

An Intersectional Perspective on Female Mobility in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract

This article explores literary representations of female mobility in the Hebrew Bible. While it is often assumed that women barely moved in the ancient world, the study shows that the Hebrew Bible gives witness to a vast spectrum of travelling agents. The texts do not offer direct access to socio-historical realities, but as documents of cultural history, they are argued to hint at and echo the variety of the phenomenon in ancient Israel. It is not meaningful to speak of the travelling women as a collective, however, as the motives for their movement are tied to various socioeconomic contexts, ranging from slavery to economic migration to foreign policy. While class is fundamental to ancient female mobility, the sources also reveal the significance of other intersecting differences such as age, sexuality, kinship, ethnicity, or religion displayed by the (in)voluntary travelling agents.

Keywords

travel and mobility, women, intersectionality, social stratification, slavery, marriage, economic migration, pilgrimage, foreign policy

1 Introduction

The world today is filled with types of human mobility, as people travel as tourists, business women and men, exchange students, economic migrants, members of multicultural families, asylum seekers, and refugees. While the list could go on, movement is rooted in diverse social realities, including both privileges and social disadvantages. Similarly, the grounds for and contexts of travel intersect with various questions of social stratification in the Hebrew Bible, which portrays an array of (in)voluntary travellers who move either locally, regionally, or long-distance.

This article investigates female mobility in the Hebrew Bible, exploring its motives, implementation, and eventual outcomes. It highlights a neglected aspect of travel in the ancient world and challenges the stereotypical assumption that women barely moved in antiquity. While long distance travel was uncommon to the vast majority of women, as it was to the majority of men, a close reading of the Hebrew Bible indicates a number of reasons for women to move. Various social realities prompted, enabled, or compelled types of movement that frequently intertwine with the possession of power and resources or the lack thereof.

Before turning to the primary sources, I will discuss two scholarly conversations which I join by means of this investigation: travel in the ancient world on the one hand and intersectional approaches to the Hebrew Bible on the other. An intersectional lens, as I hope to demonstrate, can help us better comprehend the social complexity of female mobility in the ancient world.¹

2 A Turn to Intersectional Mobilities

This article contributes to two emerging areas of research in Hebrew Bible studies, travel and intersectionality. Travel and movement, to begin with, have received increasing interest across disciplines exploring the human past. A great deal of related research concerns Greco-Roman

¹ The relevance of intersectionality for women's contemporary movement has already been explored. See, e.g., Lutz and Amelina, *Gender, Migration, Transnationalisierung*.

antiquity.² Yet mobility has also enjoyed growing attention in the study of the ancient Near East.³ In both fields, the phenomenon of migration has been recently highlighted.⁴

The topic of travel is gaining momentum in Hebrew Bible studies. Two central events of the ancient Israelite narrative, the mythical exodus and the Babylonian exile, concern specific types of mobility, escape and deportation, and have been studied rather thoroughly. Scholarly attention is now expanding from such collective events and related social memories to the travel of individuals, families, or smaller groups. Recently, migration has received especially much attention in this field, as well.⁵ Scholars working on Jewish antiquity have further explored aspects of early Jewish travel in the context of the Greco-Roman world.⁶

The present purpose is to analyse several forms of human mobility with a focus on women as travelling agents, and I hope to demonstrate that some common assumptions related to ancient travel need to be re-evaluated. In particular, it has been argued that long-distance journeys were a specialised activity to which only relatively few had access, while the majority of people were “stayers inhabiting small worlds”; the likely “movers” were mostly male, typically either slaves, soldiers, or traders.⁷ Although such a characterization is statistically correct, generalizing claims can have the harmful effect of narrowing down research interests, and

² See, e.g., Casson, *Travel*; Dillon, *Pilgrims*; Montiglio, *Wandering*.

³ See, e.g., Zaccagnini, “Patterns”; Adams and Roy, *Travel, Geography and Culture*; Favaro, *Voyages*.

⁴ See, e.g., de Ligt and Tacoma, *Migration and Mobility*; Yoo et al., *Migration and Migrant Identities*.

⁵ See esp. Ahn, *Exile*; Boda et al., *Prophets Speak*; Crouch and Strine, Special Issue on “Involuntary Migration”; Hadjiev, Special Issue on “Migration.”

⁶ See esp. Hezser, *Jewish Travel*. Several relevant articles are included in Harland, *Travel and Religion*; Niehoff, *Journeys in the Roman East*.

⁷ See the helpful overview of Woolf, “Movers.”

scholars have indeed ignored female mobility to a large extent.⁸ I argue, however, that the Hebrew Bible, for one, invites us to imagine a wealth of women's journeys, which results in a more nuanced notion of ancient mobility, regardless of how local and minor women's movement may have been from the viewpoint of those in power.

Diverse texts on women's movement are valuable regardless of their historicity. Narratives are obviously not traditional archival sources used in the study of the human past. Yet fictional texts, too, are documents of cultural history.⁹ Being rooted in the social realities of their authors, they assist us in imagining and reconstructing aspects of social, economic, and political life in the human past.¹⁰ In particular, fictional narratives reflect and reveal ideas of and attitudes towards travel and movement, thus gesturing at conventions of social life in the ancient world, even if the authors' brushstrokes are impressionistic at their best.

Casey Strine has recently reflected on the historical value of the Genesis texts on migration, arguing that they raise themes that "are far from being just literary fiction." They count as "ancient Near Eastern descriptions of an experience common among involuntary migrant communities."¹¹ Similarly, I argue that various travel accounts of the Hebrew Bible—not just migration stories—can crystallize archetypes of ancient mobility, even if the sources themselves are fictional. Since the narratives are depicted to take place in this world and do not concern symbolic or other-worldly journeys, it can be assumed that the authors drew on their own experiences and knowledge of the contemporary world. This does not mean that the stories

⁸ While overall analyses of female mobility in the Hebrew Bible are still missing, valuable contributions have been made particularly regarding Genesis and Ruth. Recently, see Strine, "Sister"; Shepherd, "Ruth." On women in Hellenistic Jewish novels, see Hezser, *Jewish Travel*, 394–399.

⁹ See Whitmarsh, "Josephus."

¹⁰ Similarly, Millar, "World"; Hopkins, "Novel Evidence."

¹¹ Strine, "Sister," 66.

would perfectly mirror or replicate history; they surely do not help us trace or recover particular persons or events. Yet they do invite us to reconstruct phenomena of social life, as those are imagined by the authors whose conceptions are biased, but can nevertheless yield personal insights into history.¹² As will be seen, some types of female mobility are also supported by legal or poetic texts, which further speaks for their historical likelihood.

I stress that it would be misleading to speak of female travellers as a collective because women's agency and opportunities were and continue to be affected by multiple factors beyond gender, especially by their socioeconomic position. Since different women had access to different types of travel, social stratification matters and must be considered. Furthermore, the very talk about "access to travel" can be highly problematic, considering that mobility is not necessarily fully voluntary or voluntary at all. Such ambiguity is already demonstrated by the foundational event of the Israelite narrative and cultural memory, the mythical exodus from Egypt, in which women are depicted to take part both as members of the group and as a leader in the case of Miriam. The same is even clearer in the case of the other major event of the biblical narrative, the obviously involuntary Babylonian exile.

I argue that an intersectional frame helps us address and analyse connections between mobility and power, including the profiles of the travelling agents, as well as the conditions and motives behind their trips. To clarify, the term "intersectionality" was coined by the African American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw who theorized the links between gender, race, and class in the subjugation of non-white women.¹³ Being rooted in the study of minorities, intersectionality has now grown into a large cross-disciplinary project. Although intersectional thinking can take many directions, it generally acknowledges and accentuates complexity in social life: all

¹² See García, *Literature*, 5.

¹³ See Crenshaw, "Intersection."

people belong to multiple categories (e.g., gender, age, class, disability, race, ethnicity, sexuality) that shape their experiences and opportunities.¹⁴

Since intersectional research is inherently interdisciplinary in orientation, the approach can be adapted to diverse context-specific inquiries.¹⁵ The investigations are simply united by a focus on “the dynamics of difference and sameness,” typically in relation to power.¹⁶ Intersectional analyses are gaining momentum in Hebrew Bible studies,¹⁷ and I hope to add to this conversation by drawing attention to female mobility. I argue that an intersectional lens calls attention to the complexity of the phenomenon, helping us unpack related questions of social stratification and power. It assists us in taking notice of differences or identity markers that characterize female travellers and the people whom they encounter, or the people to whom they are related. It also helps us analyse how mobility may affect these categories.¹⁸ As I hope to show, class is fundamental to female mobility, but it is not the only relevant intersecting difference. On the contrary, the sources further point to kinship, age, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion as factors that can prompt, force, or affect female mobility.

3 Women as Travelling Agents in the Hebrew Bible

This section explores a spectrum of female travellers with an aim to grasp the conditions and goals of their movement. As will be seen, the Hebrew Bible suggests that women’s mobility in

¹⁴ See Knapp, “Race,” 249–265.

¹⁵ See Davis, “Intersectionality”; Lykke, “Intersectional Analysis.”

¹⁶ Cho et al., “Field,” 787.

¹⁷ See esp. Goering, “Intersecting Identities”; Claassens and Sharp, *Feminist Frameworks*; Yee, *Hebrew Bible*; Yee, “Thinking Intersectionally.”

¹⁸ On intersectionality as a tool for exploring one’s ever-evolving position, see Kartzow, *Margins*, 10.

ancient Israel was virtually as diverse as women's life in general, being rooted in life situations that manifest anything from severe disadvantage to exceptional privilege.

Two clarifying remarks are in order. First, while I cannot address all biblical references to female mobility, the examples are representative of the overall scope of the phenomenon. Second, the aim is not to trace possible diachronic developments within the Hebrew Bible, but to offer a typological presentation of different types of travelling agents in the corpus.

3.1 Slaves

Slavery constituted a major reason for mobility in the ancient world. In the Hebrew Bible, too, one encounters female slaves who move or are forced to move. While the law in Deut 23:16–17 maintains that an escaped slave should not be handed over to her master or exploited but given asylum among the people of Israel, the narrative accounts complicate such a rosy picture by underlining the extreme assailability of slave women on the move.

Hagar was first Sarai's female slave (שפחה) and subsequently became Abram's wife (אשה) because of her reproductive capital (Gen 16:1–3). Although one might debate the use of the term "slave" regarding Hagar because of her double identity, she counts as a slave when slavery is understood as referring to "situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power."¹⁹ In fact, the story resonates with the Code of Hammurabi's Law 146 concerning a situation in which a pregnant slave woman claims equality with the wife, and the wife is allowed to treat her as a slave.²⁰

¹⁹ For this definition, see United Nations, "Slavery is Not Merely a Historical Relic," n.p.

²⁰ See, e.g., Frymer-Kensky, "Family," 211.

Hagar is emphatically presented as an “Egyptian” (Gen 16:1, 3; 21:9), signalling the ethnic and cultural difference between her and her household.²¹ Hagar’s inferior position as part of the patriarch’s property is also suggested by the fact that Sarai and Abram never address her by name.²² Unlike in the exodus story, the vulnerable one here is the Egyptian “other,” and two episodes are crucial regarding mobility. First, Hagar’s close relation to Abram does not win her a secure position: Hagar runs away from Sarai, who treats her harshly due to jealousy caused by Hagar’s pregnancy, and hides in the wilderness (16:6–13). Second, the situation re-escalates after Isaac’s birth when Sarah, aiming at securing Isaac’s inheritance, asks her husband to get rid of the slave woman (אמה) and her son Ishmael (21:9–10). While Abraham is distressed by Sarah’s request, he fulfils it along with divine encouragement (21:11–14), sending Hagar away with her son, some bread, and water. As a result, Hagar ends up wandering (תעה) and raising her son in the wilderness of Beer-sheba (21:14–21).

Although the narratives are not told from the perspective of Hagar, they invite us to imagine social life in ancient Israelite households and expose the general vulnerability of slaves who were family members but dependant on their masters’ goodwill. Regarding movement, slaves might choose to escape “voluntarily” because of poor treatment, as Hagar does in the first account. They could also be expelled for good, as happens to Hagar in the second one. While the master plays a crucial role in decision-making, the stories remind us that female slaves could be forced to move because of the wish of another, more privileged woman; it is Sarah

²¹ In her pioneering study, Phyllis Trible observed that the forms of oppression in the Hagar story pertain to nationality, class, and sex. See Trible, *Texts*, 27. Yet Hagar’s nationality (i.e., relation to a political state) is not at stake here, but rather her identification with a cultural or racial group (i.e., ethnicity).

²² In fact, the only person who speaks to Hagar as if she is an actual named individual is the divine messenger (Gen 16:7–12, esp. 16:8).

who turns Abraham's head as a result of her emotional flux and fears.²³ Consequently, Hagar finds herself in a situation of involuntary mobility. The question is not about travel to a destination of refuge, but about forced wayfaring without an end-goal, being exposed to dangers, nearly losing one's child, and surviving only with divine help (21:15–19).

Another story of slavery concerns the anonymous פלגש of the anonymous Levite (Judg 19).

While the Hebrew term is often translated with the word “concubine,” its exact meaning remains unclear. For the most part, it denotes young girls growing up in “involuntary sexual bondage.”²⁴ However, the Levite is also characterized as the woman's husband (שׂא; 19:3) and her father is said to be the Levite's father-in-law (חתן; 19:4, 7, 9), signalling that she is to be understood as the Levite's secondary wife.²⁵ Yet this does not improve her situation. Rather, it is justified to characterize the woman as a slave, considering her subservient status that permits inhuman treatment and extreme violence.²⁶

The woman departs from her master's place “at the other end of the hill country of Ephraim” and returns to her father's house in Bethlehem (19:1–2).²⁷ The Levite follows her with the hope

²³ In other situations, Sarai herself is the vulnerable one, which reveals the ever-evolving nature of one's social location. See the section “Economic Migrants” below.

²⁴ Scholz, “Concubine,” n.p. Hence, Scholz proposes that the term should be translated as “(mostly) a sexually trafficked girl in life-time sexual bondage to produce progeny to her master” (ibid.).

²⁵ See Ackerman, *Warrior*, 236.

²⁶ Similarly Tribble, *Texts*, 66.

²⁷ All the English translations of Hebrew Bible texts are from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, slightly modified.

Note that the reason for the woman's departure is debated. A common meaning of the root נגז used in the MT is “to commit fornication,” which suggests that the woman prostituted herself. Alternatively, as the Septuagint and Old Latin imply, the move was prompted by an emotional reaction of anger. See, e.g., Tribble, *Texts*, 66–67.

of winning her back, is warmly received by his father-in-law, and eventually returns home with his slave (19:3–14). At sunset, the group arrives in Gibeah and is offered shelter by an old man who is not a local (19:15–21). As the men of the town want to humiliate the male guest by raping him, the old man offers his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine to them instead (19:22–24). His proposal is not accepted, and the Levite pushes his concubine to the men. They gang-rape and abuse her until the morning (19:25). At dawn, the woman collapses outside the host’s house, where her master finds her and, at the lack of response, places her on the donkey and continues the way home. There he (re)manifests his own capacity to violence and cuts the woman into twelve pieces (19:26–30).

While this text of terror raises many social and ethical issues, it also counts as a travel narrative. The story opens up with a bold move, as the woman’s wish to leave her master’s house leads to a courageous act enabled by her family network; she has a childhood home to which she can return. Yet her father fails her and she must follow her master back “home.”²⁸ Although the outcome is appalling, the author implies that the woman could move between her childhood home and the house of her master, albeit temporarily and depending on the opinions of the men who dictate her destiny. In fact, the text begs the question of whether the woman’s own initiative to move outside her immediate home contributes to the horrific outcome; the same question of why evil things happen to women who move alone can be addressed in regard to Dinah, who sets out to meet other girls and is raped (Gen 34:1–2).²⁹

²⁸ In this respect, the figure can be contrasted with another woman in Judges, Achsah, who turns to her father and receives what she demands and desires (Judg 1:14–15). See Schneider, “Achsah,” 50.

²⁹ Yet the Hebrew Bible also attests to the opposite insofar as Abigail sets out to meet David, which does not cause problems to her (1 Sam 25:14–36). Abigail’s departure is different, however, because the servant encourages her to solve the tricky situation, caused by the fact that Nabal had got into trouble with David’s men, which prompts Abigail’s diplomatic mission. She moves on her own intention, but unlike Dinah or the woman

Apart from indicating the (precarious) prospect of movement between homes, the story in Judg 19 underlines how horror and hospitality could intertwine during ancient journeys. It offers a frigid reminder that the demands of hospitality, aimed at the protection of men who become more vulnerable outside their familiar settings, could happen at the expense of unprotected women to whom such ethical concerns of solicitude were not extended.³⁰

As a final example, I turn to the laws on foreign women as trophies (Deut 21:10–14). If an Israelite soldier desires a beautiful foreign captive (21:10–12), the woman is to move with him and follow a particular procedure of shaving her head, cutting her nails, and changing her clothes. For a month, she is allowed to mourn for her parents, after which the man can have sex with her and take her as a wife (21:12–13). If the woman no more pleases the man later on, she can freely depart from him; he does not have permission to sell her into slavery because of having humiliated, oppressed, and raped (ענה *piel*) her (21:14).³¹

The passage discusses the forced displacement of women acquired during military campaigns (cf. Num 31:17–18; Judg 1:12–13; 5:30; 21:22; 2 Kgs 5:2). At first glance, it may not seem to concern slavery: the text states that the woman will become a wife and is not be treated as a slave if the marriage comes to an end. Yet, the seeming concern for her proper treatment deprecates the fact that Deut 21:10–14 discusses sexual slavery and sanctioned rape in warfare. The forced relocation of the woman results from the abuse of power. Her different ethnic

in Judg 19, she is urged by others to act. Moreover, the wise woman of Tekoa visits David. She does not embark on the trip on her own, however, but is brought to him in order to fulfil Joab's plan (2 Sam 14:1–4).

³⁰ Cf. Gen 19:8, commented by Gudme, "Invitation," 94–95.

³¹ While the Hebrew root does not consistently denote forced sexual penetration, it refers to rape in several instances (e.g., Gen 34:2; Judg 19:24; 20:5; 2 Sam 13:12, 14, 22, 32; Lam 5:11); see Stiebert, *Rape*, 5–6.

identity is not coincidental but enables her treatment as movable sexual property. Through sexual violence, she becomes a “symbol of the conquest of her ethnic group.”³²

3.2 Brides

Marriage arrangements are crucial in kinship-based societies where genealogies and inheritance rules are mostly patrilineal. Similarly, endogamous marriage within one’s family group was often preferred in ancient Israel because of a wish to retain the integrity of the father’s lineage, and marriages were typically patrilocal in the sense that women were expected to leave their natal households to become members of their husbands’ households.³³ It is natural, therefore, that marriage arrangements cause mobility in the Hebrew Bible.³⁴

An extended travel account is provided regarding the marriage of Rebekah and Isaac (Gen 24). The story illustrates the decisive role of family: Abraham worries about the idea of her son marrying a Canaanite and, to secure him a desirable wife, sends a servant to Aram-naharaim, the land of his birth (24:1–4, 10). The servant addresses the option that the bride might not be willing to follow him, which would force Isaac to relocate (24:5). Abraham rejects the option by appealing to the divine assurance that his offspring is to live in the promised land (24:6–9), and the servant makes his way to the well outside the city of Nahor. There he approaches Rebekah and is invited by her brother Laban to stay with her family (24:10–31). Laban and Bethuel approve the servant’s proposal, and the occasion is celebrated by exchanging gifts and the men’s homosocial feast (24:32–54).³⁵ The guest wishes to depart the following morning

³² Rey, “Reexamination,” 39.

³³ See Ackerman, “Women.”

³⁴ Moreover, consider the tale of Sarah and Tobias in the book of Tobit. Papyri from the Judean desert further document marriage as a frequent cause for mobility. See Zerbini, “Mobility,” 317–319.

³⁵ On marriage gifts, see Lemos, *Marriage Gifts*, esp. 46–47 on the exchange of bridewealth in Gen 24:53.

but is persuaded to stay for ten days. After repeating his wish to return home, Rebekah's brother and mother consult her. Following a positive reply, Rebekah is sent off with a blessing and her wet-nurse and maids (24:54–61).

While the scale of women's long-distance movement remains unclear, many brides undoubtedly relocated shorter distances because of marriage. The story of Rebekah contains details that may be informative beyond this incident. Although it is unlikely that Rebekah could have resisted the arranged marriage, the author draws attention to her willingness to relocate on two occasions, indicating some concern for the female experience.³⁶ First, the servant thinks about a possible refusal before embarking on his trip, addressing the prospect of the groom's relocation. Second, Rebekah's family consults her when the guest rushes with the departure, ensuring that she is not forced to leave sooner than expected. Furthermore, the author mentions the bride's resources. Even if the question is not about a particularly wealthy woman, Rebekah is sent off with a nurse and maids, taking members of her childhood home with her.³⁷ This makes her move more humane, enabling the continuation of some personal relations and networks, but it simultaneously involves the uprooting of other women, which could be undesirable or traumatic for them.

Like his father, Isaac is anxious about intermarriage and sends Jacob off to find a wife among the daughters of his uncle (Gen 28:1–5). Jacob journeys to Haran, where he works for Laban and is eventually able to marry both Leah and Rachel (28:10–29:30).³⁸ It should be noted that

³⁶ Regarding brides, consider also Ps 45:11–13 with a speech to the bride-queen who possibly originates from Tyre and is exhorted to forget her own people and family due to her marriage to the king praised in the psalm. It has been argued that the speaker is the queen-mother. Considering its theme of war, the psalm may pertain to the aforementioned phenomenon of treating women as booty in war. See Schroeder, "A Love Song," 421, 428–429.

³⁷ On the bride's female companions, see also Ps 45:15 and Schroeder, "A Love Song," 430.

³⁸ On the practice of "brideservice," see Lemos, *Marriage Gifts*, 45.

local mobility characterizes the work of Rachel who tends her father's sheep (29:9). Later on, Jacob wishes to return home (30:25–26), but the departure is not easy, as the attitude of Laban and his sons towards him has become unfavourable (31:1–2). Jacob explains the situation to his wives who are ready to follow him, feeling themselves betrayed by their father (31:3–16). Although some attention is paid to the views of Jacob's wives, their female slaves Bilhah and Zilpah are never consulted, signalling that they did not stand a ghost of a chance of refusing the trip to the unknown. The author simply states that Jacob embarks on the journey with his family and all possessions (31:17–18). Laban, however, pursues them to Gilead after noticing the disappearance of his *teraphim*. He asks Jacob to explain the secret departure without a farewell, including festive music and kisses, and asks for the cult objects of which Jacob is not aware (31:19–35). The men make a covenant after which the retinue continues the trip, being sent off with Laban's kisses (31:36–32:1).

Here, the brides relocate after they have become wives, prompted by their husband's wish to flee. They do so with consent but barely have a choice. The language used by Leah and Rachel is striking, as they speak of how Laban had treated them as foreigners and “sold” (מכר) them (31:15), pointing to women as commodities to be exploited and exchanged.³⁹ Although the women cannot say goodbye to their extended family, Rachel prepares for the trip by stealing the *teraphim* (31:19), perhaps in order to pursue her share of inheritance and/or to ensure divine protection on the way. The women express disappointment, therefore, but also interpret the relocation as a necessary corrective to the unfair situation. Finally, Laban's reaction of discontent is remarkable: regardless of whether he would have allowed his daughters and son-in-law to depart in peace, his comment reveals the value of ritual at the moment of departure, which should not be abrupt but marked with celebrations.

³⁹ See Niditch, “Genesis,” 39.

3.3 Economic migrants

Environmental disasters often prompt people to move with the hope of better financial prospects or mere survival. The Hebrew Bible, too, contains tales of economic migration, even if the reason for such mobility is typically mentioned in passing. In these stories, women are depicted to move together with their husbands or other family members.

Genesis 12 mentions several incidents of travel, beginning with the account of how Sarai and Abram move to the promised land (12:1–9). The journey continues soon, however, as the couple moves to Egypt because of famine (12:10). Their arrival in the foreign land causes anxiety in Abram who is afraid that the Egyptians will kill him because of Sarai's beauty, and he asks Sarai to present herself as his sister (12:13).⁴⁰ The locals recognize the beauty of Sarai who is taken to the Pharaoh's palace (12:14–15), while Abram is given male servants, female slaves, and animals (12:16). Yet God afflicts the Pharaoh with plagues, and the Egyptian ruler gets angry at Abram who had hidden his marriage to Sarai, sending Abram away with his wife and possessions (12:17–20).

The journey is not caused by forced deportation, slave trade, or the like. Yet migration prompted by famine is barely voluntary if driven by a wish to survive. While Abram is cast as the one who moves (12:10), the expectation is that his wife moves with him and Sarai, who is both Abram's wife and half-sister, plays a major role in the narrative. Following her husband's advice, Sarai displays their siblinghood and hides their marital relation to guarantee a successful settlement to the new land. This enables Abram to exploit Sarai's physical attractiveness, and he does so without any shame: Abram gives his wife to the Pharaoh in order to improve his own finances in a precarious situation. While the story ends with involuntary deportation, caused by the Pharaoh's fury, Abram leaves Egypt as a wealthy man, having

⁴⁰ Cf. Gen 20:1–18; 26:1–18 on the motif of presenting one's wife as one's sister in a foreign land.

benefitted from the deal that exposed his wife to a type of sex work in the court and turned her into the breadwinner of the family on a foreign land.⁴¹

The story highlights the dynamic nature of one's social location. It was observed above that Sarah forced Hagar to move. Here, however, Sarai herself is the vulnerable one. The same individual, as Gale Yee observes, can be "both oppressor and oppressed, powerful and powerless, because of her different and shifting locations in a matrix of domination."⁴²

Another tale of economic migration occurs in the book of Ruth, which narrates how a famine prompts Elkanah, his wife Naomi, and their two sons to move from Bethlehem to Moab (Ruth 1:1–2). When Elkanah and his sons die, Naomi finds herself alone in a foreign land together with Orpah and Ruth, her Moabite daughters-in-law (1:3–5). Encouraged by rumours of a good harvest, Naomi wants to return to Bethlehem (1:6) and Ruth insists on relocating there with her (1:7–10). Ruth, lacking any tribal link to her new place of residence, ends up working in the fields of Boaz, a relative of Elimelek. She is a foreign labourer, and the job opportunity comes with the risk of gendered sexual violence (2:8–9, 21–22).⁴³ Naomi advises Ruth to make use of her physical attractiveness (3:3–4) to win Boaz. Following her plot, Ruth seduces Boaz (3:6–7) who eventually redeems her and Elkanah's land, as well as becoming her son's father (4:9–10, 13).

While the first move to Moab concerns a family with a male head, the second one back to Bethlehem involves two widows who travel without any male support or supervision (1:19);

⁴¹ See Strine, "Sister," 54–58.

⁴² Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally," 16. On Sarah's double role and experience, see also Reaves, "Sarah."

⁴³ Note also Ruth's own comment in 2:10, which seems to concern the unexpected protection of a foreign worker; see Shepherd, "Ruth," 537–541. On Ruth as a hard-working model migrant, see Yee, "Ruth."

this was barely common, but something that the author could imagine to happen.⁴⁴ Ruth insists on relocating with Naomi, which indicates that affectionate relations could prompt voluntary movement; Ruth really acts on her own intentions, whilst Orpah gives up and follows Naomi's wish by returning to her own people (1:6–15). The Moabite woman is dedicated to Naomi to the extent that she wants to appropriate her mother-in-law's gods or ancestors (1:16)⁴⁵ and is ready to expose herself to risks. The physical attractiveness (3:3) and sexual deeds (3:7) of the migrant woman help her in a tricky situation, securing both her own finances, Naomi's old age, and the continuation of the family line that was about to die without any offspring (4:13–15). Although Boaz's direct economic benefit was probably limited, given the lack of interest shown by the nearer redeemer (4:1–6), Ruth probably counted as “productive addition” to his household.⁴⁶

3.4 *Worshippers*

Pilgrimage prompted a considerable amount of travel in the ancient world.⁴⁷ Apart from being responsible for various tasks of household religion (e.g., Judg 17:1–5), Israelite women, too, participated in ritual life in local and regional sanctuaries where they could pray and make music (e.g., Ezek 8:14; Ps 68:26). Such cultic occasions involved movement, as is exemplified

⁴⁴ On the rarity of female mobility without the company of male relatives or owners, see Woolf, “Movers,” 461.

⁴⁵ The phrase ואלהיך אלהי (Ruth 1:16) remains open to interpretation. It is often translated as “and your gods/God, my gods/God,” but the term אלהים may refer to ancestors (e.g., 1 Sam 28:13). The latter interpretation is supported by the immediate context focused on kinship and burial (1:16–17); see Schipper, *Ruth*, 99.

⁴⁶ In fact, the story underlines Ruth's industriousness early on (Ruth 2:7); see Shepherd, “Ruth,” 542.

⁴⁷ Pilgrimage is here understood as “paying a visit to a sacred site outside the boundaries of one's own physical environment.” See Dillon, *Pilgrims*, xviii.

by the account of Hannah (1 Sam 1:3–28). The woman and her husband are said to travel every year from their home in Ramathaim to the regional shrine in the husband’s home city, Shiloh, with the purpose of praying and performing sacrifices there (1:3). Hannah specifically prays for offspring in the sanctuary (1:9–10), which coheres with how people prayed for fertility at temples throughout ancient Greece and the Near East.⁴⁸

In the late pre-exilic and post-exilic periods, the gradual centralization of the cult increased visits to Jerusalem. The scant archaeological data remains open to interpretation, and pilgrimage to the city was not widespread before the Hasmonean era.⁴⁹ Yet there are indications of gradually growing pilgrimage in which women, too, were involved, even if one should remember that the majority of ancient Israelite/Jewish women perhaps never visited the city. Moreover, women’s participation in the cult was inherently limited in that they had no access to the inner court of the temple complex.⁵⁰ Keeping these limitations in mind, let us review the evidence for women’s participation in pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple.

Biblical laws require every male to appear before God three times a year (Exod 23:17; 34:23; Deut 16:16), during the festivals of Matzot, Shavuot, and Sukkot (Deut 16:16). The extent to which the authors of these laws expected women to be involved remains obscure, as the lists of household members who are to visit the place chosen by God include daughters and female slaves (Deut 12:12, 18; 16:11, 14), but not the wife of the household.⁵¹ The lists begin with masculine terms denoting “you” that may include both partners, or wives could be excluded from the requirement, for example, because of a wish to stay at home with a new-born (cf. 1

⁴⁸ See Knowles, *Centrality*, 99–100.

⁴⁹ See Knowles, *Centrality*, 102–103.

⁵⁰ See Josephus, *B.J.* 5.198–199, 6.415; *A.J.* 15.419; *C. Ap.* 2.103; *m. Mid.* 2.5–6; *b. Sukkah* 51B.

⁵¹ In Deut 31:10–12, however, women are mentioned among those who listen to the torah that is read to the people of Israel in the place chosen by God during the Sukkot festival of the jubilee year.

Sam 1:21–23).⁵² Furthermore, purity issues might have restricted women’s entry to ritual life (cf. Lev 12:1–5), although they could also have prompted visits to sacred spaces, as is suggested by the law on the mother’s postnatal sacrifice (Lev 12:6–8). Nazirite women, too, were required to bring offerings to be sacrificed by the priest (Num 6:1–21; cf. Josephus, *B.J.* 2.313). None of these legal materials prove actual practices, but by illustrating ideal social realities, they reveal cultural values and expectations related to female mobility, including the ideal of pilgrimage and the performance of related ritual acts.

Second, a few narratives suggest that pilgrimage expanded in the Persian era. They may express either wish or reality, but the sum of remaining evidence indicates that at least some women visited Jerusalem as pilgrims. First, the book of Ezra depicts the community’s return from Babylon (chs. 1–2, 7–8). Though the return may be modelled on the exodus, it can be interpreted as pilgrimage, considering the stress on Jerusalem as the destination, the fact that the return consists of several journeys, and Ezra’s emphasis on cultic issues such as priests, cultic vessels, and sacrifice.⁵³ Second, Ezra and Nehemiah portray the celebration of pilgrimage feasts, including the Sukkot (Ezra 3:1–4; Neh 8:13–18) and the Pesach and the Matzot (Ezra 6:19–22). Nehemiah 8:2 specifies that women are a part of the assembly that gathers from cities to Jerusalem in order to receive Ezra’s teaching on the day before the Sukkot. Women’s presence in the proximity of the Jerusalem temple is further mentioned in relation to other occasions of communal activity and obligations (Ezra 10:1; Neh 10:29; 12:43).

3.5 Rulers

The tale of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10) is a fictitious narrative of a journey pertaining to foreign policy and intellectual exchange. It elaborates on a woman of exceptional means, who

⁵² See Ackerman, “Women,” 9–10.

⁵³ See Knowles, *Centrality*, 81.

is said to travel in order to learn more about a foreign king. The trip itself is not narrated as the author simply notes that the queen, having heard of Solomon's fame, wishes "to test him with hard questions" and arrives in Jerusalem with her large retinue and camels carrying spices, gold, and precious stones (10:1–2). Having observed Solomon's wisdom and the splendour of his estate, the breathless queen acknowledges Solomon's reputation and the divine will backing his kingship, and she presents Solomon with gifts as well as receiving them from the king before returning back home (10:3–10, 13).

The account points to concrete travel practices, the habit of journeying with a retinue and the importance of gifts in foreign relations, both of which involve social interaction and stress the traveller's relational agency.⁵⁴ For the present purposes, it is crucial that the narrative concerns an inquisitive, confident, and powerful woman. Surely, she succumbs to Solomon in the story, which focuses on asserting Solomon's wisdom and wealth that are even admired by influential foreigners, as well as emphasizing the divine will on which his power to rule rests. Yet the ease in which the female figure is introduced is striking, suggesting that there is nothing surprising in her interest in travel, nor is her foreignness an issue of any kind.

The motif of testing is decisive, as it points to rigorous intellectual exchange between the two rulers and shows that the queen is on a par with Solomon.⁵⁵ Their encounter can be interpreted as a show-down between two wealthy and wise rulers, and their equality is underlined by the references to the queen's large retinue (10:2) and the rulers' mutual exchange of gifts (10:10, 13). The queen also displays her authority by her speech as she proclaims Solomon's men happy and blesses his God (10:8–9). While this type of travel appears only briefly in the

⁵⁴ Cf. 1 Kgs 10:11–12 on gifts.

⁵⁵ Note that the same Hebrew root is used for God testing Abraham in Gen 22:1.

Hebrew Bible, it reminds one of the (probably exclusive) access of royal women to voluntary long-distance travel.⁵⁶

4 Mobility, Power, or the Lack Thereof

The relevance of the Hebrew Bible to ancient mobility may not be immediately clear, as it does not provide extensive and elaborate evidence for widespread travel.⁵⁷ Yet movement shapes both collective and individual destinies in biblical narratives, which, though imaginary or even miraculous at times, echo aspects of social life in the ancient world. Together with legal material, they suggest that the Israelite moved for multiple reasons such as slavery, environmental disasters, trade, warfare, family matters, religious festivals, education, or another cause. Types of female mobility are similarly diverse, ranging from an expulsion of a slave to a royal expedition, thus cancelling any idea of a homogeneous phenomenon.

The greater part of the Israelite women did not move very far. Trips to foreign lands were probably uncommon, although the sources illustrate major relocations caused by marriage arrangements, the long roots of economic migration in search of financial prosperity, and the phenomenon of political journeys. In this respect, however, women are not so different from men to whom long-distance travel was similarly rare in the ancient world.⁵⁸

As for long-distance movement, key gendered differences pertain to different prospects in warfare, trade, and foreign policy. First, military service, which constituted a major reason for

⁵⁶ Regarding royal women on the move in early Jewish literature, see, e.g., Josephus, *Vita* 126–127.

⁵⁷ To some extent, this may pertain to the fact that Israel was an agrarian and not a maritime people. See King, “Travel,” 95.

⁵⁸ It has been argued that long-distance journeys were a specialized activity, mostly undertaken by young males with valuable skills, i.e., masons, miners, or potters; see Woolf, “Movers,” 450, 461. A great deal of the evidence for female migration concerns household migration; see Zerbin, “Mobility,” 316–317.

men to move,⁵⁹ does not directly apply to women, even if there is some limited evidence for female leadership in situations of warfare (cf. Judg 4–5; Jdt) and women fought in the Jewish war against Rome.⁶⁰ Yet military trips had wider societal effects that could change women’s lives drastically, including the forced movement of captive women as sexual property (e.g., Deut 21:10–14). Second, trade-related travel was a predominantly male phenomenon. Although travelling female merchants are not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, women could have immense indirect effect on trade as producers of exports. Such engagement in trade could also involve at least local movement.⁶¹ Third, while one might expect that political journeys were primarily undertaken by men who generally held more positions of power in ancient societies, the story of the Queen of Sheba points to the prospects of powerful women in the management of international relations.

Even if women’s life involved less journeys to faraway areas, the significance of movement does not depend on whether or not it was long-distance. The fact that female mobility was mostly small-scale does not mean that women’s life would have been immobile. Journeys, regardless of how local, can involve major experiences and shape a person as well as those related to her.⁶² This is indicated, for example, by Hannah’s way of communicating with a deity in the regional shrine in the hope of getting pregnant, or by the women of the Israelite assembly who gather to Jerusalem to receive teaching. To gain a better understanding of the power dynamics at display, I now turn to intersecting differences between female travellers.

⁵⁹ On military recruitment and settlement as a major migration stream, see Woolf, “Movers,” 453–455, 457.

⁶⁰ See Josephus, *B.J.* 3.303, 4.505; Tacitus, *Histories* 5.13.

⁶¹ Cf. Tob 2:11–14 on Anna’s business. Moreover, Judean women living in Babylon occasionally completed financial transactions; see Alstola, *Judeans*, 264. Various ancient Near Eastern sources, too, indicate that women were involved in trade and could even travel for business purposes; see Michel, “Women,” 202–203.

⁶² On the transformative effect of travel, see Stone and Petrick, “Benefits”; Woolf, “Movers,” 461.

The biblical evidence for female mobility underlines links between travel and power, including resources or the lack thereof. The prospects of women on the move depend on a number of intersecting differences, including gender, slavery/freedom, socioeconomic position, age, sexuality, kinship, ethnicity, and religion. The female gender, for one, makes women vulnerable and often limits their agency, as observed regarding marriage arrangements made by others on behalf of travelling brides, habits of hospitality that may protect men at the expense of women, the threat of sexual violence applying to foreign workers, or the exploitation of women's physical attractiveness to secure the finances of other family members. Considering potential dangers, it is unsurprising that the better-off women are depicted to travel with a retinue, even if the sources also indicate that co-travellers do not help a woman on the move when her own family members fail her.

Since the travelling women are not a coherent group, an analysis of gender is insufficient for gaining a nuanced notion of female mobility in the Hebrew Bible. This urges one to consider the impact of other factors. Slavery, a situation of ultimate disadvantage and radical lack of freedom, is fundamental in this respect, causing forced or otherwise undesirable movement. The laws of Deut 21:10–14 reveal the phenomenon of displacing and humiliating foreign female captives, whilst the narratives about Hagar and the Levite's concubine underline the lack of support experienced by slaves on the move. Hagar's Egyptian ethnicity adds to her vulnerability, making the expelled woman a wayfaring alien in a foreign land. Yet the shared ethnic identity of the Levite's concubine and her family members also fails to protect this woman, both at her childhood home and later on the road where hospitality and protection are directed at the master at the expense of the woman.

While the impact of slavery is distinct, the texts stress the diversity of "free" women, who come from diverse contexts that both enable and force movement. Given that travel requires resources, one might expect that the mobile women belong to the elite. Yet privileged positions

are not overrepresented. On the contrary, the Queen of Sheba's trip requiring both financial and social capital is an exception. A large proportion of the pertinent sources concerns women who can be characterized as belonging to the middle strata of the society, i.e., brides and pilgrims, although the movement of the former is less voluntary than that of the latter. Economic migration is another reason for the movement of women who are neither wealthy nor extremely disadvantaged: changing circumstances caused by environmental disasters may threaten one's "middle class" status and lead to migration, prompting semi-voluntary mobility that involves risks but is imagined to result in financial gains.

Apart from gender and class, several texts bring the intersecting differences of kinship, age, and sexuality to the forefront. Kinship relations broadly understood, including social relations created by either descent or marriage, are integral to female mobility in the Hebrew Bible, even if their significance has not typically been recognized in intersectional gender studies.⁶³ Kinship shapes the women's experiences in radically different ways. In difficult situations, familial relations can either fail the woman on the move (cf. Hagar and the Levite's concubine) or support her (cf. Ruth). Kinship is further emphasized in stories concerning marriage arrangements and economic migration, which deserve some further considerations.

In the Hebrew Bible, brides move even long-distance. Such relocations enable the continuation of the desired family lineage, signalling the value of shared ethnic identity. The brides' reproductive capital further points to kinship, age, and sexuality as major intersecting differences. While women such as Rebekah are depicted as being willing to relocate, even to a new land, their movement is ultimately dictated by men who strike the deals or present the plan concerning the future of the women and their upcoming offspring. Genesis 24:59–61 suggests

⁶³ In fact, the impetus to integrate kinship into intersectional analysis comes from Hebrew Bible studies. See Goering, "Intersecting Identities," 344.

that brides could have taken household members with them, thus enabling the maintenance of some existing relations and alleviating the pains of departure and settlement. Yet such displacement might not have been desirable from the viewpoint of those women who were forced to move with the bride.

Tales of economic migration display highly dynamic identities: outside the familiar setting, the travellers are free to recreate themselves or present aspects of their identity that do not play a dominant role in their places of origin. Ruth, for example, is eager to follow her mother-in-law's way of life and to integrate into the local society. She is willing to play by the rules of the new culture, explained to her by Naomi, even if it means detachment from her native people and exposure to major risks. Meanwhile, kinship relations can be hidden in the hope of financial gains, as happens in the tale of Sarai and Abram in Egypt. Remarkably, both Sarai and Ruth are exhorted to expose themselves to sex with foreign men when the adviser—a husband in the case of Sarai or a mother-in-law in the case of Ruth—considers such a strategy to lead to economic security. In these stories, the prospects of a woman who finds herself in a tricky situation, as well as those of the whole family, depend on her attractiveness, i.e., from the intersecting differences of beauty and sexuality.

Pilgrimage represents yet another form of mobility in which religious (a wish to communicate with a deity or deities) and social (a wish to be part of a collective) concerns intersect. Visits to sacred spaces are inherently performative insofar as they involve various ritual acts. Overall, pilgrimage appears to be the most inclusive and voluntary type of female mobility in the Hebrew Bible, although it may have been driven by communal expectations, which makes it difficult to determine the exact level of voluntariness. While pilgrimage is cast as a relatively universal practice, a closer examination points to the impact of several intersecting differences. Age, sexuality, and (either existing or wanted) kinship relations affect some visits to sacred spaces, which are undertaken by women of reproductive age and include either prayers

delivered in the hope of pregnancy or postnatal offerings of sacrifice. Religion also plays a role in the story of Rachel, who steals her father's *teraphim* and thus embarks on a journey to the unknown with the aid of material objects.

Female mobility, whether wanted or not, has to do with power. This urges us to reflect on the domains in which power relations emerge and to consider their impact on mobility. In her study on black feminist thought, Patricia Hill Collins identifies four interrelated domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.⁶⁴ As argued by Yee, the same domains characterize the Israelite society. The structural domain of power (i.e., institutional structures of society) manifests itself through the patriarchal family, the state, the priesthood, and the scribal schools. The disciplinary domain (i.e., ideas and practices sustaining hierarchies) involves religious laws. The hegemonic domain (i.e., symbols and ideologies shaping consciousness) includes, for example, the symbolic representation of women as evil in the Hebrew Bible. Finally, the interpersonal domain of power has to do with daily interactions of people in micro-level.⁶⁵

All four domains of power shaped female mobility. Considering the intense effect of the patriarchal family, the structural domain is fundamental to women's journeys. The impact of the disciplinary domain is apparent in the laws regulating the treatment of foreign captives or those outlining pilgrimage. Ideologies of hegemonic power permeate much of the extant material, as many women on the move encounter oppressive situations, which are not questioned but often implicitly justified by the authors.⁶⁶ Finally, the texts reveal the impact of ever-evolving interpersonal interactions that affect women's destinies in both tragic and

⁶⁴ See Collins, *Feminist*, 277–288.

⁶⁵ See Yee, "Thinking Intersectionally," 14–16.

⁶⁶ On the justification of oppression in the four domains, see Collins, *Feminist*, 276.

transformative ways. Forms of power, therefore, are intricate and apply to various domains that are relatively discernible but far from obvious to the reader in that the authors do not problematize them; they take a side and invite the reader to join them. An intersectional reading, however, helps us colour the black-and-white snapshots. Much is still missing, but even a grayscale picture surely leaves us better off.

5 Conclusion

Apart from the mythical exodus story, the Hebrew Bible does not contain extensive and elaborate travel accounts, not to speak of ones concerning female mobility. Yet the corpus contains a substantial amount of material that invites us to imagine and reconstruct female mobility in ancient Israel. Female travellers, however, are not to be treated as a homogeneous collective, as their (in)voluntary movement is rooted in various socioeconomic positions, thus being conditioned, prompted, and shaped by clusters of contributing factors.

While the evidence for women's journeys remains scattered, this study has shown that the Hebrew Bible challenges stereotypical ideas of ancient mobility: the corpus is nearly silent on the journeys of women who belong to the elite, whilst the sources mostly concern women representing the lower and middle strata of the ancient Israelite society. It is inadequate to analyse gender and class, however, as the intersectional differences of kinship, age, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion frequently affect women's agency and experiences, both prompting movement and shaping their prospects on the way or as resident aliens.

Different ethnicity, kinship concerns, and sexuality can add to women's vulnerability, making them commodities to be exchanged or disposed. Yet other factors—especially constructive kinship relations, worship of a deity or deities, or membership in the Israelite assembly—can serve to empower them. As such, the Hebrew Bible reveals the transformative power of

movement, whether for better or worse. Both local and long-distance journeys can shape and even change one's familial status, socioeconomic position, or identification with a group.

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