

“A Wandering Aramean Was My Ancestor”

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¹When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.”

⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.”

You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house. (Deuteronomy 26:1-11)

The words Charles Dickens chose to open his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* are among the most famous in English literature: “*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.*” Right from the beginning, the reader knows that the story to come will be something of a paradox – a time of joy, but also a time of pain... a tale of blessings and curses... light and darkness... wisdom and folly.

Arguably, the same words are also an apt description of the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrew refugees in the story of the Exodus. The book of Deuteronomy, which brings the nation of Israel right up to the edge of the Promised Land, is presented as an extended series of sermons preached by Moses to the group that had fled bondage in Egypt in search of a better life. Having wandered for 40 years, an entire generation of older immigrants had passed away, never to see the land flowing with milk and honey with their own eyes. Those who had left Egypt as children were now adults. Moses’ congregation had seen and experienced much along the way – good and bad, feast and famine, success and failure.

In this chapter, however, Moses is preaching about thanksgiving, gratitude, and collective memory. Moses wants the refugees of Israel to **remember** all that God has done for them: how God heard their cries when they were in bondage in Egypt... how God moved to end their oppression and liberate them from their captors... how God cared for them in the desert with guidance, food, water, shelter, and defense against their enemies. As they near the end of their journey and prepare to take their first steps into the Promised Land, Moses says that they should never forget where they had come from or how they got there. He wanted God’s mighty acts of care and deliverance to always be brought to mind.



So, even as their lives changed for better or worse, whenever they offered gifts and offerings to God, they were instructed to speak aloud, as a mantra, the beginning of their collective story, saying “*A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...*”

That story, after all, would recall some very good times. In fact, Judaism would come to describe the time of wandering as the era of the “Nomadic Ideal,” “the golden age” of Israel’s innocence.¹ Unencumbered by the building, maintenance, and management of the cities, vineyards, armies, and religious centers that would be built up later, the people of God had no choice but to live day by day in God’s care. Out in the harsh, unforgiving wilderness of Sinai, there was no question that their survival was totally and completely dependent upon the grace and gifts of heaven. There was no wondering about what God had done for them lately, because it was seen and experienced on a daily basis. Those people may have left Egypt as Hebrew slaves and refugees, but it was in the wandering that they became the nation of Israel, God’s chosen people. In the history of Israel, it was the best of times.

However, as it always is with human life, it was not all good. No matter how we may filter the past to pull out and preserve only the rosier, happiest memories, a little rain falls in every chapter of life. The same was true for “the wandering Aramean” who was their ancestor. That reference, after all, was to Jacob, the one who would become the namesake of Israel, and who was every bit a child of his father Isaac, but who also had some Syrian (a/k/a Aramean) blood through his mother Rebecca. He also spent much of his life on the run in the wilderness, experiencing not just want and poverty, but also danger from those who had sworn revenge against him.

Not surprisingly, the wandering nation that would take his name experienced many of the same challenges. They were often on the run from enemies. They experienced severe thirst and hunger so severe that many wanted to return to the slavery of Egypt. They fought amongst themselves. They complained about their leaders. They even abandoned God, famously forging a calf out of gold to be their new and more hopeful deity.

This mixed-bag of Israel’s existence – both for Jacob and his namesake nation -- is captured in the Hebrew word that we translate as “wandering.” We might imagine that wandering in itself is not all bad. We might think of a peaceful, meandering stroll, perhaps a jaunt off the beaten path to explore a pleasing wooded glen. As many a bumper sticker says, “Not all who wander are lost.” But the Hebrew verb “*abad*” has a much darker connotation. It suggests the kind of wandering one does when they are about to perish, when the cloud of death is drawing near.² No, the wandering Aramean who was their ancestor was not just out for a stroll; he was on the run from ruin, destruction, and annihilation.

This is much closer to the images that come to mind when we hear the word “refugee” today. Ironically, the nation of Syria -- once home to the Arameans -- has been ground zero for the largest displacement crisis in modern times. Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and roughly 6.8 million families have fled the brutal conflict as refugees and asylum-seekers. Another 6.7 million people remain displaced within Syria.³

¹ “The Book of Deuteronomy,” Exposition by Henry H. Shires and Pierson Parker, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. II (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 484.

² “abad,” <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/6.htm>.

³ <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>

Unfortunately, the war in Ukraine is giving the Syrian situation some real and tragic competition. Some estimate that there have been 7.5 million border crossings out of Ukraine in recent months, with well over half of them landing, at least for the moment, in Poland. The overwhelming majority of these refugees are women and children.⁴ It is hard to overstate the extent of the human tragedy unfolding across the globe right now. In just these two examples alone, we have described around 21 million people who are now lost and wandering, on the run from ruin, destruction, and annihilation. It is not hard for us to imagine that these are, for almost every one of them, the worst times of their lives.

Wandering, it seems, is always a mixed bag. Even if there was a kind of nomadic idealism in the Exodus, I cannot imagine that Moses wanted Israel to remember only the good times. I think he wanted them to remember all of it as both the best of times, and the worst of times... the joy and the pain... the light and the darkness... the faithfulness and the failures.... To remember that, even when they were weak, God was strong... To remember that, no matter how far they wandered, God was always there. I think Moses knew that, even if their memories of wandering were complicated, those memories would help the people to cling more closely to the living God.

It is the same for us. So, when we come before God to offer whatever it is we have to give, we too should start with remembering – remembering what God has done for us, how God has delivered us, how faithful God has been to us, even when we were not faithful to God. That kind of memory may just open our hearts as we remember those who are still wandering, still running from the Pharaohs of today. It may even end up helping us act with greater charity, generosity, and courage to help them find their way home, given that, but for the grace of God, we could be fleeing and wandering with them.

In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and the Wandering Aramean who is our ancestor, too. ***Amen.***

⁴ <https://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/ukraine-crisis-facts-faqs-and-how-to-help#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20millions%20of,been%20forced%20from%20their%20homes.>