

Seek the shalom of the city: Homelessness and faith communities in diaspora

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Abstract

This article is a missiological response to the migration and homelessness challenges, especially issues of socio-economic and political marginalisation, as experienced by foreign nationals in the City of Tshwane. The most pressing question which this article seeks to investigate is: “What action can faith communities in diaspora take to contribute towards the regeneration of their host city?” Using literature study and a contextual Bible reading of Jeremiah 29:1–7 from the lenses of both trained and ordinary readers, this article encourages faith communities in diaspora to actively participate in seeking the shalom and well-being of their host city by praying and working towards urban renewal.

Keywords

Seeking; shalom; city; faith communities; diaspora; migration; homelessness.

1. Introduction

International migration is not only increasing rapidly (Castles 2000:273), but also wreaking havoc in the global arena socially, economically, politically and religiously. It brings with it challenges such as spatial and economic contestations (De Beer 2008:183–184), and social exclusion and marginalisation, among others (see Mangayi 2014; cf. Mashau and Mangoedi 2015:2). These challenges have led to creative tensions between foreign and local nationals. Foreign nationals are not only accused of stealing jobs from locals but are also said to be contributing towards the moral decay of host nations in many ways. In their article, “Contested spaces: Exploring the intersections of migration, sex work and trafficking in South Africa”, Walker and Oliveira (2015) deal with issues of cross-border migration,

human trafficking and sex work, with foreign nationals not only accused of selling sex in the streets of Johannesburg, but also running brothels. Some are also accused of being pedlars of drugs. In South Africa, especially in the City of Tshwane where this study has been conducted, these contestations have led, in some instances, to violent xenophobic or Afrophobic attacks against foreign nationals (see Botha 2013:105; cf. Nel 2015:1).

The foregoing challenges have given birth to narratives of human dislocation, displacement, homelessness and death in some instances (see Akinola, 2018:66). What is even more shocking in our context is the recurring nature of xenophobic attacks directed towards foreign nationals and the call for foreigners to go home on one hand, as well as the life encompassed by fear among foreign nationals on the other hand. This reality is also affecting faith communities in diaspora. Just like the exiles in Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 29:1–7), they are also asking themselves whether it is possible to sing songs of the LORD while in a foreign land (see Psalm 137:4). The most pressing question which this article seeks to investigate is: “What action can faith communities in diaspora take to contribute towards the regeneration of the host city? How can their presence benefit the host city? Drawing from the contextual Bible study of Jeremiah 29:1–7, migrants and homeless people can benefit their host cities by seeking the *shalom* (peace) and prosperity of their new home away from home. In the effort to unpack this, this article will firstly deal with the literature review. Secondly, it will critically explore the research method that was applied in attaining data for this article. Thirdly, it will provide a theological analysis of Jeremiah 29:1–7. Fourthly, this article will give prominence to the voices of ordinary readers of the Bible, followed by a synthesis that sought to amplify emerging voices in terms of new lessons regarding the transformation agenda that can be gleaned from the collaborative dialogue between trained and ordinary readers of the Biblical text.

This research is important because of the shifting dynamics regarding migration and homelessness. Migration and homelessness are increasingly becoming a permanent feature of growing urbanisation globally. The discourse of migration and homelessness is shifting from one of “contestation” to one of “belonging”. People movement, cross-border migration included, is something that we can no longer wish away. The new United Nations statistics record of 2015 has recorded, for instance, a total

number of 244 million international migrants. It is therefore important that host nations should learn to embrace them and give them space and opportunity to contribute towards the peace and economic growth of their respective cities, regardless of the many challenges that migrants bring with them. The book by Huchzermeyer (2011), “Cities with slums: From informal settlement eradication to a right to the city in Africa”, is a very valuable tool in terms of locating this discourse within the scope of migration and homelessness in the City of Tshwane. It helps us see that some challenges, just like migration and homelessness, are there to stay and remain in a space like the City of Tshwane for a long time.

2. Literature review

Cross-border migration and homelessness in the City of Tshwane

Migration, especially cross-border migration, has increased enormously since the dawn of democracy in South Africa. This includes people who come to South Africa legally and those who are undocumented. Political refugees and asylum seekers are also included when we talk about cross-border migration. Cross-border migrants are highly concentrated in cities like Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town (Vearey 2013:128). The City of Tshwane is no exception.

Cross-border migrants are very vulnerable to all sorts of challenges, including access to decent housing and sanitation (see Mazars et al. 2013:6). As much as it is possible for migrants to purchase properties in South Africa, it is very difficult for those coming from African countries (African migrants) to buy houses in big numbers, because they are not able to access any government housing subsidy. The following statement is self-explanatory:

For wealthy Europeans, Asians, North Americans and a few wealthy Africans, this right to purchase property has allowed them to buy up relatively cheap luxury homes in the country. But for the majority of migrants from other parts of Africa, the purchase of a home in South Africa – even the tiny “matchboxes” that make up most of the new housing stock in the townships – is well beyond their personal financial means and private banks have been reluctant to loan to anyone in the townships, let alone foreigners with questionable legal status (McDonald 1998:454).

While lack of government policy on this issue can be cited as the main cause, this reality has left some of the cross-border migrants homeless, thereby joining a substantial number of local homeless people in the streets of Tshwane and other growing cities in the country. While some are sleeping in parks, others find accommodation in shelters; the most noticeable incident about this reality is the establishment of plastic houses in front of the local headquarters of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) on the corner of Sisulu and Pretorius Streets. These are cross-border refugees coming from African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Tanzania, Nigeria, Mozambique, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. These people are stuck on the pavement of Sisulu Street because they can be deported to their home countries if they leave this area. They are waiting for the UNHCR to provide aid (Monama 2015).

Social exclusion and exploitation of foreign migrants

There is serious contestation for inner-city spaces. “On a daily basis, the inner-city presents a contest for space between rich and poor, black and white, foreigners and locals” (De Beer 2008:182). Contestation between foreigners and locals is rife in South African cities, especially in areas that concern housing and access to economic means. There is a veiled accusation among South Africans that foreign nationals are here to steal their jobs; hence, the eruption of xenophobic attacks on black foreigners in recent times (see HRW 1998).

Contestation, resentment and xenophobic pop-ups (incidents of attacks towards foreign nationals from time to time) continue to cloud our social discourse because, in some instances, those in private business, especially the catering industry, prefer to hire foreign nationals ahead of locals. The motive for such actions is that foreign nationals, especially illegal immigrants, can be easily exploited, as we have witnessed with the much-publicised case of the Geet Indian Restaurant. Their waiters from Zimbabwe told current affairs programme *Checkpoint* that they are not paid the legally-required basic salary and the owner deducts 15 percent from their daily tips as well. This was televised on October 13, 2015. A case like this is worsened by some of the illegal immigrants who are willing to accept meagre wages (see Peberdy 2001).

Social exclusion, marginalisation and exploitation are in some instances further entrenched by the policy position of the City of Tshwane. While the Constitution of the Republic seeks to embrace everybody who lives in it, the current policy on homelessness in this city (2013 Policy Document on Homelessness in the City of Tshwane) is silent on issues of migration, homelessness and economic inclusion. The vulnerability of foreign nationals is experienced by men, women, children and people living with disabilities. This kind of experience affects migrant faith communities as well.

The push to exclude and marginalise the poor (including foreign migrants) is often accompanied by a call towards urban regeneration or renewal, which in turn is often accompanied by subtle efforts to exclude, marginalise and exploit the poor from the highly contested inner-city spaces. Renewal programmes are often veiled by rhetoric words such as “clean” and “safe” environments to the detriment of the poor. De Beer remarked that, “But often “clean” and “safe” are just terms used to cover up what is actually meant, which is to remove the poor somewhere else, to close down informal trade, and to make access for the vulnerable increasingly impossible” (2008:186). This applies to the issue of the homeless cross-border migrants as well.

Seeking the peace and prosperity of the City of Tshwane

The phrase, “seeking the peace and prosperity of the city”, is borrowed from Jeremiah 29:7 and is used in this section from the perspective of its original intent; but applied in the context of seeking urban regeneration in the face of migration and homelessness in the City of Tshwane. It is the calling to migrant faith communities not to neglect their missional responsibility of seeking the *shalom* and well-being of their host nation. They must become transforming agents who seek to impact their own contexts and those of their neighbours. This is captured in the following words:

And it is in this context of contest, power, and exclusion that the Church has the challenge to flesh out a gospel that is appropriate, liberating and constructive; a gospel that will take note of the historic, political, socio-economic and spatial dynamics that are at work in the making and re-making of our cities (De Beer 2008:182).

Seeking the peace and prosperity of the City of Tshwane in the context of migration and homelessness will be achieved when the vision to create a home for all who live in South Africa is realised; this vision is captured in the Freedom Charter, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the National Development Plan 2030, and the Vision of Tshwane 2055.

How can we sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land?

There is clear evidence that migrants play a critical role in the informal economy of the host nation (Muller 2015:1). The biggest challenge is that those migrants also experience violence at the hands of the locals. It is captured as follows: “There is evidence of a rise in “violent entrepreneurship” in South Africa, where local traders and politicians capitalise on xenophobic sentiments for their own benefit, unleashing a whirlwind of violence in which migrants are killed and their businesses destroyed” (Muller 2015:1). This has led to many such communities asking: how can we sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land? How possible is it for us to be able to contribute towards the well-being of the economy of the City of Tshwane, whilst at the same time facing this kind of brutality?

The foregoing questions are further brought to our table because immigration legislation and policy also make it difficult for foreign nationals to be able to contribute meaningfully towards the economic well-being of their host nation. They remain largely exclusionary as unskilled workers (Peberdy 2001b:8). The following is self-explanatory:

The Department of Home Affairs declared in 1998 that “no one in the unskilled and semi-skilled categories would normally be accepted as an immigrant worker”. Employers wishing to introduce skills, even on a temporary basis, have to justify why the positions cannot be filled by South African citizens or permanent residents (Peberdy 2001a:17).

3. Research methodology

This article adopted and used the Contextual Bible Study method as a hermeneutical key to unlock how ordinary readers interpret the Bible in their context of migration and homelessness. This method has been designed to foster collaborative and critical reading of the Bible between ordinary

and trained readers and to dispel the traditional approach of “ivory tower” preoccupations where trained readers are assumed to hold the monopoly of knowledge. It is asserted: “CBS is located within collaborative work and collaborative Biblical interpretation among organised communities of the poor, working-class and marginalised, organic intellectuals from these sectors, and socially engaged (“converted”) Biblical scholars and theologians” (West 2015:239). According to West (1993:72), the aim of reading the Bible with the ordinary readers is to engender the following:

- (1) A commitment to read the Bible from the perspective of the South African context, particularly from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed;
- (2) a commitment to read the Bible in community with others; particularly with those from contexts different from their own;
- (3) a commitment to read the Bible critically; and
- (4) a commitment to individual and social transformation through contextual Bible study.

The issue on social transformation is informed by the hermeneutics of liberation which urged scholars to take the context of those on the margins seriously (Nadar, 2009:387). The data presented in this article is drawn from a group of homeless people in the City of Tshwane and the group interviewed comprised of 21 persons between 21 and 57 years of age. The majority of the group were women who were housed in the Potter’s House. Most men who attended the Bible study were not sheltered but came from the streets. The Bible study conducted by the researchers comprised of 12 questions. The first and the second were answered by the whole group. From question three to twelve, the group was divided into four sub-groups. At the end of each discussion, they chose one person to represent the group. This approach proved to be a very successful tool in gathering data from participants. According to Greeff (2010:36), focus groups are “a means of better understanding how people feel or think about an issue, product or service”. To avoid unethical behaviour on our part as researchers (see Struwig and Stead 2001:67), all participants [informants] were informed of the nature of this research and their consent was sought so that this work would be published in the form of a scholarly article. All informants were willing participants in the whole process of data-gathering and the synthesis thereof.

Having used the Contextual Bible Study method with a group of homeless folks in the City of Tshwane, there are few critical observations that need to be recorded and this is done in the effort to augment it for different types of ordinary readers, as follows:

Firstly, the CBS method should be applauded for giving prominence to the voice of ordinary readers of the Bible, their context and the social transformation agenda thereof. However, it is important to note that it is very limiting when looking at the role of a trained reader as a facilitator. I therefore concur with Nadar (2006:341) who concluded that this method poses some epistemological problems that require attention moving forward; hence, she pleaded in the same breath for an interventionist strategy in conscientising ordinary readers of their collective wisdom. This is necessary in selective cases where the literacy level of ordinary readers is very low. It became clear in my engagement with the above-mentioned group that, while some have a high level of literacy, others remain in the margins and require intense probing and suggestive questioning to stick with the text because of their low levels of literacy.

Secondly, as much as social transformation is the goal of this method, the application thereof is not always guaranteed. In my case, I discovered that it is difficult to gather together the same group of homeless people over a longer period of time. Apart from a group of women who were housed at the Potter's House in Tshwane, some of the members of the group interviewed were coming directly from the streets and with no address for one to locate them or undertake a follow-up in terms of the implementation strategy to foster change in their context. In this case, ordinary readers rely on the advocacy of trained readers who, if taking their prophetic role seriously, are able to influence policy change and push the municipality to adopt a strategy that deals with issues of migration and homelessness in the City of Tshwane. An article by Mashau (2017), "Unshackling the chains of homelessness in the City of Tshwane: A critical appraisal of the current policy in the light of national and local policies and strategies", is one such example.

Thirdly, my engagement with the group of homeless people in Tshwane opened my eyes to see that the ideal of collaborative and critical engagement between the ordinary and trained, as espoused by the CBS method (West,

2015:239), remains very much in the hands of trained readers who, after gathering the data, are left with the role of analysing, interpreting the same data and generating emerging voices in the process. I therefore agree with Nadar (2009:384) who called for the need to interrogate the identity and role of the intellectual or trained reader moving forward. The power dynamic remains very much part of this discourse, with the trained reader having the upper hand.

And last but not least, the CBS method anticipates that every trained reader is also by implication a socially-engaged Biblical scholar who is actively involved in the struggles and survival of the marginalised (see West 2014:2; cf. West 2015:245). I have picked up in our discussions that this is not always the case. Most of the researchers that participate in this project do not have live experiences when coming to issues of migration and homelessness and therefore they rely heavily on desktop research and the voices of the so-called ordinary readers. It is therefore imperative to encourage trained readers to be more hands-on when encountering and engaging the homeless from the pavements of our cities like Tshwane. In this case, the “encounterology” method by Kritzing (2008) and the CBS method, if correctly applied, become more transforming and liberating.

4. Theological reflection of Jeremiah 29:1–7

In reading, interpreting and applying Jeremiah 29:1–7 in the context of migration and homelessness, trained readers of the text conclude as follows:

The Context of Jeremiah 29:1–7

Jeremiah 29:1–7 falls within the scope of Jeremiah 26.1–29.32 (Brueggemann 1998:229). This view is supported by many scholars with slight alterations (see McKeating 1999:137; cf. Clements, 1988:169–170). When Jeremiah wrote this part of his book, he was addressing the powers that be, speaking the truth to power and addressing false prophets, as we shall see below.

Jeremiah 29:1–7 is part of Jeremiah 29, the section which contains more extracts from letters between the Babylonian exiles from 598 and the community that has remained in Judah. According to Clements (1988:170), “These letters are probably four in number (Jeremiah to the exiles, vv. 1–15; Shemaiah in Babylon to Zephaniah in Jerusalem, vv. 21–23; Jeremiah to

Shemaiah, v. 24, but broken off and no longer preserved in full; a further letter from Jeremiah to the exiles, vv. 31–32)”. In line with the foregoing, Jeremiah 29:1–7 constitutes the first section of the letter addressed to the exiles (Jeremiah 29:1–15). The first section (Jeremiah 29:1–7) deals with an encouragement to the exiles to realistically and intentionally embrace the exile, while the second section (Jeremiah 29:10–14) provides a long-term hope for return and restoration (see Brueggemann 1998:255). This chapter pays special attention to the first section because it provides the framework in terms of how migrants can address issues of homelessness and the well-being of their community and that of the host nation.

When writing the section under reflection, Jeremiah was in a way confronting false prophets and their false promises. They had hoped for early release from Babylonian captivity and were preaching such a message that generated false hope to the people. On the contrary, Jeremiah brought a different message that was shocking and one that dashed their hopes for an early return to Jerusalem (see Berrigan 1999:123–124). The exiles were to spend seventy years in Babylon and therefore they were to be content with their situation. It is asserted: “This was indeed the hardest part of the divine instructions. Psalm 137 reminds us of the bitterness that affected the later deportees” (Mackay 2004:163). It prompted them to ask: “How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4).

Migration and homelessness

The narrative of Jeremiah 29:1–7 is directed to people who were in Babylonian exile. The Jews were forcefully removed from their homes in Jerusalem and taken to captivity in Babylon around 598. Physically, the destruction of their homes rendered the Jews homeless. The detachment from their home country also rendered them homeless in a foreign country. They did not feel at home and struggled to make the best of their situation. This included the spiritual dimension as well. It is noted that: “The main question facing the exiles was how they could maintain a real religious relationship with the LORD in a foreign land. They no longer had access to the Temple and its sacrifices. If they were to worship the LORD in an appropriate way and live true to the covenant, then this would seem to require a speedy return to the promised land” (Mackay 2004:161).

Being at home in God's world

In writing to the exiles, Jeremiah sought to invigorate them to settle down in Babylon. “In Babylon the deportees were permitted to retain much of their traditional customs and structures” (Mackay 2004:159, 160); and therefore, Jeremiah encouraged them not to let go of such a noble task of building God's community, even though they were in a foreign land. In this way, Jeremiah inspired them to be at home in a foreign land. For as long as they lived in Babylon, the Jews were to make the best of it. It is concluded: “But while it was legitimate to criticise and oppose the evil perpetrated by Babylon, the exiles' attitude was not to be negative with respect to the pagan land they were in. Rather, they were to promote its interests in every way open to them, because ultimately it was the LORD who had brought them there” (Mackay, 2004:163, 164).

Jeremiah's message, that prompted the exiles to feel at home in Babylon, can be summed up as follows:

- The exiles were to feel at home in Babylon because it was still part of God's world and they were also there because of God's doing. It was asserted that “Nebuchadnezzar was merely the agent whom the LORD had used to carry out his purposes. They should accept their circumstances, because the LORD was in control of them” (Mackay 2004:162; cf. Jeremiah 29:4).
- The exiles were to build houses and plant gardens (see Jeremiah 29:5); and with this message it was clear that God wanted them to be at home in Babylon, irrespective of its foreignness. According to Greenway (2007:41), “For the Hebrews in Babylon, it was not a question of whether or not they could choose to remain in the city. They were captives, and if liberation came, it would be an act of God (Jeremiah 29:14)”.
- They were to disregard the false hope of an early release. It is asserted that: “For Jeremiah, hope and assurance were not to rest on naïve patriotic and unreasoned expectations that God would swiftly put an end to the power of Babylon and so send the exiles back to their homes. Rather, they were to build upon the painful acceptance of the reality of Babylonian rule in the present. Consequently, they had to adapt to this situation and learn to endure it” (Clements 1988:173).

- They were to increase in numbers and not decrease. They came as a community to Babylon and therefore the Israelites were to remain a covenant community who should grow in numbers, stature and spirituality. They had to marry within the exilic community as part of their covenant prerogatives and this would help them to settle down in Babylon (Mackay 2004:163).
- Seek the *shalom* and prosperity of Babylon; and also pray for it and its well-being (see Jeremiah 29:7). This will be deliberated in depth below.

Seeking the *shalom* of the City

The basic meaning of *shalom* is to be whole; sound in mind and body; saved. According to Greenway (2007:42), “God is the source and foundation of *shalom*, and in the final analysis there is no *shalom* apart from him”. Instead of growing deep resentment towards their imperial masters, the Jews were to work for the well-being of the empire and its capital (Brueggemann 1998:257). This was not just another means of surviving politically, but it was their God-given mission to pray and seek God’s intervention for the host city (Mackay 2004:165). In his interpretation of the phrase, “Seek the *shalom* of the city”, Greenway (2007:43–45) proposes the following practical things to be set out as the broad agenda for city missions:

- Establish and maintain communities in the city that display the wonderful values of *shalom*.
- Show concern for the material and physical well-being of all citizens.
- Agents of *shalom* seek reconciliation and right relationships between people of all races and cultures in the city.
- *Shalom* refers to righteousness, in the sense of just and fair relationships between people.
- Above all else, *shalom* means peace with God and reconciliation with the Maker and Ruler of the universe.

The theological reflection, by trained readers of the text, conclusively outlines the following principles regarding migration, homelessness and the missional calling of the faith community:

- Nobody should feel homeless in God's world; God is still in charge of your plans and destinies, irrespective of where you are in his world.
- When migration places you in another country, other than your country of origin (place you call home), you should make the best of your situation to be at home right there.
- The community of faith, including migrant covenant people, should always keep in mind that their mission is to seek the *shalom* and prosperity (wellbeing) of the host city. They should, prayerfully, work towards the renewal of their host city.
- Biblical understanding of the *shalom* should always guide their practice.

5. Contextual reading of Jeremiah 29:1–7

In reading, interpreting and applying Jeremiah 29:1–7 in the context of homelessness and migration in the City of Tshwane, ordinary readers of the text concluded as follows:

On the question of what the text is all about, the entire group noted the following:

- The text is about ubuntu and integration with other states; this is with particular reference to God's people [Israel] in exile in the land of Babylon. One of the respondents added that this text is about "slavery and bondage in exile".
- One of the respondents connected the text with homelessness. Another one added that these people were led away from Jerusalem to Babylon. They were without food and therefore suffering under king Nebuchadnezzar who kept them as slaves. The group agreed that these people were a community which had been deprived of its rights, including their right to multiply.
- This exile, according to these members of the entire group, affected the rich and the poor, palace officials, skilled workers and leaders. One respondent added that the educated are [were] also affected by [this] exile. This has in a way affected not only their spiritual well-being, but also the physical. According to one respondent, this community of the exiles were also suffering economically. They were

“homeless people who did not have food; hence they were called to grow gardens”. “Their basic needs were not met”, exclaimed another respondent. This impacted them negatively; it deprived them of their joy and their ability to increase

- This text is also about a letter written by Jeremiah to the suffering community, taken into bondage. He encouraged them to start a new life with God. One respondent added that they should pray to God. They should also multiply, even when they were not in their own land. Another one said: “Prosperity is possible with God”.

As for who the main characters in the story are and what they know about each one of them, respondents said the following:

- **Jeremiah:** a man of character who has been sent into exile from Jerusalem. One respondent added that Jeremiah is the one who has given a letter to the exiles in Babylon. It is also clear to them that the Lord spoke to him [Jeremiah]. This letter was said to be a letter of encouragement and blessing.
- **Elasah:** the one carrying the letter.
- **People of Jerusalem** who were in exile. One respondent added that these were people who were to bless the city of Babylon.
- **King Nebuchadnezzar** is the one who took people [God’s people or the Israelites] from Jerusalem to slavery [in Babylon].
- **The remnant elders:** these are the people who survived this exile; these elders would teach others what the letter is all about.
- **Skilled workers and partisans:** they were also affected by exile.
- **God:** was concerned with all the Israelites; he showed himself to them so that they would be encouraged that he was still there to console those suffering in exile.

When requested to re-tell the story in their own words, respondents agreed that the story was about the prophet seeing the vision after the migration of people [Israelites] to another nation. It was about God’s prophet, Jeremiah, who wrote an encouraging letter to help them cope with the challenges of having to survive in a new country. One respondent explained that this letter was from God who was speaking to his people through his prophet.

God used Jeremiah to communicate to his people what was going to happen. God wanted them to seek his face when the time had come.

Migration, homelessness and faith communities in diaspora

In their effort to unpack the issue of migration, the respondents defined the concept of “exile” in the context of Jeremiah 29:1–7 as follows: Group 1 responded by saying that “It means to be estranged from your birth country”. Group 4 shared the same sentiments as follows: “Our understanding about exile is when a person or people are forced to flee from their country of origin to a foreign land due to persecutions that can lead to death in their home country”. Group 3 pointed out that Babylon is the exile recorded in this text. This view is also shared by Group 2 who responded as follows: “Exile is a foreign country, as we can see in the text. King Nebuchadnezzar carried people into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, and it was by force. They were forced into slavery”.

Causes of migration and homelessness

As for the question as to why the Israelites were in exile, Group 1 responded that: “Nebuchadnezzar led them into exile”. Closely related to the response given by Group 1, Group 3 highlighted that “their country was under siege”. These two groups focused mainly on the issue of agency. The other two groups, however, were able to highlight some of the underlying issues that led the Israelites to Babylon. The main reason furnished by Group 2 is that: “They disobeyed the Word of God”. Group 4 shared the same view, as follows: “They fell short [of the] glory of God, and then they went into exile for a certain period”.

Faith communities, agency and slavery

As already noted in the foregoing, the entire group of the respondents had a clear understanding and sense that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians were agents who subjected the Israelites to Babylonian captivity. They are also said to be the host nation who had specific intentions in mind as far as this captivity is concerned. Group 1 noted that the Israelites were expected to “work as slaves”. Group 3 added that they were expected to “integrate with the people of Babylon and help grow it”. Group 4 elevated the matter

to the spiritual realm by pointing out that “they were expected to continue believing in idols and disobeying God’s glory”.

Being at home in God’s world

As for the question as to what God instructed them [Israelites as the faith community in diaspora] to do for themselves while in exile, respondents shared the same view. Group 1 responded by saying that they had to: “build houses; settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce; marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for sons and give daughters in marriage; increase in numbers.” Group 2 recorded the same but added the issue of prayer to the Lord on behalf of their host nation. The issue of growing as a faith community was emphasised by Group 3 when noting that they had to “reproduce and grow spiritual[ly]”. Group 4 concurred also that they had to “marry and have sons and daughters, find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters”. Instead of decreasing, the Israelites were encouraged to increase as a faith community in diaspora. They were to treat Babylon as their home away from home.

Seeking the shalom of the city

In response to the question as to what God instructed them [Israelites] to do for their host, Group 1 pointed out that they had to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city”. All other groups shared the same sentiments, with Group 3 adding the missional dimension and their unity as follows: “To spread the Word of God, peace and prosperity and unite as one”. As for the reason why God instructed the Israelites to do the above-mentioned for the host city, Group 1 responded as follows: “Because if the host city prospers, they would also prosper”. All other groups agreed with Group 3, adding the issue of peace to the equation “for peace and prosperity”.

Contextualisation of the Biblical narrative

In this section, respondents had to answer the following questions: Who do you represent in the story? And why do you think you represent that person? Who are the exiles today? Why do you think they represent the exiles today? These questions were meant to contextualise and apply theoretical issues raised in Jeremiah 29:1–7 to the real-life context of the respondents. Group 1 agreed that they represented both the exiles and their

host. Locals are said to represent the host nation, whilst all foreign brothers and sisters are said to represent the exiles, seeing that they are coming from different countries. One respondent in Group 2 noted that he represents Babylon, since he is a local guy. He asserted, “I am a local guy. I was born South African like the Babylonians. Exiles are foreigners in our country”. Group 3 and 4 shared the same views that South Africans represent the host country like Babylon, while the cross-border migrants represent the exiles. Group 2 added the reason why people go to exile as follows: “Other people are forced to leave their country due to political reasons, war and more”.

In answering the question of what it is that you can do for yourselves in a stressful situation like being a migrant and homeless, respondents enumerated the following as solutions: Group 1 said that they will “marry and multiply; live in peace with each other; prosper by means of working hard”. One respondent in Group 2 remarked that, “I will pray to God to give me strength and wisdom to survive the situation”. Group 3 noted that what is needed is to “unite for peace and prosperity”. Group 4 concurred with those calling for prayer as a solution as follows: “... kneel down and pray for God’s favour”.

As for the question, what it is that you can do for your host city or nation to ensure peace and prosperity, Group 1 listed the following:

- Treat each other with love and respect.
- Look out for each other.
- Make laws that cater for the different classes of people.
- Teach everyone to care for one another.
- Do unto others what you expect them to do unto you.
- In good and bad times, help each other.

Group 2, on the other hand, emphasises the need to form and strengthen faith communities in the context of exile. They noted that there is a need to “build more churches so that people can join the churches, and teach those people the Word of God, because where God is, there is peace and people will prosper”. They added that “Our foreign brothers must pray for the host country, so that the country will prosper”. Adding to these spiritual dimensions, Group 3 agreed that there is a need to “keep godly morals and

tolerance”. Group 4 asserted that there is a need to “pray for that country or nation and intercede for them to ensure peace and prosperity comes among them”.

6. Synthesis: Emerging voices

When a synthesis of voices of trained and ordinary readers was made, in the context of Jeremiah 29:1–7, it became clear that ordinary readers of the text understood what the text is all about. While trained readers were able to analyse the text within the context of its original context and the scope within the entire book of Jeremiah, ordinary readers never had such ability and the only thing that they could do was to analyse the text within the framework of their understanding of what the text is all about and how they are able to draw direct inferences from the text and their immediate context of migration and homelessness in the City of Tshwane.

As for the main thrust of the Biblical narrative of Jeremiah 29:1–7, trained and ordinary readers of the text have four things in common, namely:

- The text is about migration and deals specifically with the Babylonian captivity.
- The Israelites were subjected to Babylonian exile because of their disobedience to God; but at the same time God used this opportunity to teach those in exile that he remains the same God to be served everywhere in the world. The exiles can be at home anywhere in the world. The exiles were encouraged to make the most of their situation, no matter how difficult and depressing their situation might be.
- Faith communities in diaspora should not lose hope and feel despair; they should establish themselves and practise their faith on foreign territory. They should be able to sing the songs of Zion in foreign lands. This, according to Methula (2014:114), requires a theology which prioritises transformative actions which include efforts to seek economic justice for those on the margins of the City of Tshwane: these include the homeless, abused women, commercially-exploited sex workers, street children, foreigners and victims of economic injustices.
- They were encouraged to seek the peace and prosperity of their host nation.

The emerging voices of the ordinary readers of the text can be summarised as follows:

- Migration and homelessness are a present reality.
- Issues of migration and homelessness can be addressed when faith communities pray and seek the *shalom* and prosperity of their host nation or city. Assertion is made in this instance that faith communities must feel at home everywhere in God's world where they find themselves.
- Migrants must not be treated as different people, seeing that their presence contributes positively towards the economic well-being of the host nation or city. They should contribute towards the renewal or regeneration of the host city. In this way, communities of faith (including those in diaspora) will act as agents of change in defining a missiological response (see Kritzinger 1995).
- A life of peace and unity is possible between locals and cross-border migrants, especially when laws cater for cross-border migrants and their integration in order to advance local economies. This, according to De Beer (2015:1), will lead faith communities to express *ubuntu*-solidarity while asserting and mediating respect, dignity and justice at the same time.
- Locals should be able to embrace foreigners and treat them the same way they would like to be treated if they were in exile as well.

7. Conclusion

Narratives of migration, homelessness and marginalisation are global in nature, but also local as well. Migration and homelessness are a reality in South Africa and in the City of Tshwane in particular. A group of migrants and homeless that were interviewed for the purposes of this research revealed that the City of Tshwane is a home for many foreign nationals, some of whom are homeless. In line with the opening statement by Nelson Mandela, we can safely conclude that migration and homelessness are social ills that have been, in many instances, created by human beings. People who were forced into migration have been pushed by poverty, political violence, ethnic and tribal wars, amongst others.

The encounterological reading of Jeremiah 29:1–7 by both trained and ordinary readers of the text, which led to a synthesis of their understanding and interpretation, revealed that migration and homelessness can be resolved by human beings in line with the opening statement by Nelson Mandela. The greatness of humanity can, without doubt, blossom when humanity stands in solidarity with each other to fight justly against migration and homelessness. Issues of marginalisation, xenophobic attacks and exploitation can fall or be defeated. However, it became clear in this study that, for the greatness of humanity to blossom, God's intervention is needed. Faith communities in diaspora are encouraged to seek God's face and God's *shalom* in their efforts to seek the prosperity or well-being of the host nation or city. They should work towards the regeneration of the City of Tshwane in the case of this article. It became clear in this article that cross-border migrants have an important role to play in promoting and developing the wellbeing of their host community or city; and therefore, locals should do their uttermost best to integrate foreign nationals as part of their communities.

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