

Where do we go from here?

*A Biblical Perspective on Roots and
Mobility in Britain Today*

FRONT PAGE QUOTE

“And who is my neighbour?” Luke 10v29

BACK PAGE QUOTE

“where you’re from feels sort of irrelevant these days” Generation X

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Summary

The League of Gentlemen was one of the BBC's biggest successes in the 1990s. The sitcom featured a small, isolated town fiercely protective of its (rather peculiar) identity. The show's lead characters, 'Tubs' and Edward, were a profoundly disturbed couple who ran a local shop which, they aggressively insisted, was exclusively for local people. Any strangers who were unlucky enough to wander in were corrupted, evicted or 'silenced' by the warped proprietors. Darkly 'alternative' as the comedy was, it was preoccupied with a very mainstream theme – the disturbing parochialism of isolated, static, small town life.

At the same time, the concept of localisation appeared to be enjoying a renaissance in the business world. 'Think global – act local' became a widely intoned corporate mantra. The term 'glocalisation' was coined to capture the tension of corporate giants who needed to formulate strategies which encompassed the breadth of their empires but had to be implemented in specific, unique locations. Just recently, HSBC bank has undergone a minor rebranding in which it produced and now parades the strapline, "The World's Local Bank." Being local is, it seems, something to be proud of.

The tension between being rooted in a specific location and yet needing to transcend it became fundamental to Western societies in the 20th century. In the space of a little over 50 years, Britain was transformed into a hypermobile society, losing its sense of place, destroying communities and fracturing relationships. This has been both welcomed as a move away from the perverse narrow-mindedness satirised by The League of Gentlemen, and lamented as a loss of roots, identity, community, and society. Whilst people have welcomed the sense of freedom their mobility has afforded them, there is mounting evidence to suggest that the social costs of hypermobility are beginning to outweigh its benefits.

This booklet examines the balance between being rooted and being mobile and assesses what Biblical teaching has to say about the issue. It begins by briefly surveying the state of our mobile nation today, favouring the image of a Global Suburb (over the more widespread Global Village) to describe the dispersed, homogenous environment which hypermobility fosters. It then proceeds to trace the road to this condition. Somewhat paradoxically, it appears that after several millennia of immobility we are slowly returning to a semi-nomadic state in which we use our homes as bases from which to travel in search of work, food, learning, and leisure. Where we live has increasingly little to do with where we live our lives.

Chapter 3 looks in greater detail at the effects of hypermobility. These are not as widely recognised as they might be, partly due to being overshadowed by the more frequently discussed environmental consequences of our mobility, and partly due to our own reluctance to censure a trend which has offered us so much liberty in the past. Nevertheless, there is good evidence to suggest that our mobility habits weaken community and family structures, facilitate crime, threaten childhood, homogenise cultures, polarise society, and weaken democracy. The common theme across these consequences is the effect mobility has on the manner in which we relate to one another

in our daily lives and it is this thought that leads into a consideration of the Biblical perspective on the issue in Chapter 4.

The Bible has no concept of our modern, Western hypermobility, yet the tension between being rooted in the land and evicted from it runs central to the Old Testament. Biblical mobility is very different to modern hypermobility. The former tends to entail occasional, unified, national upheaval whereas the latter involves brief, small-scale, individualised movements. Nevertheless, both have a profound and very similar effect on the way in which people engage with one another and shape community within their locations. Being rooted in the land was fundamental to Israel but was never the ultimate goal. Whilst still wandering in the desert, they are told very clearly that they will remain leaseholders within Canaan, with the terms of their leasehold agreement being tied closely to the manner in which they shaped their society. They were, in effect, called to be a rooted society which maintained a semi-mobile mindset.

The importance of place appears to disappear in the New Testament with Jesus Christ assuming the theological and existential implications that the land had borne. Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter 5, place is still critically important, with the Gospels being firmly rooted in specific locations and the epistles working out how the nascent churches might live out the kingdom in their immediate environment. As the Old Testament prophets warn, pietism is no substitute for active commitment to justice, equity and healthy relationships within society.

Finally, Chapter 6 looks to integrate this Biblical perspective into the modern British context. As ever a translation process is demanded. Uncritically transporting scriptural instructions across temporal and cultural boundaries can do more harm than good. Nevertheless, a number of Biblical premises – such as place being important but dangerous, relationships requiring location, and mobility being an antidote to parochialism and restrictive nationalism – are pertinent and applicable. The exact way in which these principles are used to form strategies and modify behaviour will vary according to situation so the chapter concludes with a series of questions and guidelines for individuals, employers, policy makers, and churches, to help them think through their particular issues.

Recent rail tragedies, road-building policies, environmental campaigns, and house price rises are liable to make the topic of our love of mobility yet desire for rootedness somewhat incendiary. In conclusion, this booklet attempts to show that roots and mobility need not be seen in opposition to one another but rather used as mutually sympathetic tools with which to build healthy relationships, and integrated and active communities.

Chapter 1: A Nation of Strangers

Chapter Summary

History suggests that a wholly immobile existence, whether rural or urban, provides fertile breeding ground for intolerance and cultural myopia. Yet the modern alternative, a hypermobile society in which we travel ever greater distances to work, learn, shop, and play, carries its own social problems which we are reluctant to acknowledge. Biblical societies knew nothing of our modern atomised hypermobility, yet the Bible is profoundly interested in this tension between rootedness and mobility as it has important consequences on how we construct our communities and relate to one another within them.

The Dangers of Standing Still

Describing her childhood in the north Oxfordshire hamlet ‘Lark Rise’ in the 1880s, Flora Thomson wrote, “Horizons were widening; a stranger from a village five miles away was no longer looked upon as ‘a furriner’.”¹

‘Lark Rise’ was a poor but reasonably happy place. Relationships were strong and the sense of community was powerful. Nevertheless, the narrow horizons, even if they had extended beyond five miles, still bred a narrow mind and social claustrophobia:

“[The villagers] carried out St Paul’s injunction to weep with those who weep; but when it came to rejoicing with those who rejoice they were less ready. There was nothing they disliked more than seeing one of their number doing better or having more of anything than themselves.”²

This picture of ‘small town’ pettiness and jealousy is easily recognised, the tale of the individual pitting his or her aspirations against the community’s expectations being one of the oldest motifs in literature.

Neither is it, despite the popularity of the stereotype, confined to poor, remote farming communities. Alf Garnet, the anti-hero of the BBC comedies *Till Death Us Do Part* and *In Sickness and In Health* lived his entire life in one of the world’s biggest, busiest and most cosmopolitan cities. Yet he still managed to retain and spout views of remarkable intolerance and cultural myopia.

It appears that living in the same place and doing the same things with the same people for the same reasons over a prolonged period of time, whilst fostering strong relationships, can breed a dangerously small-minded approach to life and to other people.

Always on the Move

‘Lark Rise’ and Alf Garnet are relics of the past. Each is noteworthy for capturing what we once were, whether that was the close-knit agricultural community or the narrow-minded, lifelong East-ender. ‘Multicultural’, ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘social mobility’ are the terms proudly paraded in today’s national self-portraits.

The transformation can be explained by a number of factors such as education, the breakdown of class structure and increasing levels of affluence. However, the greatest influence has been the enormous rise in our level of mobility.

As a nation we travel over three times further today than we did in 1952.³ We travel further to work, to school, to shop, and to visit friends than ever before.⁴ The average person makes over a thousand journeys per year, totalling nearly 7,000 miles, 2,000 more than in 1975. This is forecast to double again in the next 25 years.⁵

Nor is it simply our 'micro' or day-to-day travelling that has risen. An ever increasing proportion of us work abroad. As a nation we flew 35 times more domestic miles in 1998 than we did in 1952.⁶ In 2000, British airports processed twice as many passengers as they did ten years earlier.⁷

We move house more frequently than we used to, with nearly half of the of the British population moving in the 1990s. By 2001 there were nearly 1.5 million housing transactions per year.⁸ We appear to have become a nation always on the move.

Welcome to the Global Suburb

If this rise in mobility has acted as an antidote to cultural prejudice, it has also had more subtle but equally pervasive negative effects.

For many people the ever rising commuting distances and times have effectively dissected their lives, severing home and work and prohibiting any significant work/ life integration. The rising demands among many businesses for a willingness to be mobile, particularly at the senior manager level, are going one stage further and dissolving the concept of home altogether.⁹

The trends are the same for school and shopping, with fewer and fewer children walking to school, and more and more adults driving further to shop. Where one lives is increasingly becoming irrelevant to where one lives one's life!¹⁰

The effects of this are not always immediately obvious but are nonetheless tremendously powerful. As attachment to place is weakened, civic pride diminishes. Environments become physically less appealing and socially less welcoming. Anonymity fosters crime which itself fractures communities and encourages those who can to leave.

As people travel further to shop, school and work, the economic and occupational glue which holds communities together disintegrates. Local businesses find themselves increasingly unable to compete with out of town malls. Town centres are left without amenities or become colonised by indistinguishable chain stores which abolish any trace of local distinctiveness. As Tom Wolfe wrote in his novel, *A Man in Full*: "the only way you could tell you were leaving one community and entering another was when the franchises started repeating and you spotted another 7-Eleven, another Wendy's, another Costco..."¹¹

Just as importantly, weak attachment to place diminishes 'social capital'. 'Social capital' is not easily defined and comes in a variety of terms such as 'social energy', 'civic virtue' and 'community networks' but it is generally accepted to mean "networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives."¹² Low social capital – knowing nothing about one's neighbour and living in a street or 'community' of strangers – invariably leaves an individual more vulnerable

and lonelier and readily breeds a siege mentality, as is witnessed by the rise in surveillance technology, gated communities and ‘white flights’.

The ultimate and worst possible result is a characterless, perpetually transient society full of strangers who keep themselves to themselves and live in a uniform and unfriendly landscape. Such a picture is not necessarily new. Eighty years ago T.S. Eliot, drawing on Dante’s *Inferno*, described the crowd that crossed London Bridge in just such a deadened way. Like the spirits to whom they were compared, they were faceless, nameless and rootless, drifting eternally and purposelessly. Today the anonymous individuals in Eliot’s crowd have sealed themselves into cars and spread out from the commuting centres to every town and city in the country.

The 1960s telecommunications revolution led the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan to coin the phrase ‘Global Village’. It passed swiftly into the modern lexicon, its positive connotations of intimacy and friendliness recommending it to an optimistic era. Thirty years later, the village metaphor is recognised as singularly inappropriate. Today few Western villages are truly village-like and the world certainly isn’t. In the 21st century the term Global Suburb seems rather more appropriate.

Resolving the tension

The fundamental tension, therefore, appears to be between an attachment to place which breeds parochialism and a disregard for it which breeds alienation. Few people would wish to relinquish the freedom and opportunity offered by mobility and yet most are dispirited by living in a nation of strangers.

The world of Flora Thompson’s ‘Lark Rise’ has been stood on its head. We are now infinitely more likely to share our street with strangers and have friends living five (or more) miles away than we are to know everyone around us and distrust ‘furriners’ from neighbouring parishes.

The societies of both Old and New Testaments were significantly different to modern Britain, with neither the capacity for our daily micro-mobility nor the desire for our regular house moving. Yet, as we shall see, the tension between roots and mobility is one of the central themes of the Bible. The means and form of mobility may have changed but the fundamental issue of how we construct our communities and relate to one other within them remains critical.

Biblical society knew nothing of the atomised hypermobility of our modern West, and yet both Israel and the communities of the Pauline letters recognised how a sense of place combined with a mindset of mobility could contribute to right relationships, social justice and secure society.

¹ Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise* (OUP, 1939), page 69

² *ibid.*, page 221

³ 720 billion passenger kilometres per year in 1999 vs. 218 in 1952. Table 1.1, *Transport Trends 2001*, Office for National Statistics (The Stationery Office, 2001)

⁴ *ibid.*, Tables 1.8 and 1.10

⁵ *ibid.*, Table 1.5; cf. John Adams, *The Social Implications of Hypermobility*, (www.oecd.org/env/docs/epocppct993.pdf), page 99

⁶ 7 billion domestic miles in 1998 compared to 200,000 in 1952. *ibid.*, Table 1.

⁷ 142 million passengers in 2000, *ibid.*, Table 7.7

⁸ In 2001 there were 1.45 million housing transactions compared to 903,000 in 1961. Office for National Statistics, Statbase (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/tsdataset.asp?vlnk=704&B4.x=61&B4.y=15>). See also DETR, <http://www.housing.dtlr.gov.uk/research/hss/index.htm#surveys>

⁹ Managing Mobility Matters – A European Perspective, MORI, (<http://www.mori.com/polls/2001/pwc2bs.shtml>)

¹⁰ Between the mid-80s and late-90s, the percentage of children who walked to school fell from 59% to 48%, whilst the proportion who were driven doubled to 30%. Over the same period the average shoppers made 5% more shopping trips but travelled 45% further. DETR, Transport Statistics (<http://www.transtat.dft.gov.uk/personal/index.htm>)

¹¹ Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* (Jonathan Cape, 1998), quoted in *Hypermobility: too much of a good thing*, John Adams (PIU Transport Seminar, 2001)

¹² Robert Putnam, quoted in Office for National Statistics, *Social Capital A Review of Literature*, 2001. It is interesting that there is no universally recognised and readily available phrase in the English vocabulary to describe “the opposite of crime” in the way that *shalom* does in Hebrew or *salaam* does in Arabic. Recognition of this led the Shadow Home Secretary Oliver Letwin to use the phrase “the neighbourly society” in the Sixth Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture (Oliver Letwin, *Beyond the Causes of Crime*, CPS, 2002)

Chapter 2: The Road to Mobility

Chapter Summary

From nomadic or semi-nomadic origins, humans settled and founded villages, towns and cities. This fostered a community spirit but could also limit opportunities and cause claustrophobia and xenophobia. When opportunity arose in the late 19th and 20th centuries, people left home. Their mobility fostered a sense of liberation which became self-perpetuating to the extent that, by the 21st century many people had returned to a semi-nomadic lifestyle, where home became the base from which they travelled in order to interact rather than a location for interaction itself.

Settling Down

Once upon a time we were all wanderers. Mankind spent many years in a nomadic or semi-nomadic state, travelling and settling according to his supply of food, before he ever founded towns and cities. From studies of the few remaining nomadic tribes, combined with a good deal of guess work, anthropologists believe that for thousands of years people lived in extended family communities which bound together for protection and hunting.

The change came when around 10,000 years ago, as a result of depleting of game supplies, human were forced to grow their own food, and learned to domesticate animals and selectively breed wild grasses. Rather than stripping bare a landscape before moving on, mankind assumed a managerial role.

With agriculture and stewardship came settlement and the trappings that heralded: pottery, writing, government, trade, metallurgy, and, somewhat ironically, roads and wheeled vehicles. The writer Bruce Chatwin blamed many of the ills of society on this immobility, believing that mankind had a “migratory drive” which “when warped in the conditions of settlement... found outlets in violence, greed, status-seeking or a mania for the new.”¹ His thesis was highly speculative and more literary than scholarly but it did at least point towards the difficulties and tensions which a settled existence needed resolved.

Three Problems with Settling Down

Broadly speaking, there are three problems associated with a wholly immobile existence: cultural xenophobia, economic protectionism and limitations of opportunity.

Countless books and films have dwelt on the first of these problems. The poet John Clare satirised the hypocrisy and pettiness of an English village in his poem *The Parish*. His is no Elysian vision of harmony and mutual care but instead an acute picture of what a stagnant life can do to people.

More recently the BBC comedy ‘*The League of Gentleman*’ was based on the same premise. The small town of Royston Vasey, so deeply protective of its solitude and identity, had generated a cast of inhabitants so severely warped that they invariably corrupted or exterminated any strangers who were unlucky enough to stumble into their midst. Immobility and isolation can indeed be rich breeding ground for fanaticism and prejudice.

The second problem, economic protectionism, is related to the ease with which the land is idolised and even deified. In his book *Who Owns Scotland* Andy Wrightman argues that “the ownership and use of land is one of the most fundamental issues in any society.”² This may seem like an exaggeration today but there is sufficient evidence to say that land has been *the* dominating factor in British politics over the last millennium.

Appropriation of land rights sealed the Norman Conquest in the 1060s. Dissolution of monastic property guaranteed the English reformation in the 1530s. During the English Civil War, the Commonwealth sold off vast Crown and Church estates, the former of which were only regained 250 years later and the latter never. The enclosure movement of the eighteenth century incorporated common grazing land into landed estates, so driving the peasantry into towns and cities, generating the labour supply for the burgeoning industrial revolution and creating the Victorian urban proletariat.³

These land grabs settled the broad nature and ownership of Britain’s acreage and with it shaped the economic, geographic and demographic characteristics of Britain over the last 150 years. They are also, perhaps, one of the reasons why land itself is not deemed such a critical issue by the man in the street today, because although Britain is 60 million acres in size, its population of 60 million lives on approximately 4.4 million of those acres.⁴

Historically, however, ‘the man in the street’ (or, more accurately, in the field) has been rather more concerned with land, recognising its critical influence on economics and power. At no time was this clearer than during the Commonwealth of the 1650s when a number of radical sects formulated proposals which addressed the unjust concentration of land (and power) in the hands of the few. Many of these groups appealed to the Old Testament Jubilee laws and opposed the established church which they saw as growing fat on the profits of tithes.

The result of the Commonwealth was that the established Church lost many of its estates, although not without considerable resistance. The battle for land during this radical decade illustrated how immobility had led to territorial imbalance and a form of property-idolatry. Landed estates became so important for one’s comfort, economic health and personal identity that ownership had generated lassitude and corruption. Rather than people owning the land, the land owned people.

The third problem with immobility is its inherent restrictions on individual’s opportunities. Those that could afford it would often send their children away for an education but for the majority life could only ever be what the immediate locality allowed. Children inherited their parent’s trade, position in society, religious denomination and ambitions no matter what talents they had themselves. The fact that they physically could not move away usually meant that they were unable to socially, culturally or intellectually.

This is still a widely recognised phenomenon which recent films like *Billy Elliot* and *Bend it Like Beckham* illustrate. One’s ‘territory’ need not be purely physical, indeed it is more likely to be a hybrid of the physical, economic and cultural, but the same principle of needing to move out of pre-existing community structures in order to achieve

one's personal goals and ambitions is central. It is not without reason that the word 'static' has accreted connotations of stagnation and deterioration in modern English, unlike its antonym 'dynamic' which is given pride of place in hundreds of government speeches and business proposals.

Moving on

As a result of the intolerance, injustice and claustrophobia that a wholly static environment bred, when opportunity presented itself the British population began to move on. With the advent of the railways the country opened up to the general populace in wholly new way.

The individual's personal desire to escape and make their own life was helped by economic and technological developments in the twentieth century. Neo-classical economic theory which was dominant for so long not only treated land as a commodity which could be traded without regard to social consequences but regarded mobility as essential to maximise labour productivity. To encourage rootedness was to create skill scarcities in growth areas and thus slow economic progress. Mobility became a cornerstone of successful capitalism and people were therefore encouraged to 'up sticks and move on'.

Technological developments also encouraged mobility with mass produced automobiles becoming affordable alongside other consumer goods in the post-war boom. No longer were people dependent on the railway network to travel the country, and after Dr Beeching, no longer *could* they be.

Accordingly, the price of all transport but in particular motorised transport fell. Between 1974 and 2000, the cost of motoring rose 1% in real terms and in the same period, bus and coach fares increased 62% and rail travel 82%. However, over those 26 years, disposable income grew 94% in real terms, thereby reducing the relative cost of each form of transport but especially of motoring.⁵

Over and above these trends which encouraged mobility, the fact that post-war Western identity was shaped so strongly around the values of personal freedom, individual choice and economic capitalism meant that mobility was not simply a benefit of western civilisation but was a *definitive characteristic* of it. People *wanted* to move to better jobs, better areas or bigger houses.⁶ The British tertiary education system was structured around moving away from home and imbalanced economic development across the country pulled many young people towards the great conurbations, particularly London. To get on in life necessitated moving on.

As the once rigid British class structure weakened, consumption and possession became the best means of signifying social progress. Again, 'moving up' necessitated moving on, and it became almost a duty to climb the property ladder, transferring to a different area if necessary. Failure to do so was to neglect the potential and privilege that being a modern Westerner afforded you. It was almost to betray your birthright.

As Christopher Lasch argued, for certain elites in the Western intellectual tradition, ‘progress *is* mobility’.⁷ To inhibit movement is not only to challenge Western aspirations but also to threaten Western identity.

A Return to Nomadism

The result of this trend towards mobility is a somewhat paradoxical return to semi-nomadism. After a brief interlude of a few thousand years when people stayed put and shaped their livelihoods around them, we are slowly returning to a pattern in which we travel, predictably on a daily basis and unpredictably over the longer term, in search, ultimately, of food and employment.

The critical difference is, of course, the means of transport which today is predominantly the car. In the last 50 years, when the total number of passenger miles travelled has risen threefold, the total number travelled by private vehicles has gone up over ten times, the number of private cars has risen from 2 to 25 million, and the length of roads in Great Britain has increased by 80,000 miles.⁸

Our return to a semi-nomadic state is not limited to our day-to-day micro-mobility. A weaker attachment to place provides greater reason to ascend the property ladder, particularly seeing as, after the housing booms of the late ’80s and the last five years, property is seen to be as much an economic investment as it is a place to live. The difference between this form of semi-nomadism and that of our ancestors, however, is that today when we move on we do so alone, without the supportive social network that comprised the traditional nomadic society.

In the space of two hundred years, but especially over the last fifty, we have left behind completely the settled existence that had dominated the British landscape for the last two millennia and returned to one where setting up home is more like pitching a camp, which we know we will one day leave but from which we are happy to make our frequent and ever longer forays out into the world.

¹ Bruce Chatwin, ‘I always wanted to go to Patagonia’, in *Anatomy of Restlessness*, (Jonathan Cape, 1996), page 12

² Andy Wrightman, *Who owns Scotland?*, (Canongate Books, 1997)

³ Kevin Cahill, *Who Owns Britain?*, (Canongate Books, 2001), p. 20 ff.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 6

⁵ *Transport Trends 2001*, Table 4.1

⁶ Tenure by main reason for moving, 1998-99, Social Trends Dataset, (ONS, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/xsdataset.asp?vlnk=519&B4.x=37&B4.y=5>)

⁷ Kenneth Anderson, ‘Heartless World Revisited: Christopher Lasch’s parting polemic against the New Cross’, TLS, September 22, 1995, p3

⁸ *Transport Trends 2001*, Tables 1.1 and 3.4

Chapter 3: The consequences of mobility

Chapter Summary

The 'hypermobility' of the 21st century has significant social costs which are not often recognised. Albeit in consort with a number of other trends, hypermobility can weaken community and family, facilitate crime, polarise society, homogenise culture, affect health, damage the environment and weaken democracy. Forecasts suggest there will be no waning of the hypermobile trend and expectations of a technological solution are, at best, questionable. All these factors coalesce to threaten the relational health of society in the future.

Too much of a good thing

Given the potential dangers of immobility, we should welcome our itinerant society. Mobility has facilitated economic growth, presented opportunities, fulfilled potential and helped counter xenophobia. All these achievements should be lauded.

However, over recent decades Britain appears to have moved from a state of mobility to one of 'hypermobility', where the social costs begin to outweigh the personal benefits. This hypermobility results from a combination of our ever-increasing 'micro-mobility', the means, time and distance we travel on a daily basis, and the more slowly rising 'macro-mobility', our tendency to move house and district with ever greater frequency. The combination of the two has a potent effect on society.

These costs are only slowly being recognised, partly due to our much greater awareness of the environmental problems raised by hypermobility and partly due to our innate reluctance to censure a trend which has done so much to liberate us in the past. Nevertheless, they are growing ever greater and the longer they are ignored, the more damage they threaten to society.

A weaker community

Whilst the average number and distance of journeys taken have steadily increased in the last 50 years, the amount of *time* the average person spends travelling has hardly changed at all.¹ The changing nature of travel – increased car ownership, falling relative travel costs, more widely scattered friends, relatives, amenities, and workplaces – means that as a nation we spend much less time in and around our homes and localities. We may close the front door behind us approximately as many times as today as we did in 1952 but when we do, we get straight in the car and drive miles out of our neighbourhood. The inevitable result is a decrease in 'local interaction time' leaving less time to form meaningful relationships with the people one shares one's street and neighbourhood with. The greater distance we travel also makes us aware of how many people there are 'out there' and how few of them we know. Our world becomes full of strangers.

This more anonymous and less convivial world is not only less pleasant but self-perpetuating, breeding a temporary mindset where one is less inclined to become involved in local organisations and more inclined to see home as a (temporary) base from which one journeys to see distant friends. Making good friends in a locality takes time and effort and if one is concerned not to lose the friends one already has *and* aware that

one is only likely to be in the neighbourhood for a few years in any case, that effort seems hardly worth while.

The effect of this weakened sense of attachment to place in the US has been traced by the writer Robert Putnam. His book *Bowling Alone* charts the decline of participation in politics, civic groups, trade unions, professional organisations, and informal social occasions (like bowling) in America. It is important to emphasise that mobility is not the sole culprit for this decline in ‘social capital’. Putnam also cites television, affluence and time famine. It should also be noted that the UK has not reached America’s level of civic disengagement – yet. Still, it is clear that the fundamental premise of mobility, the capacity to be ‘elsewhere’, invariably weakens the desire to and the pleasure of being ‘here’.

Family breakdown

‘Family breakdown’ has in the past been cited as the explanation for and result of virtually every social ill. It has been linked to crime levels, teenage pregnancy and educational disruption, and has been explained by absent fathers, careless mothers, lack of government guidance, and the deleterious effects of television. To cite it as a consequence of hypermobility seems unnecessary.

Yet just as our micro- and macro-mobility habits weaken community, they can also weaken family. A culture of necessary job mobility compounded by a time-consuming commute helps reduce ‘family-interaction’ time, just as it affects ‘local-interaction’ time. Similarly, moving home and area can disrupt children’s education and an individual’s proximity to and capacity to care for elderly relatives.

Of course, there is no absolute link between moving home and family breakdown. Sometimes moving area can be the act which saves a family, by minimising commuting time or allowing better care for vulnerable relatives. Yet, there is still a general correlation between stability within an area and familial security.

More crime ridden

A more concrete effect of hypermobility is the rise in crime. Mobility itself has little to do with *why* people commit crime but it has everything to do with *how* they manage commit it. In a local environment which is largely anonymous and totally fluid it is dangerously easy to commit crimes, especially house burglary and car crime. In a world full of strangers, it is infinitely easier for criminals to blend in. Moreover, “people are far more willing to steal from strangers and institutions than from personal acquaintances.”²

All this can provoke fears over the invisible enemy ‘out there’ and, somewhat ironically, lead people to demonise groups in a way in which the traditionally static community is thought to do. Mobility may broaden the mind but hypermobility can close it down again.

This environment for and fear of crime that hypermobility breeds has brought back another pre-mobile principle. Neighbourhood watch scheme recognise that looking out for one another is one of the most effective and economical means of dealing with crime.

Such schemes are, of course, a deliberate imitation of the natural behaviour of traditional, immobile communities.

Neighbourhood watch schemes are one economical and easy way of crime prevention to which inhabitants of the hypermobile society have resorted. Other means are less convivial and more expensive. They include the rise of all-pervasive surveillance technology, the growing resources devoted to security measures, such as locks, bolts and security windows, and the increase in gated communities and private roads. A suspicious society breeds a siege mentality in which all public space is hostile and potentially dangerous.

More hostile to children

Nowhere is this hostility more evident than in the lives of children. Hypermobility limits children's independence, experiences and even affects their health.

At first glance accident statistics suggest that our roads are getting ever safer for children. There are, for example, about a third as many children killed on roads today as there were in 1922 when there was very little traffic and a nationwide 20mph speed limit. This does not, however, mean that the world is three times safer for children as the real reason for the fall in accidents is that roads have become so dangerous that children are no longer allowed out to play in the same way as they were 80 years ago.³

It is not simply the greater number of faster travelling cars which have made streets too unsafe for children but also an acute awareness of 'Stranger Danger'. This, as much as the fear of unsafe roads, is the reason why between 1971 and 1990 the proportion of 7-8 year olds who went to school unaccompanied by adults fell from 80% to 9%.⁴

This enforced lack of independence has been considered to impair social development, with children's experience of mixing independently with peers and learning to cope without adult supervision being limited to the gated (and guarded) school playground.⁵

The ultimate hypermobile society is one in which, unless supervised, children cannot play outside (because it is too dangerous), cannot visit the shops (because there aren't any within walking distance), and cannot go unescorted to schools (because of fear of paedophiles). This is hardly the "sweet wine of youth".⁶

More polarised

A more subtle impact of hypermobility is its relationship to the polarisation of society. The large increase in distance that the average person travels masks big disparity across income. Mobility is strongly correlated to household car ownership and car ownership is strongly correlated to household income. In the top quintile of incomes, half of all households have access to two or more cars; whereas in the bottom quintile 71% of households have no car. Accordingly, the average distance travelled to work by those in the highest quintile of incomes is over eleven miles, compared with those in the lowest quintile which is under five.⁷

Superficially this might sound like a good thing, with the poorest in society not suffering from the anonymity and social dislocation that hypermobility inflicts on others. Not

only, for example, do they work closer to home but they shop far closer too. The average length of a shopping trip steadily increases in relation to income, from less than three miles for the lowest income band to more than five miles for the highest.⁸

However, because this group is anomalous it ends up suffering rather than benefiting. With society tailored to mobility generally and to the car specifically, those who are too old, young, poor, or ill to drive become effectively second class citizens, with a restricted choice of jobs, amenities and shops. The negative connotations of the phrase “branch closure programme” in the banking world and the questions about the viability of the Post Office’s uniquely broad network reflect our own national tension in this matter. We recognise the unfairness of hollowing out the local retailers and public services which glue communities together but refuse to recognise that it is our own hypermobility that is at the root of the problem.

It is also worth considering briefly at this point the broader global picture of mobility polarisation. In the last 50 years the number of car owners in the world has risen from 50 to approximately 500 million. In the same time the number of non-car owners has increased from 2.5 to 5 billion.⁹

The issues this raises are clear. The West has lost any moral right it might once have had to tell developing nations not to use their cars in the ways we do. In any case, these nations are hardly likely to allow Westerners to pull the ladder up from under them.

And yet, should the whole world succeed in catching up with the US’s state of car ownership by 2025 there would be 6.4 billion motor vehicles on earth, enough to form a traffic queue 30 million miles long. The environmental consequences of this would, of course, be catastrophic and the social problems experienced by hypermobile societies would be a truly global phenomenon.¹⁰

Less healthy

Another subtle yet insidious effect of hypermobility is its effect on our health. Walking becomes more dangerous, less feasible and less pleasant. Correspondingly, and despite the rise in gym membership in the UK, there have been increases in heart problems and obesity in a number of hypermobile societies over recent years.

These problems cannot be laid solely at the door of mobility but it undoubtedly contributes to them. Once again, the biggest cost is believed to be borne by children whose opportunity for exercise and play are confined to back garden or relegated in favour of the television.¹¹

This health consideration also ties in with the issue of social polarisation. The British Medical Association has noted a decrease in consumption of leafy green-yellow vegetables (which are inversely correlated with cardio-vascular diseases and cancer) by low-income families and have attributed the cause to the decline of local shops and lack of access by the poor to supermarkets which are increasingly located for the convenience of car-borne shoppers. This appears to be a trend also in evidence in other developed nations.¹²

More dispersed

Hypermobility societies are dispersed societies. Residential developments expand around towns, retailers relocate out of town and offices move to business parks. With these changes public services are forced to achieve necessary economies of scale and move out of smaller, 'impractical' locations.

The resulting suburban sprawl necessitates that people drive to get anywhere. As they prefer to use cars, public transport becomes proportionally more expensive and at the same time less consumer-friendly, as highly dispersed land usage is by nature less amenable to collective transport systems which operate best between concentrated population nodes. This, in turn, makes the very idea of a public transport system increasingly unviable with all the knock on effects this has on social polarisation. In short, by facilitating social dispersal, hypermobility becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Quite apart from this, a dispersed society is by and large considered to be an aesthetically unattractive one. Irrespective of that fact that only 10% of the British Isles is inhabited, suburbia seems to many of those inhabitants to be ubiquitous. The hypermobile, dispersed, suburban society is a long way from Blake's "green and pleasant land."¹³

Less culturally varied

Directly linked to this process of social dispersal, is the process of cultural homogenisation. Like many of the consequences outlined above, this can be explained by a number of other factors, not least capitalism's inclination to favour corporate giantism and economies of scale. The result, as mentioned earlier, is a global suburb occasionally graced by indistinguishable chains of cafés, grocery stores and fast food restaurants.

The same story replays itself on an international level with the phenomenon of 'tourist spoil' being widely recognised. "Distinctive, traditional, indigenous cultures, expressed in the form of music, dance and artefacts, become commodities marketed by the tourist 'industry'."¹⁴ In the ultimate hypermobile society, there is not longer any 'there' to visit.

Environmentally less pleasant

The environmental costs of hypermobility are well-documented but are worth mentioning briefly. They range from the global implications of high carbon dioxide emissions, to national ones of unfettered road building programmes and local ones of suburban sprawl and traffic congestion.

Few environmental problems can be explained solely by our hypermobility and consequently few will be solved by simply travelling less frequently or by a different means. What hypermobility does confer on the individual, however, is the sense that he or she can escape environmental problems by simply going elsewhere. If you find your local environment unappealing, all you have to do is move. The major change in the debate over recent years, as environmental concerns have shifted to a global level, is the recognition that sooner rather than later there will be nowhere else to go. The sense of freedom offered by mobility is powerful but ultimately it will prove illusory.

Less democratic

A final and more controversial effect of hypermobility is on government and democracy. Democratic apathy has been a growing concern in a number of countries over recent years, with 41% of the British electorate failing to vote in the 2001 general election and 28% in the first Presidential election in France in April 2002, thereby allowing the National Front candidate through to the second round.

Again, a variety of factors has influenced this trend, with the blurring of the British political landscape and the Labour party's unprecedented majority being key amongst them. However, as people lose any sense of place and distance becomes ever more of an irrelevance, local issues become unimportant and even national government becomes marginalized. The consistently low turn out in local elections is an indication of how important the British public sees local politics. When individuals themselves naturally operate on an international scale, their government's inability to legislate accordingly renders them effectively impotent.

No end in sight

Taken together, these problems paint a bleak picture. It is unlikely to be one with which everyone concurs and yet all evidence shows that it is the direction in which we are headed.

Transport forecasting is notoriously difficult but in as far as projections can be made, our mobility levels in the West look set to increase exponentially, placing immense strains on our public transport system and road networks.

Despite the many reasons to counter this trend, the sense of personal liberation which mobility has given us in the West appears to be overwhelming. More precisely, mobility has close and intricate links to economic growth. "There is no convincing historical evidence to suggest that slower transport growth rates could be achieved without a slowdown in GDP growth", Andreas Pastowski has written. He goes on to say, "at what point we agree that 'enough is enough' is not clear."¹⁵ Realistically, no democratically elected government will be prepared to risk destabilising economic growth in favour of pushing through unpopular transport legislation.

A technological solution?

For this reason, one of the most popular recent ideas is that the evolution of the information technology society will offer a cheap, painless panacea to these problems.

The basis of this idea is that the heavy use of telecommunications will obviate the need to travel and that this "will revive and promote human-scale community life by permitting more people to work from home, thereby encouraging them to spend more time close to home, and helping them to get to know their neighbours better."¹⁶ The instant, cheap, massive electronic data transfer that the so-called 'broadband revolution' will provide will mean people will no longer want or need to move about quite so much.¹⁷

Whilst this is an appealing idea with much to recommend it, closer examination suggests it is also somewhat hopeful.

Firstly, all evidence to date shows that dematerialisation of economic activity does not decrease mobility but actually parallels and even encourages it. “Historically the growth trends of both sorts of mobility [electronic and physical] have correlated strongly and positively, and today the most physically mobile societies are also the heaviest users of all forms of telecommunications.”¹⁸ Only 18% of business leaders think that technology will reduce the need for mobile workers in the future.¹⁹

Secondly, there is the more circumstantial evidence of the growing market in portable electronic media, such as laptops, PDAs and mobile phones. One would imagine that if people were genuinely inclined to log on rather than travel, an immobile desk top computer would be sufficient and laptops, at best, a niche market. Retail trends suggest otherwise.

Thirdly, existing data indicate that the networked society is, in fact, as polarising as the mobile one. The British government is concerned about the widening of the ‘digital divide’ and the repercussions this will have on tomorrow’s labour market. Currently, those in the upper income quintile are three times more likely to own a mobile phone than those in the lowest, and those aged 16-24 are eight times more likely to be on-line than those aged over 65.²⁰ Information technology may, at best, transfer problems rather than address them.

Finally, it assumes that people will be happy to lead increasingly virtual lives. “It presumes that people... will not want to meet and shake hands with the new friends that they meet on the Internet... and that they will not wish to have real coffee breaks with their fellow workers.”²¹

Even if this were the case (and most would consider it unlikely) we would do well to question its merits. Virtual ‘communities of interest’, much heralded over recent years as the 21st century’s alternative to geographical communities, tend not to demand much obligation or, at very least, impose a great deal less than their physical counterparts.

Virtual communities, in effect, encourage a kind of modern Platonism, allowing people to distil off their perfect Forms, the essences of their cherished interests and passions, and send them into a matterless ether, where they can interact perfectly with other Forms, without all the inhibiting imperfections of the flesh.

This may have the same liberating appeal as mobility does but it is an unnatural and potentially dangerous situation, as an increasing awareness of ‘chatroom stalkers’ and ‘internet abusers’ shows.²²

It also sits ill at ease with biblical anthropology which rejects the Greek separation of soul and body and insists on humankind as a ‘psycho-physical entity’.²³ It may be alluring to forget our messy physicality on occasion but ultimately it is self-delusion.

Moreover, virtual communities fail to address our ‘actual’ problems. How do you foster environmental thinking without a concern for place? How do you help regenerate local communities when on-line? How might democracy be re-invigorated without an interest

in the tangible effects of policy making? Ultimately, it is much easier to be counter cultural with a physical network in place. Location is the foundation for relationships.

The telecommunication revolution may alleviate some of the tensions but it is highly unlikely to solve the social problems of hypermobility.

Conclusion

“At what point [do] we agree that ‘enough is enough’?” This question hangs over the hypermobile society like a Damoclean sword, reminding us that the happiness our freedom and mobility has granted us is a fragile thing. We can pretend there is no problem but that would simply be to pass the ticking parcel on to a future generation.

Asking when ‘enough is enough’ is not to doubt the benefits of mobility or to champion a return to pre-industrial parochialism. It is, however, to suggest that mobility can act as an agent of social destruction just as much as it can an agent of social liberation. Just because it has been a solution to some problems in the past, that does not prevent it from being a problem itself today.

The specific details of the hypermobility problem will, of course, be unique to Britain in the early 21st century. But the effects of this hypermobility are common to human nature and all societal structures, corresponding ultimately to way in which people relate to one another and to their communities. It is with these effects in mind that we turn to look at the topic of roots and mobility in the Bible.

¹ John Adams, *The Social Implications of Hypermobility*, p. 118

² *ibid.*, p. 127

³ *ibid.*, p. 107

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 107

⁵ Mayer Hillman (ed), 1993, *Children, transport and the quality of life*, (Policy Studies Institute, London), quoted in *The Social Implications of Hypermobility*, p. 124

⁶ ‘The Dead’, Rupert Brooke

⁷ DETR Transport Statistics (<http://www.transtat.dft.gov.uk/index.htm>)

⁸ DETR Transport Statistics, (<http://www.transtat.dft.gov.uk/index.htm>)

⁹ *The Social Implications of Hypermobility*, p. 110

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 110

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 124

¹² *ibid.*, p. 125

¹³ ‘Jerusalem’, William Blake

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 122

¹⁵ Andreas Pastowski, *Decoupling Economic Development and Freight for Reducing its Negative Impacts*, quoted in *The Social Implications of Hypermobility*, p. 102

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 120

¹⁷ Broadband is defined by the Broadband Stakeholder Group as ‘Always on [Internet] access, at work, at home or on the move... capable of supporting genuinely new and innovative interactive content, applications and services and the delivery of enhanced public services.’

¹⁸ *The Social Implications of Hypermobility*, p. 120

¹⁹ Managing Mobility Matters – A European Perspective, MORI, (<http://www.mori.com/polls/2001/pwc2bs.shtml>)

²⁰ Social Trends 2002, Office for National Statistics

²¹ *The Social Implications of Hypermobility*, p. 120

²² Nick Spencer, ‘Forever Engaged?’ in *Third Way*, May 2002

²³ cf. Nick Spencer, *Health and the Nation*, Jubilee Centre Booklet 1; Malcolm Jeeves, ‘Changing Portraits of Human Nature’, in *Science and Christian Belief*, Volume 14(1), pp. 3-32

Chapter 4: Roots and Mobility in the Old Testament

Chapter Summary

The concept of being rooted in the land is central to the Old Testament, with the narrative oscillating frequently between rootedness and mobility. Land is recognised as a privilege, a responsibility and a temptation and the manner in which the Israel relates to it is key to the nation's economic, social and relational well-being. Israel's mobility is very different to the West's modern daily micro-mobility but ultimately both modern hypermobility and Biblical rootedness focus on the same issue: the means and manner by which people relate to one another and live out their values in society.

Roots and Mobility: Old Testament Narrative

In many ways the entire Biblical story revolves around a tension between roots and mobility.

Mankind's first state was static, with God and within the garden provided for them. The fall heralded the first of many Biblical dislocations with the exile from Eden, and the friction between place and movement became explicit in the confrontation between Cain and Abel. The flock-keeping Abel is murdered by the agricultural Cain whose crime condemns him to being a "restless wanderer", a punishment "more than [he] can bear".¹

A similar tension is replayed in the story of Babel, where the arrogance of settled, urban man is mocked and disturbed by God who first has to descend to view their skyscraper and then scatters them all over the earth as a punishment.² Before we encounter Abraham, therefore, we have already been presented with a complex picture: rootedness is an ideal open to abuse and mobility is both an antidote to and reprimand for the sins of settlement.

Significantly, God's first words to Abraham address exactly this tension. Abraham is told to "leave your country, your people and your father's household", an enormously demanding command in an age where land, nationality and community were the basis for identity and security. Nevertheless, Abraham is not called to a wholly nomadic existence but to one in which the end of his travelling is settlement in a land in which he will be blessed and used to bless "all peoples on earth".³ The means of mobility lead to the ends of rootedness.

From this point on the focus oscillates regularly between mobility and rootedness. The Patriarchs alternate between movement and settlement, ending up settled but eventually oppressed in Egypt. The consequent upheaval of the Exodus forged and fixed Israel's unique identity and commission but also bred resistance and rebellion. The challenge of mobility frequently frightened the nation more than the prospect of a return to settled oppression and this tension forms the narrative basis of the rest of the Pentateuch. Although, as with Abraham, mobility was only ever a means to an end, it was often viewed as too troublesome a means. "We were better off in Egypt!" becomes the refrain throughout the book of Numbers.⁴

In the same way as the interplay between settlement and nomadism is central to the Pentateuch narrative, it also becomes a key element within the law. "You yourselves

were aliens once” is the sentiment lying just below the surface of much of the Torah. There is an acute awareness of the protectionism and power-abuse that settlement can breed. The Israelites are reminded that they are tenants of the land, rather than freeholders, and should not abuse their privilege for fear of punishment or, in the final reckoning, eviction. As Hosea prophesies:

*My God will reject them because they have not obeyed him;
they will be wanderers among the nations.⁵*

The final reckoning does, of course, arrive and, in a mirror image of the Exodus, Israel is uprooted and sent into exile. Jeremiah recounts how, by ignoring and violating her covenant with God, Israel has defiled the land.⁶ Never hers by right, she has forfeited the gift and as the kingdoms of Israel and Judah fall, the body which bears God’s promise is once again on the move.

It is Jeremiah also who conveys God’s command to the Israelites held in captivity in Babylon that they should remain there: “Build houses and settle down... Marry and have sons and daughters... Increase in number there... When seventy years are completed... I will come for you... and bring you back from captivity.”⁷

Five hundred years before the birth of Jesus, it is this promise which undergirds the tension into which the Son of Man was born. Israel may have been physically back in the promised land but that was still under a brutal foreign occupation: theologically the exile was not yet over. Being rooted in the land, the central theme from the time of Moses, Abraham and even Adam, was the issue of the moment.

Once again, however, the sins of settlement obscured the purpose of having roots. It was never simply a case of being there, but being *right* being there. Just as mobility was never an end in itself, ultimately nor was being rooted. Israel was promised the land for a reason. It was this tension – between being mobile for the right reasons and being rooted for the right reasons – which found its resolution in the life of Jesus.

Roots and Mobility: Old Testament Theology

The land was never simply a neutral stage on which Israel and God acted. Rootedness in the land or eviction from it had profound theological implications, just as its division, tenure and use affected Israel’s social condition and the way in which it fulfilled its covenant.

The Old Testament concept of land lay “between two poles of magic and secularism”.⁸ Israel was warned against idolising the land and treating it as sacred in its own right. Place did not have any innate sanctity and was not to be confused with or honoured in place of God himself. On the other hand, land was not a purely commodity or the natural outcome of a closed, mechanical process, a view which only gained pre-eminence in the West many centuries later. The land was instead theocentric: closely linked to and used by God but not divine in itself. This understanding had a number of implications for Israel’s life and organisation.

The land as a good gift from God

Throughout the Torah and in Deuteronomy in particular Israel is frequently and sometimes abrasively reminded that they do not deserve what they are about to be given. They will not conquer the land through their own strength, righteousness or ingenuity but simply through of God's actions in choosing them.

*"it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people"*⁹

Moreover, the Israelites are precluded from taking pride even in being chosen by God, as it is made quite clear that they were not elected due to their number or merits but because God loved them and wanted to use them:

*"The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers..."*¹⁰

Everything Israel had is due to God's generosity and that applied to the land as much as anything else: ultimately Israel was dependent on God rather than on the land. This fact is spelt out forcefully in Deuteronomy chapter 6:

*"When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers... a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant – then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."*¹¹

The land remains God's in spite of Israel's conquest, a fact stated on several occasions in the Pentateuch and most clearly in Leviticus 25:

*"the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants"*¹²

At the end of the day the Israelites are leaseholders and not freeholders. The real freeholder led them to the land for a reason which – as Israel found at the time of the exile – was intricately tied up with the terms of the leasehold agreement.

This emphasis on land-as-gift was intended to counter any arrogance on Israel's behalf and deter any sense of imperialism or territorialism, as well as to act as a guarantee for the covenant purposes for which God had chosen Israel. It was also to ensure that Israel's identity was primarily based on her relationship with the God who formed her rather than the place in which she resided. Israel was first and foremost God's "firstborn son".¹³

However, lest that recognition should also breed a sense of impermanence, transience and negligence of place, there was an equal emphasis on the land being 'good'. This is seen at its most lyrical in Deuteronomy 8, a 'boundary reflection' on the quality of the land:

“the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig-trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you”¹⁴

Such an acute sensitivity to the beauty and wealth of the land mitigated against any disrespect that ‘tenancy-awareness’ might have bred in the people.

This balance between recognising that the land was good and worthy of care and concern, and yet ultimately subordinate to God and not worthy of worship in itself can be seen in the declaration to the priest for the dedication of first fruits described in Deuteronomy 26. The dedication incorporates the memory of who Israel is and what God has done for her with an appreciation of the land and its wealth. The Israelite is required to take some of the firstfruits of the soil and offer them to God with the prayer:

“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation... but the Egyptians ill-treated us... so the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand... he brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me.”¹⁵

Similarly, the incident involving Naboth’s vineyard in 1 Kings 21 exemplifies the attachment to the land despite not owning it that Israelites could feel. King Ahab wants the vineyard and is prepared to exchange it for one of his own better plots of land or offer a price which Naboth can name. Naboth’s reaction sounds peculiarly vehement – “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers” – until we recall that as far as he was concerned it was not his to sell. As Chris Wright explains:

“He [Naboth] held it on trust from the Lord for the benefit of his family. It was not a question of ‘human rights’, ‘natural justice’ or anything so abstract. It was a staunch upholding of the right of a member of God’s people to maintain that part of the national inheritance which God had assigned to his personal household... The whole incident shows how closely personal possession of a share in the land and personal belonging within the covenant relationship of God were bound together.”¹⁶

Naboth’s determined possession of the land-gift is linked directly to the extensive (and to us irredeemably tedious) land lists in Numbers 26 and 34 and Joshua 13-19. The close division of land between the Israelites “according to their clans” enshrined the fundamental principle that every household had its part in the national inheritance and that territorial aggrandisement was not permitted. They had been given the land for a purpose – it was as much a responsibility as a gift.

Land as responsibility

As Walter Brueggemann wrote, “The land... has within it seductive power... land can also be... the enemy of memory, the destroyer of historical precariousness.... Guaranteed security dulls the memory”¹⁷ It should hardly be surprising that the command to remember is central within the Old Testament.

Time and again Israel was told to remember that they were slaves in Egypt, that God led them out of slavery by mighty acts, that God fed them in the wilderness and that God promised and then delivered them a land on which to establish themselves. Such memories act as an antidote to self-importance and as a stake in the ground for Israel's identity: she may engage in many activities in the land, such as agriculture, trade and celebration, that other nations also enjoy, but ultimately she is God's. That is her unique identity which must be preserved no matter what the land tempts her to.

That identity gains its flesh in the reasons for which God formed and led Israel to Canaan. Just as much as the land is a temptation to forget who God (and thereby who Israel) is, it is also a temptation to protectionism and injustice. Israel was given the land by God as a place in which she would institute laws and justice which would act as a light to other nations. The way in which the land was used and treated was as much part of Israel's commission as anything else.

This can be seen in a number of Old Testament laws. As noted above, land ownership was carefully distributed and recorded, one of the intentions of which was to counter natural human inclinations towards accumulation. Unlike other neighbouring nations, Israel did not have a system whereby the king owned the land either for his benefit or (theoretically) on behalf of his subjects.¹⁸ Such imbalanced distribution was counter to founding principle of Israel as a nation, that of shared and equal access to and use of the land and its natural resources, and exemplified in the prophet Micah's vision of the last days:

■ *“Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree”*¹⁹

The law did not stop at the principle of equity of tenancy, however, but, recognising the innate imbalance in human nature, legislated for those who for whatever reason had become dispossessed. Slaves, for example, were protected from the exploitation that might arise from their landlessness. Their terms of service and release were clearly laid down and they were given the opportunity for freedom after six years should they want it.²⁰ They were entitled to enjoy Sabbath rest as well as all the benefits of the great festivals and cultic occasions which added several days' break from work throughout the agricultural year.²¹ Land was key in Israel but being landless did not entail being worthless.²²

The importance of Sabbath rest extended beyond the employment conditions for slaves. A day of rest was mandatory not just on employer and employee but also on working animals and the land itself. The law was intended to provide rest for all so that all “may be refreshed” and was also used as an opportunity for the poor to take from the fallow fields what they could and even for wild animals to take what the poor left. In this way the land was both a beneficiary of God's justice (in that it wasn't to be exhausted) and a stage for it. The Sabbath laws were a reminder to Israel that “cessation from frantic activity will not cause the world to disintegrate or society to collapse.”²³

Most famously, the Jubilee laws in Leviticus 25 enshrined the principle of land equity. Every fiftieth year was to be a Sabbath year in which the usual Sabbath regulations about

rest applied but were accompanied by a universal return to ancestral property. Land was to be bought and sold with the Jubilee in mind so that transactions would be based on the number of years left before the next Jubilee. In actual fact what was being sold was not the land itself but only the ‘usufruct’, the expected yield of the land until the next Jubilee.

By taking the land off the market as a commodity, the Jubilee laws intended to check unscrupulous growth and prevent the amassing of huge private estates. It anchored the Israelites to their founding principles of equity of access and acted, in theory at least, as an antidote to the tendency towards economic imbalance.

It was because this principle of land equity was so central to the foundation and mission of Israel that the prohibition against moving boundary stones was so severe.

Deuteronomy 19 legislates against such an action in a cool and straightforward way:

“Do not move your neighbour’s boundary stone set up by your predecessors in the inheritance you receive in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess.”²⁴

However, the same command is subsequently affirmed in the curses of Deuteronomy 27:

“Cursed is the man who moves his neighbour’s boundary stone”²⁵

and the prophet Hosea uses it as a byword for injustice:

“Judah’s leaders are like those who move boundary stones. I will pour out my wrath on them like a flood of water.”²⁶

To encroach on one’s neighbour’s property was not simply ‘unfair’, a fact we can easily recognise today. It was to strike at the very heart of who Israel was – a nation which enshrined opportunity and justice for all in its laws.

Land as temptation

As the story of Naboth’s vineyard illustrates, what the Torah outlined as theory was not always followed in reality. After Naboth’s refusal, Ahab’s wife Jezebel arranges to have him falsely accused and stoned to death so that the king can obtain the vineyard. The laws of Israel could be manipulated and ignored by the unscrupulous for their own ends and under the monarchy frequently were.

The best indication of this can be seen in the preoccupation with economic exploitation expressed by the prophets. Immediately following Naboth’s death, Elijah finds and condemns the king and his wife for their wickedness. A similar pattern is repeated throughout the Old Testament with prophets openly denouncing royal and national exploitation. Micah proclaims woe to those who “covet fields and seize them,/ and houses and take them,” saying “they defraud a man of his home,/ a fellow-man of his inheritance.”²⁷ Amos proclaims the time of the Lord’s judgement on “you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land.”²⁸ Jeremiah criticises Israel for defiling the land through her spiritual adultery and her economic and ethnic oppression.²⁹

Supremely, Isaiah's song of the vineyard allegorises Israel's history in Canaan through land imagery, and prophecies its destruction because the owner "looked for a crop of good grapes/ but it yielded only bad fruit."³⁰

The prophets make clear that pietism is no substitute for ethical use of the land and its resources. Ultimately, a nation which has become clouded by protectionism and socio-economic exploitation cannot act as a light to the world. And if rootedness in the land causes or at least facilitates this corruption, then that land can and will be reappropriated.

Summary: Roots and Mobility in the Old Testament

The Israel of the Old Testament oscillates between being rooted and being mobile. Her mobility is not the same as the West's modern daily micro-mobility. It is far more of a national concept, with the nation as a whole being uprooted and on the move, as opposed to numerous constituent elements of it being mobile. Nevertheless, both types of mobility serve the same purpose: to uproot a people and remove their attachment to place. Modern hypermobility and Biblical rootedness both focus on the same issue: the means and manner by which people relate to one another and to their communities.

The idea of being rooted in the land acts as a backbone to Israel's story, from God's promise to Abraham to the inconclusive return from exile in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, even whilst rooted in the land, Israel was required to maintain elements of a nomadic mindset. The bold and uncompromising statement in the Jubilee chapter of Leviticus echoes powerfully down Israel's history: "the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants."³¹

The reasoning behind this may seem abstruse at first – why lead the nation to a state of rootedness and still demand a mind of mobility? When we realise, however, and indeed witness in Israel's history the corruption which the conviction of ownership, autonomy and permanence can breed, we can appreciate why such a mindset is beneficial.

Maintaining a mind of mobility also serves other, wider purposes. One of the oldest themes of literature is our impermanence on earth. Recognition of our mortality is one of our distinctive human characteristics and it is hardly surprising that the journey has become one of the best established images for our life on earth. It is in this vein that a mind of mobility acts as a metaphor for the bigger picture of life in which, as the psalmist says, "our days... quickly pass, and we fly away."³²

Being rooted is clearly the objective for Israel, as seen in God's first words to Abraham, but being rooted is never in itself enough. It was always a means to the ends of establishing a nation whose example of Godly love, socio-economic justice and right relationships would become a blessing to the rest of the world. For individuals, it was the means by which they would love their neighbour, itself never an abstract command simply to be nice but rather the call to work out a lifetime's commitment to those next to whom your family might live for generations.

Ironically, it was through maintaining the mindset of an itinerant people who were dependent on a permanent God which best enabled the establishment of this community.

¹ Genesis 4.1-14

² Genesis 11.1-9

³ Genesis 12.1-3

⁴ cf. Number 11.5, 11.18, 11.20, 14.2, 14.4

⁵ Hosea 9.17

⁶ Jeremiah 3.1-5

⁷ Jeremiah 29.5-6

⁸ James M. Houston, 'The Concept of "Place" and "Land" in the Judaeo-Christian tradition', in *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems*, ed. David Ley and Marlyin Samuels, pp. 224-237

⁹ Deuteronomy 9.6

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 7.7

¹¹ Deuteronomy 6.10-11

¹² Leviticus 25.23

¹³ Exodus 4.22

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 8.7-10

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 26.5-10

¹⁶ Christopher Wright, *Living as the People of God* (IVP, 1983), p. 55

¹⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*, (SPCK, 1978) p. 53-4

¹⁸ Indeed, until she appealed for a king and God reluctantly acquiesced, Israel did not have a king at all.

¹⁹ Micah 4.4

²⁰ Exodus 21.1-6

²¹ Deuteronomy 16.11,14

²² C. Wright, op. cit., pp. 77, 78, 86; Brueggemann, op. cit., p. 65

²³ Brueggemann, op. cit., p. 63

²⁴ Deuteronomy 19.14

²⁵ Deuteronomy 27.17

²⁶ Hosea 5.10

²⁷ Micah 2.1

²⁸ Amos 8.4

²⁹ Jeremiah 7

³⁰ Isaiah 5

³¹ Leviticus 25.23

³² Psalm 90.10

Chapter 5: Roots and Mobility in the New Testament

Chapter Summary

The New Testament appears at first to lose the Old Testament's interest in place as an important social and spiritual element. The significance of land finds its culmination in Jesus, as do the other major symbols of such as temple and Torah. However, whilst Jesus called some to leave family and home to follow him, he did not absolve commitment to place altogether and the earliest churches operated as rooted communities which lived out their faith in and through their local environment. Ultimately the second greatest commandment is predicated on actually having a neighbour and knowing who they are.

The death of place?

On the surface of it, the Old Testament tension between rootedness and mobility is fully resolved in the New Testament. The issue of the Land is largely absent from the gospels and epistles. "The physical territory of Jewish Palestine is nowhere referred to with any theological significance in the New Testament."¹

Jesus' spent his ministry as a peripatetic teacher and refers to himself as one with "nowhere to lay his head."² He explicitly tells the woman at the well in Samaria, "a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on his mountain not in Jerusalem... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth."³ His parting words at the end of Matthew's gospel are "go out and make disciples of all nations."⁴ The sense of place so keen in the Old Testament appears to have been abolished.

Paul appears to support this. All believers are now first and foremost "in Christ". Boundaries between communities are dissolved by the cross. "You are no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow-citizens with God's people."⁵ Paul himself led an even more itinerant life than Jesus, spending many of his last thirty years on the move. As he reasoned to the Christians in Rome:

"How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they are preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"⁶

The early church was spread by believers like Paul who were prepared (or forced) to leave their geographical roots and embrace a life of travel for the sake of the gospel. The life and teaching of Jesus, the dissolution of all cultural boundaries and the example of the first Christians all appear to point to the death of place.

Can anything good come from Nazareth?

There can be little doubt that the New Testament bears witness to a fundamental shift from the Land to Christ, just as other major symbols of Israel such as circumcision, Torah and temple are also embodied and realised in Christ. What the Land meant to the people of the Old Testament – "security, blessing, corporate sharing and practical responsibility"⁷ – was now seen in or inspired by Jesus Christ.

Yet Jesus himself lived, worked and ministered in a specific culture at a specific time, a culture which was itself highly sensitive to the concept of place. Whilst the exile may have physically ended centuries before his birth, theologically it was still underway. The holy land was under foreign occupation. “Young men were driven off ancestral property because heavy taxation prevented them from making a living. Alien cultural institutions (gymnasia, schools, pagan temples, Roman standards) were being set up in it.”⁸ The political and social situation was in state of perpetual ferment and sedition and expectations were high.

These expectations were for a warrior king. Jesus’ contemporaries were looking for a hero to rescue the nation, a latter-day Judas Maccabaeus who had driven the hated Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes out of the Temple and subsequently cleansed and reconsecrated it. Many first century Jews wanted a messiah who would do the same thing to the Romans by driving them from the whole land. Only that would end the exile and inaugurate God’s true rule. To that extent, land was vitally important during Jesus’ lifetime, symbolising as it did Israel’s history, identity and hope for the future.

Jesus, of course, had very different ideas and this is why place and land appear to be so unimportant to him, particularly compared with their status in the Old Testament. He was not intending to lead a nationalist rebellion or revival. His agenda was not militaristic and his ideology extended ultimately far beyond the ethnic boundaries of Israel.

Nevertheless, the absence of place from the New Testament’s theological focus does not equate to an abandonment of place as a concept altogether. Throughout Jesus’ life places had significance. He was always Jesus of Nazareth, even when it was at his own expense: “Can anything good come from there?”⁹ He had, after all, lived and worked there for thirty or so years before beginning his teaching.

Whilst a willingness to be uprooted was central his message, that did not necessarily equate to uprooting people. Jesus’ commands to follow him should be balanced against those advising people to “return home and tell how much God has done for you.”¹⁰ The warmth and familiarity with which he is welcomed into the home of Martha and Mary testify to that fact that knowing Jesus did not necessitate dismantling your geographical community.

This is supported by the life and letters of Paul, both being focussed on different and disparate communities around the Mediterranean whom he encouraged in their life of fellowship. This fellowship was not some watery idea of ‘getting along together’ but rather a concrete, socio-economic living out of the fundamental idea of being “in Christ”. It involved financial and material generosity, hospitality, morality, and a concern for the needy. As Chris Wright has pointed out, it represented the socio-economic dimension of the Old Testament concept of Land.¹¹

Who is my neighbour?

The New Testament is not, therefore, a dismissal of the traditional Israelite idea of the importance of the Land. It is more of a refocusing of it, away from the nationalistic

implications it had accreted by the first century and back to what we might recognise as its foundational understanding within the Old Testament: as a means by which God would use Israel to bless the whole world.

Place is still critically important in the New Testament. Both the gospels and the Pauline canon read like an atlas index of the eastern Mediterranean: Nazareth... Cana... Capernaum... Tyre and Sidon... the Decapolis... Caesarea Philippi... Jerusalem... Damascus... Antioch... Colosse... Ephesus... Philippi... Corinth... Athens... Rome... This hardly sounds like a collection of writings in which place is insignificant.

It is, instead, the specific theological import of the holy land which has been refocused on the person of Jesus Christ. Being in him means being in the Land at all times and in all places. It does not mean forgetting place altogether.

This is best seen in the question asked by the expert in law, in Luke chapter 10: “who is my neighbour?” Jesus’ reply with the story of the good Samaritan cuts right across ethnic and cultural boundaries. The true neighbour was the hated foreigner and not the religious leader or lay associate with whom the victim would have shared his land.

Yet within this illustration it is *neighbourliness* which is used as a metaphor for appropriate love and concern. Irrespective of where the story’s hero came from, neighbourliness was still the proper goal and aspiration.

The concept of neighbourliness was used by Jesus as part of his mission to transfer the theological centrality of Land, law and temple to himself. It was not abandoned by him but used to exemplify the standard of behaviour God demands from all. It is encouraging, therefore, to see that phrases like ‘the neighbourly society’ are still used today as a shorthand for the way in which we believe society should, ideally, operate.¹²

¹ C. Wright, op. cit., p. 92

² Matthew 8.20

³ John 4.21-22

⁴ Matthew 28.19

⁵ Ephesians 2.19

⁶ Romans 10.14-15

⁷ C. Wright, op. cit., p. 95

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK, 1996), p. 226

⁹ John 1.46

¹⁰ Luke 8.39

¹¹ N. T. Wright, op.cit. p. 97ff

¹² ‘Beyond the Causes of Crime’, Oliver Letwin (Centre for Policy Studies, 2002)

Chapter 6: Engaging with Place Today

Chapter Summary

Biblical teaching on rootedness and mobility is a valuable resource for Christians today if carefully translated for contemporary situations. The Biblical vision of rootedness should not be used as a scourge against a hypermobile society as the potential sins of settlement are well documented in the Old Testament. It does, however, counsel against mobility when used primarily to escape commitment or idolise autonomous freedom. Human beings are relational and relationships are grounded in place. But they also demand dedication and the Biblical goal is not so much for a society which is static but one which engages with place as a means of developing and strengthening relationships. This has implications for individuals, employers, policy makers, and church communities.

Using Biblical teaching today

As is always the case when using Biblical teaching to inform modern thinking and behaviour, a translation process is required. It should not need repeating (but frequently does) that using scripture to think through contemporary issues does not entail the wholesale and uncritical import of Old Testament edicts or New Testament teaching into 21st century situations.

This applies as much to the issue of roots and mobility as it does to healthcare, law and order and any other topic of social justice or public policy. The Old Testament law was given to a pre-modern, agricultural society, whose economy was wholly dependent on land use. The New Testament epistles were sent to small, often persecuted, nascent communities and are more concerned with living out the Kingdom rather than legislating for society as a whole.

Nevertheless, the fundamental principle behind the Torah, of securing right relationships across society, is as important today as it was three thousand years ago. Indeed, as a recent ICM survey into British happiness suggests, the importance of and need for sound relationships is more pressing today than ever before. “The answer to the question of happiness may be more prosaic: once countries and households are free of material need... the biggest contributor to life satisfaction seems to be a healthy set of personal relationships.¹

Despite the often hazy use of the phrase today, ‘healthy relationships’ are not simply a question of getting on well together. Good relationships, especially when extended across society, need to be rooted in just economic structures and social legislation. The Old Testament law and prophets were acutely aware of this and focus with great intent on the condition of Israel’s socio-economic life. In this way, Israel may be seen as a paradigm for the successful legislation of social justice aimed not at rigid economic equality or capital growth but at healthy relationships.²

From biblical roots to modern mobility

Bearing this principle of Israel as a paradigm of just relationships in mind, a translation policy is still demanded. Biblical teaching needs initially to be decontextualised, with its

key themes and values being educated. It then needs to be recontextualised, with these values being applied to contemporary situations in relevant and appropriate ways.

As observed above, the Biblical concept of mobility is clearly very different to today's. The former tends to focus on national upheaval and migration on a mass scale, whereas the latter's concept of mobility resides at the opposite extreme: daily, small scale, atomised journeys. Increasingly, job relocations demand longer-term and even permanent movement for whole families rather than individuals but even these instances are a far cry from the brutal relocations demanded of tribes and clans in the Old Testament and of churches in the New.

Nevertheless, both concepts of mobility operate in the same arena of shaping personal and societal bonds with place. Whether you spend several hours per day in your car or on a train, or face the prospect of being evicted from your homeland by an aggressive foreign kingdom, your connection with your home, your relationship with your neighbours, and your inclination and ability to shape your environment are all affected.

Recognising this connection, it is possible to gain from the narrative and theology of land in both testaments a perspective which offers not a prescriptive agenda for our daily lives but an overarching set of pertinent principles:

- Place is important. Biblical texts show an awareness of the significance of place, recognising that without place, there is no community, weak relationships and an imbalanced sense of what it is to be human.
- Place is dangerous. The transition from appreciating location to aggressive nationalism is easily made. Without realising it, people can allow a land to be their master rather than their servant, provoking them to acts of corruption and violence which they would not normally conduct. Being rooted in a place can quickly lead to being hostile to anyone who is not from that place.
- There is nothing intrinsically wrong with mobility. Maintaining a 'mobility mindset' is key to the Torah, and Christ's peripatetic lifestyle exemplifies how a semi-nomadic existence can be right for the right people in the right circumstances. It also points out the potential sins of settlement and can act as an antidote to aggressive nationalism or narrow-minded parochialism.
- Both mobility and rootedness are focused on the key question: what kind of relationships should we be sustaining? Neither is the final goal in itself. Throughout the two Testaments, neither gaining and maintaining the land, nor embracing an itinerant lifestyle are ultimate objectives. Both are used by God to found, reward, warn, and discipline his people and to establish a body which will be a light to the world.

These principles are all in some way relevant to the way in which we live our lives today and leave us facing some tough choices, both personally and institutionally.

Being Rooted: A tool not a goal

Given the social cost of hypermobility, it would be easy to use the principle of Biblical rootedness simply as a scourge, prophesying social disintegration unless people discard their cars, abandon their long distance friends and incarcerate themselves within their parish boundary.

This, of course, is not an option. People will not turn the mobility clock back two centuries. The economy demands mobility. Many communities are simply not places in which anyone would want to be rooted. Calling for pre-modern rootedness in Britain today would not only be unworkable but also socially unjust, institutionalising economic disparity and social inequality.

It would also be unscriptural. Being located in the land, although a fundamental theme throughout the Old Testament, was never the end in itself. Demanding rootedness in Britain today would be profoundly *anti-biblical* if that rootedness were to enshrine weakened and impoverished relationships.

The foundational point from Biblical teaching is that strong relationships and a healthy socio-economic structure demand a sense of location. Writing to people, telephoning them and even, one day, video-phoning them are all useful means of keeping in touch but are not substitutes for personal, physical contact. In order to endure, relationships demand a degree of commitment which rootedness sustains and mobility and casual communication often erodes.

It is important to emphasise that this is not the same as saying relationships demand immobility. They do not and immobility can itself often result in claustrophobia and fractured relationships. It is to say, however, that by and large the most effective way of making friends, settling disputes, providing help and having fun is face-to-face.

Beyond this, relationships are affected by their environment. Unpleasant, threatening or frenetic environments are not conducive to forming and maintaining relationships. Being rooted in a specific place is itself not enough if that place itself inhibits healthy relationships.

At the other extreme, there is a scriptural recognition that rootedness can breed contempt for foreigners and aliens and a cultural chauvinism which is immensely destructive of relationships. Once again, being rooted in place is insufficient if that rootedness is given a higher priority than right relationships with other people.

This last point is seminal for Christians in their relationship with God. As observed above, being “in Christ” does not entail abandoning any sense of the importance of place. Instead it demands that the individual is prepared to leave roots and travel should God’s call come. Such was the case for Abraham in Haran, Moses at Horeb, Jesus in the Jordan, and Paul on the road to Damascus.³ So it is still the case for Christians today.

Going beyond a sense of place

Biblical teaching, therefore, explodes the modern myth that there is a simple dichotomy between the freedom and opportunity afforded by mobility and the constrictive

obligations and duties imposed by rootedness. It is not either/or. Both have a role to play in shaping a relational society.

A sense of place fosters relationships and should be sought. Rather than being the ‘hair shirt’ option of relinquishing one’s ambitions that it is sometimes portrayed as being, it can be the more rewarding option, allowing one to build up friends who are close at hand, willing to help out and interesting to be with. The alternative is living in a place with people one doesn’t know, can’t rely on and may not even trust.

A sense of place also gives one a greater opportunity to shape one’s immediate environment – home, street, community, village or even town – around one’s own interests and priorities. Long term commitment to a location can enable an individual to have considerable impact on his or her surroundings, whether that is its crime levels, its cleanliness, its community spirit or general congeniality. Again the alternative is living in a place that has been formed around other people’s desires or, more probably, shaped only by the impersonal pursuit of greater profits or higher levels of individual comfort and freedom. Ultimately, people who have no attachment to a place are unlikely to plant many long term seeds, of either literal or metaphorical variety.

Of course, simply having a sense of place will not guarantee any of the advantages outlined here. As countless ‘small town’ memoirs testify, a extremely well developed sense of place can breed nothing more than curtain-twitching jealousies, suffocating social claustrophobia and the unconquerable desire to leave.

But biblical teaching speaks directly to the heart of this situation. As soon as this awareness of location displaces the sound justice and relationships that it was supposed to foster, or as soon as it deafens one to the call of God on one’s life, it should be modified or even abandoned. ‘Being there’ is good but not enough. One needs to be right whilst being there.

Questions and Guidelines

This is valuable as a rule of thumb but does need to be contextualised within particular circumstances. Individuals, employers, policy makers, and churches all have unique roles to play within their specific communities.

Whilst it is not possible to discuss individual issues here, a biblical perspective can ask certain hard questions of these distinct groups. Precise answers will vary from one situation to another and no biblical teaching can legislate an absolute way of behaving in each. Yet for each, the Biblical idea of being rooted in a place in such a way as will foster right relationships, can provide some helpful guidelines.

For individuals

- What is the reason for moving to/ living in a certain place? How long do you intend to remain there?
- How close are you to relatives and friends? How well do you know your neighbours?
- Are you sufficiently rooted to fulfil your obligations to wider family?

- What would the impact of moving be on your relationships with family, friends and the local community?
- How close are you to your workplace and how much time does your work allow you to spend at home?
- How far are you involved or interested in local community affairs?
- Are you able to be part of a community that knows and cares for its vulnerable members?
- Is the local community sufficiently familiar and secure for you to feel confident in addressing anti-social behaviour?

Responsibility ultimately lies with individuals and even though the small decisions one makes in one's day to day life will seem insignificant, change must start somewhere.

Individuals will behave differently at different stages in their lives. It is absurd to assume a single twenty-something, a young family and a post-family couple will have the same needs from and attachment to a place.

Nevertheless, it is prudent for any individual to know his or her neighbours, use the local amenities and retailers and take an interest in local affairs, as much for their own benefit as for their community. The more one favours local retailers, particularly those with unique stores whose livelihoods depend on their trade, the more likely the locality is to maintain or develop a particular character. Local libraries offer unique resources for learning about the history and potential of the locality and its various communities of interest. Above all else, and very basically, it is much easier to be able to knock on a nearby door to ask for a favour than drive twenty minutes for one.

For employers

- Is there a tacit expectation that employees should be prepared to relocate/ travel long distances/ spend days away from home in order to discharge their duties?
- When employees are moved, are they simply rewarded financially or are they given time and contacts to allow them to integrate into a new environment?
- Are people treated as individuals in relocation strategies or as part of a wider family network?
- What is your level of corporate social responsibility? Does the company act as corporate citizen? Does it have any commitment to its local community?

Maintaining competitiveness is paramount for any private sector employer just as efficiency is a goal for the public sector. However, there is a need to recognise the difference between the short and long term competitive advantages.

To repeat a modern mantra, staff are a company's biggest asset. Whilst short term success may be achieved by working employees hard, moving them as the current economic conditions dictate and remunerating them accordingly, it is far from clear that this is a viable long term strategy.

Employees can and do readily become disaffected with a dislocated lifestyle, especially if it is taking a heavy toll on the relationships which ultimately determine their happiness. Whilst this does not mean that relocation is wrong, it does encourage careful consideration of both the need for relocation and the relational conditions of any relocation strategy.

The idea that in the information age data will travel instead of people is something of a modern myth. There is a real danger that the spiralling levels of information and money transmitted in the virtual economy will drag employees into their powerful slipstream and demand people move in accordance with the traffic. Employees are thus treated slaves rather than masters of business strategy, relocated and dislocated at a whim. Whilst this will be acceptable for individuals at certain stages of life, for many it will take a heavy relational toll. Ultimately, if employers have a sense of place their employees are likely to have securer relationships and this should feed back positively into company performance.

For policy makers

- What is the state of the *physical infrastructure* in the locality? Is it clean? Graffiti-free? Is there space for social interaction? Is town pedestrianised? Is there a steady circulation of people? Are residential arrangements 'fortified'?
- What is the state of the *social infrastructure* in the locality? Is there a local library, community centre, cafés, pubs, community activities and events?
- What is the state of the *retail infrastructure* in the locality? Is there a local retail community or only out-of-town shopping? Are local shops franchised or private? Is there a local/ farmer's market?
- What is the state of the *transport infrastructure* in the locality? What is the relative cost, frequency, reliability, and user-friendliness of different forms of transport?
- How far does the economic policy for a region or locality take local communities into account? Is there 'a plan for the coal but not for the coal communities'?

As mentioned above, it is not enough to be rooted in a community. If that community is dirty, dangerous and depressed, rootedness is little more than imprisonment.

The long list of potential questions for policy makers suggests that they have a very significant, if indirect, influence over the state of community. No policy initiatives will make communities amenable if the resident population is transient, cares little for its environment and treats the locality like a disposable commodity. Conversely, few people are going to wish to remain in a place for long if its physical and social fabric is in tatters.

Strategies for improving communities have received a great deal of attention from government departments and think tanks over recent years but at this point it is simply worth highlighting several of the results from the government's People's Panel wave 5, which looked at the public's satisfaction with, expectations from and perceptions of public services.⁴

From a list of public services, twelve were deemed to be important by over 10% of the sample:

Public Service	% consider important
Your GP	62%
NHS Hospitals	44%
Police	36%
Fire service	27%
Ambulance services	26%
Refuse/waste collection service	24%
Parks and open spaces	18%
Libraries	17%
Local Bus services	17%
Local Primary schools	14%
Local sports/leisure facilities	12%
Road maintenance and repairs	11%

Base: People's Panel Wave 5 - All (1,086)

However, perceived importance did not necessarily correlate with frequency of use. The five services used most frequently by Panel members were:

- recycling facilities – used by nearly three in five (58%) Panel members at least once a month
- parks and open spaces – used by a similar number (55%) at least once a month
- local bus services – used by just under half (48%) of Panel members at least once a month
- libraries – used by over two in five (44%) at least once a month
- local sports and leisure facilities – used by a third (35%) of Panel members at least once a month.

These lists should give some idea of the areas which most need development if a sense of belonging and pride is to be fostered in any community.

For churches

- What role in community does the church play? Does it offer space and opportunity for activities and interaction outside Sundays?
- Is the congregation stable enough to minister effectively? Are relationships strong enough to offer a form of long-term security?

- Does the congregation have any affiliation with local charities, amenities, schools, hospitals or other organisations?
- Is the church able to act in any way as a nexus for those interested in exploring local facilities and opportunities?
- Is there any contact with newcomers to the area or a system of welcoming to the parish? What capacity is there in the congregation for relationship evangelism?

In a society which is increasingly atomised and rootless, churches can play a unique role as community nexuses. Their very presence is often a powerful symbol of continuity within a changing landscape and their community life can remain one of the few social focal points within an area. It was just this role that many Nonconformist churches fulfilled in the new towns which grew in the wake of the industrial revolution.

It is doubtful whether it is possible to have a successful ministry or a commitment to evangelism and social reform without a sense of location. This is not to insist that the old ecclesiastical structures are all perfect and there is much to be said for the argument that the parish system, itself a relic of a static, agrarian society, is in need of reform. Nevertheless, the individual's attachment to place, if filtered and focused through his or her church, can provide a unique and reliable source of community in a fluid, anonymous society.

Overall, these varied and specific questions can be focused down into a handful of key issues:

- How committed are you to your locality and neighbourhood?
- How is your church acting as salt and light in the community?
- How far are you master (rather than slave) of your travel arrangements and what measures would you need to take in order to gain control of your situation?
- If the challenge of the Christian life is to build and sustain right relationships, what relationships comprise your life and how does the present balance between roots and mobility in your life affect them?

These questions are challenging and the answers are often unclear or demand sacrifices. However, addressing them will help individuals build life-enhancing relationships and live out the Kingdom where they are.

Conclusion

Community is one of those rare win-win words. Everyone approves of it because everyone benefits from it. It is lauded by people of widely varying creeds and beliefs and

fits neatly with the scriptural picture of mankind for whom “it is not good... to be alone.”⁵

Just because it is beneficial, however, it does not mean it is always easy. Healthy relationships demand sacrifices, which although right are often challenging. The massive rise in mobility over the last fifty years is partly a reflection of a society which is wealthy enough to feel that it no longer needs to make any sacrifices. If the immediate locality does not provide suitable occupations, amenities, friends or opportunities for personal development, it is very easy to go elsewhere.

The resulting sense of liberation is overpowering and it is very easy to see why governments are reluctant to tackle the issue of hypermobility. Addressing it will not be pleasant and is unlikely to win a government many votes.

And yet, with mounting evidence suggesting that hypermobility and the loss of a sense of place are socially destructive, it is incumbent on individuals, organisations and governments to examine their attitude to and use of rootedness and mobility carefully.

This need not be the unrelentingly painful task it is sometimes portrayed as being. Few people genuinely think it will demand altogether abandoning the freedom we have enjoyed for years and putting on the hair-shirt of a worthy, eco-friendly, claustrophobic, small-town lifestyle. Those who claim that this *is* the only alternative are merely guilty of presenting a false dichotomy.

The ultimate ambition is not simply to foster a static population but one which is locally engaged and willing to shape its community positively. Rootedness and mobility need not be in opposition but can both be used as tools for building healthy relationships and a secure society.

¹ ‘Life’s good. Why do we feel bad?’, Richard Reeves, Observer, 26 May 2002

² A later Jubilee Centre booklet will deal in greater detail with this matter.

³ Genesis 12.1, Exodus 3.10, Mark 1.12, Acts 9

⁴ <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/2000/panel/wave5/wave5summary.htm#03%20Satisfaction%20with%20public%20services>

⁵ Genesis 2.18

Appendices

1. Further Reading and Contacts

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2. About the Jubilee Centre

The Jubilee Centre was founded by Dr Michael Schluter in 1983 from a conviction that the Biblical social vision was relevant to the contemporary world. Its vision is to equip Christians to transform society through renewed relationships.

Relationships are the most precious resource in any society and ultimately it is the quality of relationships with God and within families and communities that hold society together and which provide the key to justice, happiness and well-being.

This vision initially led the Jubilee Centre into a number of campaigning roles, in partnership with others, on such issues as Sunday trading, family life and credit & debt. It also led to the launch of The Relationships Foundation in 1994 to engage in practical initiatives to reform society on issues such as criminal justice, health, unemployment, business practice, and peace building.

Over recent years The Jubilee Centre's focus has shifted away from campaigning towards promoting a coherent biblical social vision based on careful research, and founded on the belief that society may be transformed by Christians thinking and living biblically.

For further information about The Jubilee Centre's current projects, please contact:

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The Jubilee Centre also publishes the Cambridge Papers, a non-profit making quarterly which aims to contribute to debate on contemporary issues from a Christian perspective. Recent issues include discussion of cloning, taxation policy and multiculturalism. There is no subscription charge and if you wish to be added to the mailing list please contact Anne Gower at the above address or via e-mail annegower@jubilee.centre.clara.net