

Article

Jeremiah 44 and the Complexities of Ancient Migrations

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Abstract: The transnational turn in migrant studies emphasizes complexities in migration, partly related to the agency that migrants may exercise. Chapter 44 in the biblical Book of Jeremiah holds a story of migration that is peculiarly insensitive to such aspects: religious practices performed by a local community are condemned, and so are they. Through a series of analytical steps—reflection on historical conditions of migration at the time, on the historical value of the biblical sources, on a cognitive theory of mimesis in narrative, and on praxeological analysis—this study tries to regain a view of migratory complexity and migrants’ agency in that story. The reading uncovers how migrants were “doing community” through their religious practices and through their dispute with the prophet. The story reflects an enduring pattern of struggle between local communities and trans-local forces. It also reflects change in traditional communal patterns due to social changes brought about by migration.

Keywords: migrant agency; complexity of migration; prophet Jeremiah; Jewish migration; Saite Egypt; collective memory; cognitive narrative theory; praxeology

1. Introduction: Contexts for (Reflecting on) Migration

Over the last decades, significant work has been carried out to study human mobility and migration in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East (see [Trinka 2024](#), pp. 1–2 for a recent review). This research has a discursive context that is worth noticing. Historically, human mobility is an utterly regular phenomenon. It predates human sedentary life, and seasonal mobility is still practiced in many regions of the world. On a global scale, transnational mobility is a modest phenomenon. Only 3.6 percent of the world population are transnational migrants, and 60 percent of these are migrant workers needed and welcomed in receiving countries (but not always well treated). Major receiving countries for international (im)migration are the USA, Germany, other European countries, and Arab states like the Emirates ([McAuliffe and Oucho 2024](#)).

In Western political discourse, however, transnational refugee immigration is consistently perceived as a problem. The problems are related to world economic inequalities, regional variations in the protection of immigrants, and challenges for Western states in maintaining their liberal politics while upholding their state systems and protecting their economic advantages. This discourse cuts to the heart of political self-perception, especially in Europe ([Goodhart 2017](#), pp. 82, 87). This discourse is the political context for the bulk of biblical studies currently addressing migration issues.

This context is sometimes recognized in biblical studies ([Carroll 2013](#); [Hadjev 2018](#); [Trinka 2024](#)). Still, there is little reflection on how biblical studies are affected by this discourse and how this perception may influence further interpretation. This article points to one salient factor in that regard: the imaginaries of migrants and migration that biblical scholars apply.

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2. Migrants' Agency, Migrant Complexities

In her contribution to this Special Issue, Ida Hartmann emphasizes how biblical scholars encountering social science research on migration can have their implicit biases both disguised and challenged. For one example, candidates for such biases would be, precisely, contemporary imaginaries of migrants as solely victims, labelled as refugees, people in need of protection, and so on. Contributing to “naturalizing” these and similar views of migrants has obvious political ramifications. My point is not that biblical studies should or should not aim for political relevance. The point is to become explicit about one’s imaginaries and to probe them in available historical sources.

What, then, are relevant perceptions of migration and migrants in contemporary social theory? As shown by Coretta Ehrenfeld (2024), prior to the 1990s, migration was perceived from the point of view of societies of origin and settlement. The implicit assumption was, first, that social formations are defined by geography and, second, that human mobility and humans on the move are defined by places of departure and destination. Breaking this pattern, the “transnational turn” in migrant studies caused scholars to see that migrants “create their own transnational patterns of life that extend beyond the contexts of national societies” (Ehrenfeld 2024, p. 4). “Migrants went from being the ‘object’ of sociological migration research to being the ‘subject’ of social formations. . . . [M]igrants and their descendants do not occupy a deficient social role, as had been conceptualized in assimilation and integration theories before, but a socio-theoretical positivity and subjectivity” (Ehrenfeld 2024, p. 5). This, in turn, allowed for a recognition of complexities in migratory lives as well as the kinds of agency that migrants can exercise.

As Eric Trinkka argues, the recognition of forms of migrant agency and of complexities in migration is also highly relevant in studies of past migrations (Trinkka 2024). This heed for migrants’ agency and complexities in migratory experiences flies in the face of the following biblical narrative—and conventional readings of that story.

3. A Flattened View of Migrant Religion

The story world in Jeremiah 39–44 is the period after Jerusalem’s fall to Nebuchadnezzar in 597 and 587 BCE and the subsequent murder of the vassal governor Gedaliah. Some people who had remained in Judah after the Babylonian displacement now decided to escape to Egypt. They bring with them the prophet Jeremiah—against his (and YHWH’s) will. Chapter 44 narrates a series of “words” received by the prophet concerning Jewish migrants in Egypt more generally (44:1–6). This transforms into an address for one specific audience (44:7–14), followed by a narrative of the confrontation between the prophet and that group (44:15–23/24). They may be perceived as a community subject to involuntary migration (cf. Shuval 2000). The final part of the chapter is directed first to the women in that group, and then it returns to addressing all Jews in Egypt (44:23/24–30).

Sadly, the text illustrates that the strategy to flatten migrants’ motivations, experiences, and reasoning for rhetorical and ideological purposes is not a modern invention: the narrator’s voice speaks with gross simplifications and caricatures. Although addressing the community in Pathros (44:15.24), the prophet is said to speak to *all* Judeans in Egypt (44:24). Idolatry is the *only* considered explanation for the fall of Judah (44:8)—and the community understands this to be targeting their service for the Queen of Heaven (44:17.18.19). Whitcomb (2013) points out that the Queen of Heaven is not identified as a deity of other nations, but the prophet regards and depicts her as *foreign* (44:8). Simultaneously, the prophet admits that the targeted practices were inherited from the ancestors (44:21). Indeed, his claim that *all* YHWH’s prophets had denounced this practice (44:21–23), would imply that it had been around at least for a century and a half, since the days of Amos and Hosea. This notwithstanding, the deity will exterminate *all* Judean immigrants in Egypt (44:26f).

When leaving the land of Judah against the word of the prophet, these Judahites became illicit migrants (44:8, cf. [Trinka 2019a](#), p. 580). Paradoxically, however, for this community to have remained in Judah would not have solved their problem: they were already illicit citizens (44:21–23). From the perspective of the prophet, there is nothing they can do. They have no agency. Indeed, they hardly even have a voice of their own; the prophet serves as the carrier, articulating and interpreting the nature of their trauma's future as well as past (cf. [Maier 2017](#), pp. 4–7).

The parts of these caricatures that are not self-contradictory are simply unrealistic. Unfortunately, biblical scholars have tended to accept the rhetorical strategy in Jeremiah 44 without much question. The most sober English Bible translation, the NRSVUE, still provides this heading for the story: *Denunciation of Persistent Idolatry* (cf. earlier comments): (see further [Sharp 2017](#), pp. 72–73).

4. Coarsening the Past

Given a source like Jeremiah 44, is it at all possible to gain a historically trustworthy and morally sound sense of past migrant agency and of complexities in ancient migration? Clearly, attempts at doing so could not avoid some element of historical imagination (cf. [O'Connor 2011](#), pp. 7–12). However, one should not haste to call upon “common humanity” as the basis for such imagination. Human mobility in the world where ancient texts emerged was very different from what is known in the West today. States were “thin” and their power limited ([Stordalen 2021](#), pp. 114–25). Local power was often polycentric ([LaBianca 2009](#)), and therefore unpredictable. Social ideology followed tribal rather than national grammars ([LaBianca and Witzel 2007](#)). Due to risk management, many communities pursued parallel strategies for livelihood ([LaBianca 1991](#)), which made transhumance and other forms of nomadism quite regular ([Boer 2015](#), pp. 75–78). This was a world where life expectancy was low ([Blenkinsopp 1997](#)), and social security for travellers relied on a codex of hospitality and honour that “belong[ed] to the same lineage as hostility” ([Selwyn 2011](#), p. 33; see [Solevåg and Marcondes Alves 2025](#)). These and similar conditions would have impacted not only reasons and means for mobility but also competence for and attitudes toward migration, such as pragmatic and emotional ties to geographical areas, individual and group identity, and so on.

In addition to such historical factors, interpreting ancient mobility involves a range of complex social phenomena, as is shown in several contributions to this volume (see also [Southwood 2012](#); [Strine 2018](#); [Crouch 2021](#); and esp. [Trinka 2022, 2019b](#)). As [Ida Hartmann](#) argues in this Special Issue, social science approaches have their own profiles and limitations. They do not innocently reflect common human conditions and experiences. All these complications also apply to Jeremiah 44, as indicated by [Christl M. Maier \(2017, 2020\)](#).

In this particular case, additional challenges relate to the written sources' historical value and the precise relations between literary texts and physical and social realities. To understand how the group depicted in Jeremiah 44 exerted their agency and performed their migrant society, we must proceed through a series of analytical steps dealing with these issues.

4.1. Expat Jews in Saite Egypt

Let us start by considering the historical realism in the story world of the narrative. The probability of Judahite colonies in Egypt shortly after 600 BCE is supported by general indications (cf. [Wilson-Wright 2023](#), pp. 35–50), in that we know Pharaohs in the Saite period (from 664 BCE) imposed tribute on Judahite rulers and influenced their politics. They built fortresses in Judah and operated trade routes through the Levant. Local elites were involved in the logistics of military defence, trade, and the collection of taxes. Egyptian

cultural influence is visible in elite practices such as scribal and diplomatic trade and elite funerals. Ordinary Judeans were conscripted as auxiliary soldiers for Egyptian armies, serving in Judah and elsewhere. In general, it makes sense that after the fall of Jerusalem, Judahite gentry and mercenaries associated with the Pharaohs would migrate to Egypt to avoid being killed by the Babylonians—which is the story in the Book of Jeremiah.

Moreover, there are possible traces of Judahite presence in the material culture of Migdol, Daphnae, Saqqara, Kafr Ammar, and Lahun (Wilson-Wright 2023, pp. 50–61). Papyrus Amherst 63, which is thought to have been from Elephantine and Syene, reflects a cult for the deity Yaho (YHW) there (and also for a Queen of Heaven). The manuscript dates to the mid-fourth century and transmits older and apparently hybrid traditions (Holm 2023; van der Toorn 2019, pp. 149–87). Judahite writings from Elephantine reflect the memory of a Jewish temple there already in the late Saite period (before 525 BCE; TAD A4.6), although the historical value of this memory is uncertain (van der Toorn 2019, p. 61). However, in a recent review of all available evidence, Gad Barnea concludes that Yahwistic presence in Syene/Elephantine probably started in the late Saite period (Barnea 2023, pp. 115–16). So, while historical sources are meagre, it seems possible that the frame story of Jewish migration reflects historical experiences.

4.2. Composition, Textual History, Collective Memory

As seen above, the text of Jeremiah 44 is self-contradictory, and some of this may have been caused by a compositional history moving in several stages and reflecting more than one social environment (Wilson-Wright 2023, pp. 131–39). The geography of the chapter is confused. In verse 1, Pathros (usually taken to refer to Upper Egypt) is a region (אֶרֶץ פְּתוּרוֹס), but in verse 15, it seems to be a place in the land of Egypt (בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּפְתוּרוֹס). Memphis (מִנְיַ, v. 1) is not mentioned in the LXX, so the MT appears to have been amended to reflect later knowledge of Judahite presence in Egypt.

The religious language of Jeremiah 44 is marked by Deuteronomistic ideology, as are the rhetorics and, indeed, the very plot. Thus, the versions of the story known to us reflect a time when Deuteronomistic interpretation of the religious history of Judah had consolidated and become a force in collecting and transmitting what would eventually become the Yahwistic Scriptures. The latter is hinted at in the expression “all my servants, the prophets” (אֵת כָּל עַבְדֵי הַנְּבִיאִים, Jer 44:4). This phrase (with grammatical variations) is found in 2 Kgs 9:7, 17:13, 21:10, and 24:2, and it is a set expression in Jeremiah (7:25, 25:4, 26:5, 29:19, 35:15, 44:4). The phrase is also reflected in other books (Ezek 38:17; Zech 1:6; Dan 9:6–10; Ezra 9:11). The concept points to “the prophets” as an identifiable religious authority (possibly alongside the law). It is, of course, difficult to know just what point in history this phraseology reflects, but it could presumably have been some time after the conclusion of the Deuteronomistic history, which records events down to around 560 BCE.

Aren Wilson-Wright concludes, mostly on redactional–critical criteria, that it was originally composed between 570 and 558 BCE (Wilson-Wright 2023, pp. 139–40). The indications considered above, along with textual evidence, seem to undermine that conclusion. The Book of Jeremiah was being edited centuries after the events narrated in chapter 44 (Tov 1997, pp. 145–47, 149–50). The three passages in the book reflecting Jewish migration to Egypt (24:8, 43:5–7, 44:1–30) show variations in geographic and other characteristics, which may indicate a long textual history. The Masoretic version of Jeremiah 44 has additions compared to the Greek (cf. McKane 1996, pp. 1069–83; Holladay 1989, pp. 277–80). The only Dead Sea manuscript holding parts of our passage is 2QJer, also known as 2Q13, from the first century CE. It is textually close to the MT (as expected for late Q texts). However, in addition to variant spellings, it features some elements found only in the LXX, while some other points differ from both the MT and the LXX. The textual evidence does

not provide a basis for stipulating profiles or directions in the editorial processes, which could have served as an argument for reconstructing earlier versions. If it is impossible to know the forms of earlier versions of the story, it also makes little sense to date such hypothetical versions.

It is better, therefore, to read the oldest text—that is, the LXX to Jeremiah 44 from the late third century BCE—as Egyptian Jewish collective memory of events thought to have transpired in the sixth century. By collective memory, I mean perceptions of past events configured so as to help people make sense of their present (Stordalen 2015; Stordalen 2016). In this case, the continued presence of Jewish communities in Egypt would keep the memory alive and relevant—and serve as its *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1996, p. 1). It seems possible that this line of remembering started in actual migrant experiences (cf. above). However, the memory, as known in the LXX and the later MT, has been adapted to make sense in a context influenced by Deuteronomistic theology, where the prophet Jeremiah is the hero of intolerant Yahwism, and to reflect Jewish migrant presence and experiences in Egypt.

4.3. Texts and Sensory Data

Engagement in the humanities with cognitive research redefines the concept of historical data. Historical data do not exist in and by themselves; they are, by necessity, products of the human sensorium and the brain's processing of sensory input. Humans cannot get to a reality that has not first been cognitively processed. For much history writing, this does not change the game drastically. However, this insight is crucial when the objective is to evaluate relations between a text professing to mimic historical realities and the elements of reality described in that text.

Nicolae Babuts provides a cognitive theory of how human sensory data are transformed into language and stored in mnemonic resources (Babuts 2011, 2018). These mnemonic resources are vital for interpreting continued sensory experiences. To process sensory information effectively, the human brain stores readily made interpretations of past sensory information, which Babuts calls “mnemonic potentials” (also “event-related potentials”). These include knowledge of how things work in the dominion of space and time. When new sensory data are processed, the mnemonic potentials serve as interpretive guides. A perception of the world alongside an understanding of the significance of different kinds of sensory information is already in place when new data are processed.

According to Babuts, cognitive research indicates that sensory data gathered from reading are processed similarly: What is read is interpreted through mnemonic potentials relevant to the contents of the written text. Reading about something like grief, then, the brain activates mnemonic potentials made from past sensory information harvested in encounters with actual grief. The fact that readers know that a literary description of grief is fictional does not prevent them from processing sensory data gained through reading in the same manner as they would process sensory data of grief and grieving. When a fictional text is successful, readers invest interpretive energy into their perception of the text as if fictional events were actual.

Therefore, asking about third-century BCE readers' perceptions of social and migrant life amounts to asking what mnemonic potentials may have been used to process a text like Jeremiah 44. Providing exhaustive answers is impossible, but some information seems to be within reach for the limited focus on Jeremiah 44 (see Parts 5, 6, and 7).

4.4. A Praxeological Perspective

The transnational turn in migrant studies discussed in Part 1 coincided with, and probably reflected, several fundamental reorientations in social theory towards the end

of the last century. Social institutions and phenomena are no longer taken to “exist” in themselves or because of their structures. Instead, recent theories see society and its grammar as being formed and/or performed in complex interactions that, for some theorists, include non-human agents. This has given new perspectives on cultural cohesion, social order, and human identity—all of which are now typically seen as more dynamic than previously assumed (as reflected by Katherine Southwood in this Special Issue). Based on the work of Theodore R. Schatzki (1996, 2002), Andreas Reckwitz, professor of social philosophy in Berlin, integrates many “new” perspectives in his version of praxeology (cf. Reckwitz 2002, 2003, 2012, 2017, 2023). He relies on insights from philosophers like the early Heidegger, the late Wittgenstein, the late Foucault, Bourdieu, Giddens, Lefebvre, de Certeau, Taylor, Butler, and Latour.

Praxeology defines practices as the place where “the social” is made (Reckwitz 2012, p. 248). Seeing the human mind as “a medium through which practices are organized” (Schatzki 1996, p. 20), diverse dynamics are integrated in one and the same practice. These include bodily dispositions conditioned by biology, neurology, and sensory apparatus. Practices occur in specific situations and relate to social knowledge and memory at work. They are processed by bodies considering their past and present subject positions in the social web, their own bodily needs, and their whims and desires. Practices take room in physical contexts, and these, too, contribute to certain affordances. Hence, grammars of all these very diverse domains interact in and on the same moment: the making of practices.

A praxeological approach focusing on how practices are remembered allows us to avoid relying too heavily or one-sidedly on concepts like religion, identity, or homeland—all of which are uncomfortably complex and conflicted. Turning to Jeremiah 44, I will ask how this story reflects memories of people “doing their migrant community.” This opens interpretation for conceiving the remembered community as subjects with agency and some leeway.

5. Performing a Local Community Abroad

In the following, I focus on the community’s reply to the prophet’s rebuke (Jer 44:15–19) and the prophet’s response to this reply (Jer 44:20–26). Despite the fragmented and disconnected nature of the story, these two parts seem to be connected. There are minor differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions of these verses. I am interpreting the memory in the LXX, but when focusing on social institutions (which, I presume, were much older than any of the versions), I rely on the MT to avoid noise from translation. Since the MT chapter count is more commonly known to present-day readers in the West, I follow that, although the LXX parallel is marked as Jeremiah 51, with the same verse division.

Verse 1 reflects a confrontation between the Yahwistic prophet and the Jewish popular majority throughout Egypt (ἄπασιν τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις τοῖς κατοικοῦσιν ἐν γῆ Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ τοῖς καθημένοις ἐν Μαγδάλῳ καὶ ἐν Ταφνας καὶ ἐν γῆ Παθουρης). In verse 15, however, the responding party are the men (and later women) located in one particular place, that of Pathros, which seems to be a locality and not a region also in the Greek (ἐν γῆ Αἰγύπτῳ ἐν Παθουρη). This community tells a story of the misfortunes of Judah that is diametrically opposed to the prophet’s narrative. In their view, libations for the Queen of Heaven were traditionally offered “in cities in Judah and outside Jerusalem” (ἐν πόλεσιν Ἰουδα καὶ ἔξωθεν Ἰερουσαλημ, LXX Jer 51:17/MT Jer 44:17). This exception for Jerusalem in the LXX (missing in the MT) could imply a concession to monolatry dominating religious practices in Jerusalem, or to the ideology of such practice in the Deuteronomistic History. The cult for the Queen of Heaven outside of Jerusalem enjoyed public recognition from rulers and leaders. This community believed that this religious practice kept them safe. When they stopped performing it, everybody suffered, hit by

sword and famine (Jer 44:18). Now the migrants have resumed their former practices and sworn they will continue (Jer 44:19, cf. 44:25).

The prophet confirms that the cult of the Queen of Heaven comprised communal practices supported by tradition, rulers, and leaders. It was, however, also the reason for divine rage (Jer 44:21f). Jeremiah recognizes the vow made by the community to continue their religion, and he predicts it will lead to the disappearance of the divine name in Egypt. He states that the Jewish population in Egypt will vanish (Jer 44:24–26)—echoing the more definitive announcement in 44:11–14, cf. 44:26–29. The prophetic accusations clearly reflect Deuteronomistic theology, as does the account of the community. The idea that the traditional cult for the Queen of Heaven throughout villages in Judea should have ceased reflects Deuteronomistic ideology and is not realistic. It is also not in accordance with available evidence (Stavrakopoulou and Barton 2010).

Both parties in the conflict confirm that the religious practices in question were part of a long-standing tradition. Keown et al. (1995, pp. 266–68) argue that a cult for the Queen of Heaven could have had historical anchorage in Iron Age Judah. In any event, a deity with this name is known in Egyptian sources (van der Toorn 2019, p. 151). We are not given details about these practices, and it seems unlikely they would have been identical in all places. However, we can assume that third century BCE Egyptian Jewish readers would link the named practices to a deity they knew and interpret them as a traditional communal religion.

From the perspective of Reckwitz, these practices would, over the years, have adduced social knowledge and organization, material contexts with specific affordances, and corresponding bodily dispositions. All this would have formed what Reckwitz calls assemblages consisting of things, practices, people, knowledge, memory, institutions, etc. Engaging in these practices, the community was “performing the social” between them. Refusing to heed Jeremiah’s request, they confirm their attempt at continuing to perform community in their new environment. In the story world, the practices had necessarily been challenged when leaving Judah behind; due to the new setting and situations, the assemblage would now be missing material, geographical, and cultural elements. Whatever parts of the assemblages could be salvaged—such as the specific ritual action—would have increased social value. As I argue below, here seems to be a sense of despair and longing in the community’s description of their reenacting these past practices—a sense confirmed in v. 14. Third century Greek-speaking Jewish migrants invested in the interpretation of this story would likely have experiences and collective memories that made these aspects of the story come to life. They would know about a migrant’s vulnerability. They could imagine the hardships of establishing a Jewish migrant community in Egypt. They would recognize the role of ritual in the attempt to perform Jewish identity in foreign lands.

There is yet another way that this text depicts the “doing of community.” This relates to a pattern of local community shared throughout the rural ancient Near East, that being the local village council. This was seen in local Judahite rural life in the late Iron Age (Stordalen 2021, pp. 81–2, 96–101, 105–7), and these social patterns did not change radically over the following centuries (cf. Smith 1989, pp. 94–99, with further literature). They would also form part of the mnemonic potential activated for a third-century BCE reader of this text. Biblical patrimonial ideology presents the father’s house as the nucleus of social life—a perception that lasted for millennia throughout the ancient Near East (Schloen 2001; Smith 1989, pp. 93–126). Biblical scholars have tended to take this ideology at face value and declare the household as the nucleus of social life. Analysis shows, however, that this was not the exact reality. In analytical language, a social formation is a group of people perceiving themselves as bound together by pragmatic, economic, political, and ideological factors (Calhoun 2002). A *basic* social unit is the social formation lowest in

the hierarchy with the capacity to perform three essential tasks: subsistence production, social reproduction, and social self-identification (Faust 2000, p. 18). It is evident from the archeological record that the social unit responsible for subsistence production was the village (often perceived as a clan), organizing the cooperation of the households. Moreover, in matters of social reproduction, biblical law indicates that the household took part in the village ethos and was overseen by the local council of elders (Willis 2001). So, local community life was cast in patrimonial ideology, and people spoke and probably thought of the household as their basic social anchorage. In reality, however, the economy, the polity, and the habitus of the local village (clan) set the parameters for daily household practices (cf. Boer 2015, pp. 94–102). While unaware of this analytical perspective, it is clear from law as well as narrative that people recognized the authority and power of the local village council.

A local cult, like that described in Jeremiah 44, was typically under the supervision of the village/clan elders (Exod 12:21; Lev 4:15; Deut 21:4–6, cf. Ezek 7:26; Lam 1:19). The expression “all men” (כָּל־אֲנָשִׁים) in Jer 44:15, 26–27 has a specific sense in this setting. In Gen 29:22 and Deut 29:10, they name the assembly of household heads in one community responding to the leaders of a higher social unit, speaking on behalf of the community. The assembly of household heads is also responsible for executing legal punishments decided in court by village elders, as in Deuteronomy 21. This sense of the expression is frequent in Deuteronomistic language (see Deut 27:14; Josh 10:12; Judg 7:8–24, 9:51, 12:4, 20:11–33; 1Sam 11:15, 17:19–24; 2Sam 17:3–14, 24, 19:41–42, 20:2; 1Kgs 8:2, 23:2). Thus, the conflict between the prophet and “all the men” in Jeremiah is cast in a pattern of local legal disputes like those reflected in biblical elder laws or the Book of Ruth. It seems likely that any Jewish reader in the third century BCE would recognize this and understand the responding voices in Jeremiah 44 to be performing and protecting their community.

6. Tradition and Change

Theoretically, the concept of tradition is more complex than is usually recognized in biblical studies. Pascal Boyer shows that tradition is more about form, practice, repetition, and recognized significance than discursive content. Tradition, in this sense, is found in all societies (Boyer 1990, pp. 110–14). However, there is a more everyday sense of tradition as codified action or habits backed by ideology, answering “why we do things this way in this community”. This kind of everyday tradition operates on the surface of social discourse, and it often has the power to symbolize the community and stabilize social relations (cf. Fei 1992, pp. 96–100).

Jeremiah 44 depicts the cult of the Queen of Heaven as such an everyday tradition. From the perspective of Reckwitz, the assemblage for this practice must have changed drastically. In Egypt, as compared to Judah, the assemblage includes other people (some are dead, some left behind), new places (landscapes, venues), different items (altars, cultic tools), change in official acknowledgment (no kings or leaders to condone and protect the practice), and the loss of extra-communal recognition (no neighbouring community performing the same cult). According to Jer 7:18, the communal ritual included children gathering firewood, men kindling the fire, and women baking the cakes. Migration would have required new procedures for this ritual. To acquire flour for baking, the mobile community would need to engage local residents. When collecting firewood, the children would need to negotiate what areas are off-limits in these new landscapes, and so on. Such changes would necessarily influence the performance of the ritual and, thereby, its social significance (Rappaport 1999, pp. 123–31). Egyptian Jewish readers would likely be aware of these vulnerabilities to uphold ancestral tradition.

Had we been able to carry out observatory participation in the story world of Jeremiah 44, this might have been a case for studying the ability of traditions to adapt and yet be recognized as “the same”. Such resilience, the potential for simultaneous change and continuity, is a core characteristic of how social phenomena can endure over time. Processing the story world from the perspective of Reckwitz provides an interesting angle: What must have changed most are the assemblages of practices, and what displays the most significant amount of continuity seems to be the symbolism and the ideology explaining “why we do things in this way”. In fact, the story explicitly claims continuity of ideology while tacitly playing down changes in practices that must have occurred. I take this to reflect some memory or understanding in authors (and readers) of this story about the realities of migrant life. Tradition in the sense of form and practice (Boyer) changes, while tradition in the sense of ideology and symbolization (Fei) remains. This seems to be reminiscent of contemporary Latino/a/e immigrants’ use of the Bible, as demonstrated by Jacqueline Hidalgo in this Special Issue. This illustrates one advantage of utilizing a praxeological perspective. It allows for pinpointing changes in practices and assemblages, and therefore in the creation of the social, without having to postulate that this change is reflected in core religious symbolism or ideology.

That stated, Jeremiah 44 also reflects some changes in social ideology as well. Starting in Jer 44:19, the community declares that it will uphold its cult of the Queen of Heaven. Initially, the speech seems to be cast in the same voice as the previous, namely that of “the men” speaking on behalf of the community. However, midway in the proposition the reference to “our men” occurs. The LXX reads “It was not without our men we made her cakes” (μη̄ ἄνευ τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἡμῶν ἐποιήσαμεν αὐτῇ χαυῶνας...). The Hebrew is more specific: “Was it without our men we made cakes with her image?” (המבלעדי אנשינו עשינו לה כונים להעצבה). This tacit inclusion of female voices opens the question of where women’s voices start blending into the reply that begins in v. 15 (cf. [Whitcomb 2013](#), pp. 93–96). Nevertheless, it is clear that we have female voices speaking on behalf of the community alongside their men, defending community practice and tradition.

The norm in biblical literature is that speaking for the community is the prerogative of men. This also applies to matters of local cult, even though women have a lot of influence in household religion (cf. [Meyers 2010](#); [Albertz and Schmitt 2012](#); [Albertz et al. 2014](#)). The salient visibility of women speaking on behalf of a mixed-gender community in Jeremiah 44 is emphasized as they refute implicit charges that they had been insubordinate towards their men. Jeremiah charges “the men” (כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים) in this community with giving too much influence to their women—and the women answer that their men know what they are doing.

Carol Meyers has shown that the influence of women in daily life relied on the level of their participation in the production to meet daily needs ([Meyers 1988, 1996, 1997](#)). Due to their migration, this imagined village community has likely experienced a loss in agricultural production, necessitating negotiations of their access to subsistence and new livelihoods with “hosting” communities (cf. [Shuval 2000](#), pp. 52–53). All hands would be needed, and women taking care of daily business would be crucial. If the traditional male economy could not provide the materials required for the ritual, women would be likely to expand their influence in the ritual process. Something similar could be said about the ritual participation of children, which is more emphasized here than in most other biblical passages (save for Exodus 12–14, which is also set in migrant experience). All this would be recognizable to a third century Jewish reader in Egypt, where conventional Jewish ideologies of daily life could still be challenged, and the successful social reproduction of children was still essential to the community’s survival.

7. Centralism, Localism, Resistance

Jeremiah 44 reflects the memory of a struggle between competing ideologies of Judahite diaspora. The party forced to migrate retains a focus on return to the land and a strict monolatry for YHWH. The other party has left the land voluntarily, and they tolerate cults of other deities alongside YHWH. Steed Vernyl Davidson shows that this discrepancy is part of an imperial scheme in the Book of Jeremiah, a scheme peeking into the vision of YHWH as the sovereign deity. The book idealizes Babylonian migrants and their return to the land over Egyptian refugees remaining in Egypt (Davidson 2018, pp. 464–67). Judean refugees reluctant to return from Egypt “serve as the negative indicator of what the nation is not” (Davidson 2018, p. 472). Davidson shows that biblical scholarship has tended to accept and amplify this marginalization of Judean refugees in Egypt (and non-returning migrants in Babylon).

Based on recent migrant studies, Davidson concludes that states produce refugees by depriving them of “a place in the world” (2018, p. 468, cf. pp. 460, 462). A similar dynamic applied in pre-modern times, although the specific conditions were different. Deuteronomistic ideology, of course, never represented a state—at best, an imagined nation. But Jeremiah 44 mirrors a power struggle that runs through the entire history of the Levant: the struggle between local communities and trans-local forces aiming to recruit, control, and exploit local polities (Walker 2021; Stordalen and LaBianca 2021, pp. 617–18). There can be little doubt that Deuteronomistic ideology represents one such centralizing agent in the ancient Southern Levant. The prophetic voice in Jeremiah 44 explicitly denies that this community has “a place in the world”—neither in Judah nor Egypt.

Historically, only the most superior centralizing forces, like the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Roman empires, could muster economic, political, and military forces faintly comparable to what is known in modern nation-states. Indeed, their ability to display military power and symbolize centralizing ideology—in pictures as well as texts (Larsen 1979, cf. Alexiana Fry in this Special Issue)—may have misled us to overestimate their abilities to impact everyday life.

Reading Jeremiah 44 from the perspective of Jewish migrants in Egypt in the third century BCE indicates similar shortcomings in the centralizing power of intolerant Yahwism. The prophet advocates a standardized theology of Jewish diaspora. The voices of the community, including those of women, reject the prophet’s theology. The village voices win the contest within the story world, and nothing changes. In the social world of the Egyptian Jewish reader, the prophecy that the presence of the sacred name in Egypt would cease has also failed. Several Jewish Egyptian communities existed, such as in Elephantine and Syene, where the cult for YHW was found in the vicinity of the cult for the Queen of Heaven.

The text reflects the reply of the local community as a proper legal response according to biblical standards, and it perceives the service for the Queen of Heaven as a traditional practice, symbolizing the community of this group. Following Babuts, it is difficult to avoid a sense of loss and sorrow when imagining children collecting firewood in hostile lands and women baking cakes from flour that must have been scarce. Remarkably, the author of the passage renders the communal investment in non-Yahwistic religion so evident, legitimate, and vulnerable. It is equally remarkable that the prophet—who in canonical literature takes the position of the suffering prophet, closely associated with Lamentations—should be so completely insensitive to these aspects of community. Or, as said by Carolyn Sharp (2017, p. 76), “Jeremiah the prophet may dismiss [the women’s] points, but Jeremiah the book cannot ignore their discourse.” Understanding how such signals in the text might have been processed by Jewish Egyptian readers of the third and second centuries BCE is worthy of further study.

8. Conclusions: Crossing Borders of Contemporary Discourse

In her contribution to this Special Issue, Ida Hartmann wisely suggests that biblical scholars engaging in comparative studies of migration should analyze the benefits, limits, and unintended consequences of a given mode of comparison. This essay forged a combination of the social theories of Ehrenfeld and Reckwitz, which produced a different imaginary of migrants' agency and the complexities encountered in migration. It also provided a more flexible approach to questions of social continuity and change, giving the option to steer clear of conflicted concepts like religion and nation as part of the core analytical framework.

One obvious vulnerability of this enterprise is that historical studies often lack sufficient sources to reflect on questions one would like to explore. This applies to all historical research. When relying on historical sources in a comparative study involving social science, it becomes critical to consider what social imaginaries or models are brought to the table. Any vulnerability in such imaginaries will stick, however suitable the source materials.

One problem with unintended consequences is that they are usually not obvious. In the present case, the most vulnerable part of this social–historical reconstruction relates to the conflict I imagined between local and trans-local forces. This reconstruction, it must be admitted, has a very general scope and, therefore, potential for errors. More importantly, the conflict I describe is easily associated with similar conflicts in the contemporary world. Such associations could be both historically misleading and morally unfortunate.

Is there anything to be gained in the above analysis for cross-disciplinary discourse? In a conversation with socio-political studies of migration, biblical scholars have more to learn than to teach. Still, a few points above might be relevant to consider across borders of contemporary discourse. The analysis recognizes a complexity of practices in the ancient past. Awareness of past complexities is also significant for disciplines primarily working with modern materials, such as political or economic studies. As [Graeber and Wengrow \(2021, pp. 1–5\)](#) demonstrate, much reflection on past societies and economies is tainted by dated social theory and superficial use of sources. This may result in harmful imaginaries of both humankind and human society.

One crucial insight relates to how religion and religious practices may change during and due to migration. Leaders responsible for curating religious traditions typically emphasize continuity rather than change. Scholars may inadvertently support claims of continuity if focusing on religious symbolism and ideology rather than on practices—and most certainly so if relating to religious symbolizations crystallized in the religion's homeland discourse. From a praxeological perspective, words and practices that migrate will likely change significance even if they retain a completely frozen form. When social change destabilizes constellations of social power, it easily leads to a loss of status for those over-privileged in tradition but improvement for those traditionally dominated. A side-effect of this is that migration is likely to render religious differences more visible—which may have been one effect for third century Egyptian Jewish readers of our narrative.

The most disturbing point is the flattening of migration and migrants' experiences in a text still commonly recognized as significant (cf. Karin Neutel in this Special Issue). Equally disturbing, many biblical readers have failed to comment on ideological caricatures, self-contradictions, insensitivities, and gender issues in this text. Here lies a central question to any ideology of migration—whether biblical, religious, patriarchal, nationalist, capitalist, liberalist, or other: What are the forces that promote oversights and bias in ideological perceptions of migration, and how are we, as academics, supposed to relate to these forces?

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