictum that there are, "Three C's of life: Choices, Chances, and Changes. You must make a Choice to take a Chance, or your life will never Change."⁴¹ Indeed, our actions, decisions, choices will all have consequences, for good or for evil in this world. Jacqueline Lapsley refers to the action of these women as "transgressive values of deliverance".⁴²

12. Midwives missio-political lessons of resistance

The exodus narrative has raised issues around the dynamics of gender, politics and health of the lives of vulnerable people. Pharaoh feared the birth of males not females but it was from women he least feared that created the environment for radical social change. These midwives remind us that sometimes radical social change comes from the margins through sacrificial acts of civil disobedience. Their action offers a powerful lesson that our actions, decisions and choices have life giving or life denying consequences. Two ordinary women made a difference and changed the world around them for good! One small gesture had a huge impact on the lives of the most vulnerable. They exercised discernment on the ethics and morals of Pharaoh's authority in getting rid of lives yet to be born. They overcame Pharaoh's addiction to patriarchal ideology that "discounted women's power and character" and in the end it was women power that became his undoing.⁴³ It was the initiative of *women* that saved the life of Moses who served as later served as leader in the liberation of the Hebrew people.⁴⁴ In their minority position and faced by awesome life-denying imperial powers they nurtured and cultivated deep relationship with God's life-giving Spirit that gave them wisdom not to opt for direct confrontation

41 Scott, Teddy. Twitter@mrscottteddy. [Online] <http://www.mrscottteddy.com/> [Accessed: August November 5, 2014]

42 Lapsley, JE. *Whispering the Word Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 69-71.

43 Lapsley, JE. *Whispering the Word Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 73.

44 Kirk-Duggan, CA 2003. How Liberating is Exodus and for Whom? Deconstructing Exodus Motifs in Scripture, Literature and Life. In *Exodus and Deuteronomy: Texts and Contexts* Edited by Athalya Brenner and Gale A Yee. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress. 6.

against the imperial system but redirected their efforts to expose the evil and stupidity of the system.

13. Resistance in the face of systemic evil

Having lost to the women's deceptive act of resistance, Pharaoh tried another death promoting strategy against the Hebrew migrant population to destroy their baby boys. He ordered that all baby boys born should be thrown in the crocodile infested river Nile (Ex 1:22). The waters of the Nile which were meant to give life to the peoples of Africa and provide them with nutrient rich resources to irrigate vast stretch of desert lands to feed millions of Africans. However, power in the hands of insecure and immature male political leaders can wreak havoc in this world. Pharaoh used this life-giving resource as a source that denied life by legislating for male babies to be used as feeding stock for Nile crocodiles. He paints a decrepit picture of the depth of moral decay that imperial force will sink to have their way. Death seems to be the preferred instrument that tyrannical powers use against those they cannot control by other means. But God intervened to stop this imperial Tyrant who thought that he was unaccountable. In addition to the midwives, God mobilized others to become missional partners to resist empire and protect life.

The migrant Hebrew family of Moses feared God and the moral character of their lifestyle allowed them to organize their family for the sacred purpose of protecting life. It was the bold action of some daring women: Jochebed the mother of Moses (Ex 2:1-3) and Miriam, Moses sister (Ex 7 – 8) who disobeyed Pharaoh and put into action their plan to protect baby Moses. For three long months the family hid the child from the authorities and their spies in the community. When they could not keep him in the house any longer for fear of drawing unnecessary attention, the mother, Jochebed built a water proof papyrus basket for the babe and placed him in it for protection between the reeds on the bank of the Nile. Miriam, the sister of the baby served as a secretive security guard (Ex 2:4) and other family took turns to watch over him. Although the names of women are mentioned, one should not forget the silent presence of a father in the hidden text of the narrative who would also be playing his part in protecting his family by resisting the imperial forces of death. Lapsley sums up Pharaoh fundamental blunder as

one in which he: “he fatally underestimated to work deliverance through the vulnerable and seemingly powerless on behalf of the vulnerable”.⁴⁵

14. The *God of Life* gets the last laugh

It is interesting that even Pharaoh’s house that was the epicentre of life denying power, could not prevent the God of life from entering and changing the imperial agenda. Pharaoh’s own daughter from the palace went to the Nile (Ex 2:5-10) for her recreational bathe and what could be considered as an ordinary daily act became an missional opportunity that exposed her to the realities of life outside of the palace. The ordinary circumstances of life were not just coincidences but “God-incidences”. She saw a basket-boat floating among the reeds and sent her maid to get it. “She opened it and saw the child – a baby crying! Her heart went out to him. She said, “This must be one of the Hebrew babies.” (Exodus 2:6). She became an agent whose heart was opened to God’s missional purpose for the liberation of the Hebrew migrant community through her rescue of Moses from the dire death trap of her father. In the very household of Pharaoh, a close member of his family became God’s agent who used the royal treasury to employ the natural mother of the baby as nanny to care for her own baby (2:9).

Together towards life

It is this *God of life* that heard the cries of an oppressed migrant community and raised up Moses as a liberator who can be found among the contemporary migrants poignantly described by Wren:

Some have fled from terror by night,
Hiding from bullets by day,
Weary and hungry, in fear of their lives
Seeking a safe place to stay.⁴⁶

The millions of migrants that are journeying across the Sahara desert, to Libyan coasts, those fleeing the execution of ISIS in Syria and Iraq are all

45 Lapsley, JE. *Whispering the Word Hearing Women’s Stories in the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 74.

46 Wren, B 1986. *Travellers*. London: Stainer Publishers & Bell.

seeking safety and the basic resources that can support life. The global movement of migrants that live on the margins of society are also crying out for life. Their situation has brought to the fore important issues about the global justice. The response of wealthy nations building high fences to keep out migrants points to their impotent politics that cannot find life-giving solutions to the flow of migrants. Their precarious condition is acknowledged in the World Council of Churches (WCC) theme: “Together Towards Life”⁴⁷ that affirms any denial of life is a rejection of the *God of life*. It uses the mission statement of Jesus, “I am come that they may have life ... in all its fullness” (Jn 10:10). The poetic song of Brian Wren constitutes one untried solution that is open to those that wish to journey with the world’s migrants:

Break the bread of belonging; welcome the stranger in the land
 We have all been a stranger we can try to understand
 Break the bread of belonging, fear of the foreigner still blows strong;
 Make a space for the strangers; give them the right to belong.

It invites an accompaniment that is built on relationships of critical solidarity that practices radical hospitality in welcoming strangers. This welcome is informed not by ignorance and pity but understanding based upon affirmation of human dignity, human rights, human respect that are summed up commitment to justice that facilitate “fullness of life”.

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47 Keum. *Together Towards Life*.

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