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Das, Rupen and Brent Hamoud. *Strangers in the Kingdom: Ministering to Refugees, Migrants, and the Stateless*. Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2017.

Strangers in the Kingdom

*Ministering to Refugees, Migrants,
and the Stateless*

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Langham

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Introduction

All of us can draw inspiration from the courage and perseverance in overcoming adversity and building a better future, as demonstrated by millions of refugees. Many endure enormous suffering without losing hope, and find the strength to overcome despair and start a new life against seemingly overwhelming odds.

Kofi Annan, former United Nations secretary general¹

Saadya was born in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, after it had been destroyed and was controlled by various warlords.² When she was age ten, her father, brother, and sister were killed when they were caught in the middle of a battle near their home. After a few months of struggling to survive, Saadya's mother made the decision to leave Somalia. The two of them walked through various rebel-controlled areas to northern Somalia and then onto Djibouti, carrying what little they could and begging for food along the way. They found a boat of smugglers who were going across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen and paid all the money they had to join them. Halfway across the Gulf, they ran out of fuel, and the smugglers abandoned the boat, causing them to drift aimlessly. Fortunately, they were rescued by a ship, and the crew helped them reach Yemen safely.

Having no money, Saadya and her mother lived on the streets depending on others for food and shelter wherever they could find it. Sometimes her mother found work, usually as a servant or a labourer. Finally, after four years someone

1. United Nations Information Service (UNIS), "It Takes Courage to Be a Refugee United Nations Commemorates World Refugee Day on 20 June," 2005, <http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2005/unisinf84.html>.

2. The names of individuals and some of the details of their stories have been changed so they cannot be identified and put at risk.

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told them to approach the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for help. They applied for resettlement. After a further three-year wait, they were resettled in North America in a place where there were other Somali immigrants. While Saadya and her mother had lost their family and everything else they had, they were able to start life afresh.

There are moments in history that the world remembers. In the last few decades, the liberation of Bangladesh, the Rwandan genocide, the horrors of the Bosnian conflict, the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and the Iraq wars have resulted in human suffering on such a massive scale that the world has had to take notice. Today the humanitarian crises in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and northern Nigeria (and in so many other places) are overwhelming the capacity of humanitarian agencies to cope with the large number of refugees and internally displaced persons. According to the United Nations, wars and persecution have driven more people from their homes today than at any other time since World War II. Four times more people are displaced than were a decade earlier. United Nations high commissioner for refugees Filippo Grandi states, “At sea, a frightening number of refugees and migrants are dying each year. On land, people fleeing war are finding their way blocked by closed borders. Closing borders does not solve the problem.”³

Migration and forced displacement are defining this moment of history. What is challenging is the scale of the displacements and the inability of the international community to cope. Grandi writes, “The willingness of nations to work together not just for refugees but for the collective human interest is what’s being tested today, and it’s this spirit of unity that badly needs to prevail.”⁴

Human History Is a History of Migration

Migration has been a reality since the beginning of time. Anthropologists and scholars trace the movement of tribes and peoples across continents to solve the mysteries of how we have arrived in the places we are. Some people moved in search of better land and climatic conditions in order to survive. Others were

3. Adrian Edwards, “Global Forced Displacement Hits Record High,” UNHCR, 20 June 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>.

4. UNHCR, *Global Trends – Forced Displacement in 2015* (Geneva: United Nations, 2015), 8.

forcibly displaced as a result of wars and conflicts. Far too many have been trafficked in slave trades across countries, continents, and oceans, and others moved when their land was unable to support growing populations. Yet many have set out in quest of new opportunities and the prospect of new lives in distant lands. Though the historical causes of human migration have varied, all people exist somewhere because people at one point have moved there from somewhere else. It is a phenomenon of human history that permeates the biblical narrative. Old Testament scholar and missiologist Christopher Wright observes:

Migration runs like a thread through the whole Bible narrative. People on the move (for all kinds of reasons) are so much part of the fabric of the story that we hardly notice it as a major feature. Indeed, when the text actually points out that YHWH, God of Israel, has been involved in the migrations of peoples other than Israel, some Bible translations put that affirmation in parentheses – as though to separate it off from the main story, even though it is an integral part of the theological context of the story. YHWH is the God of all nations and all their historical migrations and settlements. (Deut 2:10–12, 20–23)⁵

Yet the idea of migration has been widely ignored by theologians. Daniel Groody at the University of Notre Dame writes, “Theology, however, is almost never mentioned in major works or at centers of migration studies. . . . Even among theologians the topic of migration is largely undocumented.”⁶ While there is research and literature on migrant churches, there is considerably less theological exploration of the phenomena of displacement (the core tragedy of the forced migrant, refugees, and the stateless). Often the reasons for why Christians should respond to the needs of the displaced invariably mention that Jesus was a refugee and that the Old Testament says we should take care of the vulnerable foreigners in our midst. The question is whether a few instructions and instances provide the breadth of what Scripture teaches concerning the foreigners among us, or is there something more? Is it possible that compassionate responses to the outsider touch a fundamental aspect of

5. Christopher Wright, “An Old Testament Perspective,” paper presented at the Stott-Bedaiko Forum “The Refugee Crisis: Our Common Human Condition,” Oxford University, 2016. 1.

6. Daniel G. Groody, *Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees*, Monograph 15 (Oxford: Crowther Centre Monographs, 2010), 6–7.

God's intention for creation – that through such responses he is communicating who he is?

This idea of being migrants, pilgrims, and strangers is so foundational within Scripture that it defines how the people of God should live. Wright states that, since Abraham, the notion of sojourning has now become part of our theological, historical, and spiritual DNA.⁷ It also challenges our understanding of citizenship and identity in this world; the people of God now boast a claim to an irrevocable citizenship in a heavenly kingdom and identify themselves as the followers of an eternal king regardless of who they are or what happens to them here on earth.

Migration has become one of the foremost issues of the twenty-first century as the presence of refugees and migrants becomes a growing political and social issue globally. Some people view the “outsider” with deep fear as a threat to national and personal security. They cite various acts of terrorism and incidents of sexual violence as arguments for closing borders and rejecting foreigners. They also see the issue as an economic threat. Some worry that jobs will be lost since migrants sometimes undermine local workers by working for lower wages. The race, ethnicity, and religion of refugees and migrants often raise heated discourse about the nature of national identity, and there is now widespread debate over what it means to be European, American, or Australian.

The debate is not limited to the West. Countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Kenya, and Pakistan (among many others) are asking similar questions: How and where do foreigners fit in the existing social and political arrangements that our citizens have between themselves? How do we define ourselves as a country? Having new neighbours who look different and believe differently can be seen as a threat to one's identity and well-being. These fears are often real and grounded in legitimate concerns; the reality of our globalized world is that the insecurity and crises in one country can have direct implications in other parts of the world. These concerns cannot be directly dismissed, and we are increasingly witnessing their force in influencing politics and social policy in many different contexts.

Migration as a Blessing

In the midst of the heated debates about migration taking place around the world are inspiring movements of Christian faith communities taking

7. Wright, “Old Testament Perspective,” 2.

compassionate approaches. Many churches see ministering to the displaced as a prophetic act that is central to biblical witness. As society is tempted to view foreigners with fear and respond to their arrival with attack, exclusion, and marginalization, many churches are working to protect and help the vulnerable. In doing so they are revealing the reality of an invisible kingdom where the lonely, the broken, and those in need are valued and cared for. They are providing a demonstration of compassion in the spirit of the Great Commandment's call to love your neighbour as yourself.

Many Christian faith communities likewise see refugees and migrants as a missional opportunity. As many traditional institutional churches have retreated in their commitment to global missions, they see the presence of foreigners in their communities as God bringing the mission field to them. Ironically, the impact of refugees and migrants joining churches is changing the churches themselves. Not only are a significant number of refugees and migrants becoming followers of Christ across Europe, church leaders in contexts where large numbers of migrants have embraced Christ attest to the fact that migrant churches contribute to the vitality of worship and Christian life to denominations that have been stagnant for decades. In some denominations in Europe, church growth is almost completely attributable to the growth of the migrant churches. Church historian Phillip Jenkins writes,

Yet a great many other European immigrants are Christian, and they raise the prospect of a revitalized Christian presence on European soil. . . . Southern influence grows through two distinct but related phenomena. In some areas, Third World churches undertake actual mission work in secularized North America and especially Europe. Commonly, though, evangelism is an incidental by-product of the activities of immigrant churches, an important phenomenon given the large African and Asian communities domiciled in Europe. . . . When we measure the declining strength of Christianity in Europe, we must remember how much leaner the statistics would be if not for the recent immigrants and their children – the new Europeans.⁸

Displaced individuals, victims who have lost their homes and communities, are finding in many churches a welcoming sense of community that allows them to experience belonging again. Migrants and refugees, foreigners who

8. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 113, 115.

are away from all that is familiar to them – lost and alone in their new country – seem to be much more open to God in their desperation than they were in their home countries. Missiological researcher Jenny McGill writes,

Migration blesses insofar as it enables the person to experience God and thus experience a change of self-understanding (Gen. 32:22–32; Ex. 3). The nearness of God is perhaps no more acutely felt than during an experience of physical displacement, and this nearness is always a migration on God's part, for God ultimately identifies with human suffering (Is. 63:9; Heb. 2:14–18). . . . God's companionship in suffering signifies that humanity is deeply cherished by God.⁹

Though full of opportunities, ministering to foreigners and others who do not belong to one's faith or national community is indeed a challenge. When confronted with inviting foreigners and those who are culturally different to become part of God's people, most churches struggle with maintaining their identity – of how they have defined themselves over the years. They find themselves forced out of their comfort zone, moving away from traditions that are familiar to them. Yet they desire to be relevant by being compassionate to the vulnerable. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann describes this tension as being between *identity* and *relevance*, a dilemma that every church in every generation faces.¹⁰ A church's identity is defined by its history, beliefs, and practices. This sense of history gives them meaning and stability. However, churches exist in a changing and dynamic world. Responding to human need and inviting those who are different into their community will result in changing who faith communities are as a church.

While forced displacement is never God's primary intention, McGill writes, "God utilizes the migration of people, forced and voluntary, to shape the identity of God's people and the identity of those who do not know God."¹¹ She uses the examples of Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, both in forced displacements and both by their faith and lifestyle challenging the preconceived notions and worldviews of the kings and elite about who God is. While they may not have moved the leaders to worship the living God, McGill writes, "This presence of difference disrupted the status quo of the community's assumed

9. Jenny McGill, *Religious Identity and Cultural Negotiation: Toward a Theology of Christian Identity in Migration* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 204–205.

10. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974), 3.

11. McGill, *Religious Identity*, 199.

identities.”¹² Migration and displacement, especially of the people of God, can be seen as a blessing to the host nations, as the prophet Jeremiah encouraged the ancient Israelites in exile to see. “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jer 29:7).

The Need to Belong

Ministries to refugees and other victims of displacement commonly focus on serving physical needs. Initiatives and programs invest in providing shelter, clothing, food, and access to healthcare. They seek to ensure that children go to school and that the special needs of the elderly and disabled are met. Some programs focus on employment so that refugees can take care of their families. In Western refugee host countries, churches and social service agencies provide language training and programs to help newcomers navigate the cultural, legal, and social challenges of their new country of residence. These are critical programs and help to improve the well-being of refugee, migrant, and stateless individuals. Yet in the midst of providing such services, some of the deepest of human needs are left untouched.

Many things are lost in the nightmare of displacement. Homes and villages are destroyed, families are separated, lives are lost, and dreams for the future are crushed. But one of the harshest losses facing the displaced is the loss of belonging to a community. Their identity and sense of self are undermined. They struggle to find meaning in who they are based on where they come from, the jobs they have, the family or tribe they belong to, or the lands and possessions they own. Many even face a serious legal loss of identity as the process of displacement robs them of their nationality or their ability to prove their own official status in this world. At nearly all levels of existence, displacement undercuts the security of belonging.

Migration and displacement are a part of the biblical narrative because Scripture looks at the foreigner and is very concerned with the question, “*What does it mean for human beings to not belong?*” The vulnerability of the outsider proceeds from the problem of not belonging. It is because they do not belong that they are vulnerable and in need. Scripture addresses the loss and pain of being an outsider and addresses it in the here and now of created time by urging the people of God to respond to the human needs of the “other.” Scripture

12. Ibid.

ultimately elevates above all things a heavenly citizenship, the privilege of belonging to a family and household in an eternal kingdom.

Terms such as *refugees*, *migrants* and *stateless* are not found in Scripture. These are modern categories denoting people in specific types of situations in our global system of nation-states, terminology used to describe people who have a problematic relationship with their places. They are usually people who have moved from their homes, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and lack a secure sense of belonging in the places where they now live. However, the idea of a foreigner who is alone, who has been excluded from society, is experiencing poverty, and has no one to protect him or her is an ancient reality. These vulnerable individuals, just as the poor, seem to be of special concern to God.

In order to minister to those who have suffered displacement, it is important to understand that the stateless, migrants, and refugees are not simply objects of pity that require our generosity and charity. The starting point instead is the realization that all human beings are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27); each person displays in some mysterious way the beauty, nature, and character of the Creator. He who created a complex universe and a beautiful earth filled with colors and variety did the same with human beings. God does not discriminate between the races. All people reflect who God is – his image – which is illuminated, not limited, by ethnicity, color, and gender. Our failure to recognize and celebrate this foundational truth has led to a history of discrimination, violence, and injustice. Instead of defining ourselves in relationship to our Creator, we create ethnicity, tribe, religion, and nationality, and we resort to these human terms to define who we are, who is worthy of dignity and value, and who is not. We continually succumb to the temptation to differentiate and separate from others who are not like us.

Yet God's concern is for all peoples, all nations. Even if they are in rebellion against him now, God is in the process of redeeming all of his creation. All nations will one day worship him.

*All the nations you have made
will come and worship before you, Lord;
they will bring glory to your name. (Ps 86:9)*

The Sovereign Lord, who has brought his people Israel home from exile, has promised that he will bring still other people to join them (Is 56:8).

*The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever. (Rev 11:15)*

In the kingdom of God there are no foreigners who are excluded or unwelcome. All can respond to the invitation and become part of his kingdom.

This book is an attempt to understand God's concern for the foreigner – the refugee, the stateless, and the migrant in our midst. How are God's people called to demonstrate the reality of the kingdom by showing compassion to them? This is an exploration into the heart and mind of God to try to see how he sees the foreigner and then to discern our responsibility as his people.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you think it means to not belong?
2. What do you think *it feels like* to not belong?
3. Are there migrants, refugees, and stateless people in your community? How would you find out who they are and where they live?
4. Are these people accepted by the majority community? In what ways do you see that they are accepted, and in what ways do you see that they are not?
5. Think of a time when you faced the feeling of not belonging. How can this experience inform you about the situations of the displaced today?