

# The Refugee Story of the Bible: Theological Foundations and Missiological Implications

Michael D. Crane, PhD<sup>1</sup>  
Refugees, Cities, and Diaspora Movements  
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Current data trends tell us there is no ebb in the number of refugees and displaced peoples (hereafter I will just use refugees) in the world. The pandemic only added to the challenges facing refugees: food insecurities, government instabilities, and increased border restrictions. This means there is a greater need than ever for the church to respond to refugees.

One hurdle for the church in responding to refugees is anti-refugee sentiment from many church leaders. In an unpublished paper from Shinmyoung Kim, he reported it was particularly the conservative evangelical church in South Korea that was lobbying the government to deport refugees due to fears of terrorism. The evangelical church in the United States has been shown to be decisively anti-refugee.<sup>2</sup> A Pew Research study showed 76% of white evangelicals approved a policy to stop refugees from entering the United States.<sup>3</sup> Another survey from the Public Religion Research Institute found evangelicals to be the only religious group opposed to refugee resettlement (57%).<sup>4</sup> When the pandemic surged around the world, too often refugees and migrants were immediately blamed, with Christians quick to join the chorus of condemnation and fear. The reasoning given by Christian voices have little biblical or theological justification. Fear and economic protection dominate the rhetoric, and sometimes a token reference to Romans 13 style “submit to government” is thrown in. The glaring message is the church lacks a biblical framework for refugees.

On the flip side, when I hear from Christians who do care about refugees, often I do not hear a clear purpose. Solidarity with refugees is a good starting point, but solidarity can’t be the end game. We cannot withhold real, concrete hope from refugees. A mere outward show of verbal support falls far short of the kind of spiritual and physical investment Scripture calls for in our treatment of refugees.

The Bible has a lot to say to us about refugees and how we should respond. It might be more accurate to say that the biblical story is mostly a refugee story (cf. Lev 25:23). In Frederick

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Crane is a professor of urban missiology in Southeast Asia, co-director of Radius Global Cities Network, and author of *Sowing Seeds of Change: Cultivating Transformation in the City* (Urban Loft 2015) and *City Shaped Churches: Planting Churches in a Global Era* (Urban Loft 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Chrissy Stroop, “White Evangelicals Have Turned on Refugees,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), October 29, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/29/white-evangelicals-have-turned-on-refugees/>.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory A. Smith, “Most White Evangelicals Approve of Trump Refugee Policy, Express Concerns about Extremism,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), February 27, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/27/most-white-evangelicals-approve-of-trump-travel-prohibition-and-express-concerns-about-extremism/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ulrike Elisabeth Stockhausen, “Evangelicals and Immigration: A Conflicted History,” *Process: A Blog for American History* (blog), March 18, 2019, <http://www.processhistory.org/stockhausen-immigration/>.

Norwood's two-volume work on religious refugees, he opens with the observation that "almost the entire history of the migration of the Hebrew-Jewish people falls into three grand chapters: the Exodus, the Exile, the Dispersion. All three are chapters in refugee history."<sup>5</sup> In fact, there is far more than we can cover in this short time. My goal is to frame out some biblical and theological points that can serve as some common language for us as we talk and can be helpful as we engage a skeptical and sometimes misinformed church about these issues.

## Human Dignity

Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham sees a pattern in Scripture of going from universal to particular to universal.<sup>6</sup> Some universal principles of human dignity serve to set the stage for the more particular conversation about the stranger and sojourner. All people are created by God and loved by God. As Genesis 1:27 makes abundantly clear, all of humanity, regardless of gender, skin color, or class, are made by God in his image. This means every refugee, regardless of background or motive, bears the image of God.

Scripture also makes it clear that all nations and families are part of God's redemptive plan. This is the promise to Abram in Genesis 12:3 (repeated in 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Daniel uses a threefold formula, "all peoples, nations, and languages" (Dan. 3:4, 7, 29 (singular); 4:1; 5:19; 6:25; 7:14) to emphasize that all-encompassing nature of God's compassion.<sup>7</sup> And we see the screenshot of the future in Revelation with people from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev. 5:9; 7:9). These passages are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of biblical attestation to God's global concern for all people to the ends of the earth.

## Neighborly Welcome

Statistics show that a rising number of refugees end up in cities around the world. In some cases refugee settlements become cities in themselves.<sup>8</sup> We see cities play a role in providing refuge for those who are endangered (cf. Numbers 35-36; Josh. 20). I want to be clear here—I'm not speaking to the controversial sanctuary cities of our day. I'm only highlighting that cities have served as a refugee destination for thousands of years.<sup>9</sup> Cities continue to be a place of refuge for those forcibly displaced from their homes.

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick A. Norwood, *Strangers and Exiles: A History of Religious Refugees, Vol. I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Michael D. Crane, "To the Ends of the Earth through Strategic Urban Centers: Reexamining the Missions Mandate in Light of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *The Past and Present of Evangelical Mission*, ed. Kenneth Nehrbass, Aminta Arrington, and Narry Santos, Evangelical Missiological Society Series, No 29 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Kakuma in western Kenya is a refugee settlement of more than 300,000 people. Kutupalong in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh now has about 600,000 refugees who have come across the border from Myanmar. The immensity of these settlements makes them become increasingly cities in and of themselves.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Muggah and Adriana Erthal Abdenu, "Refugees and the City: The Twenty-First-Century Front Line" (World Refugee Council, July 2018), 3, <https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/documents/WRC%20Research%20Paper%20no.2.pdf>.

There is a biblical injunction to love our neighbors that is tied to our love of God (Lev. 19:18; Matt 22:37-38; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:25-37).<sup>10</sup> Throughout the Bible, God’s people are called upon to consider others as worthy of dignity and kindness. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is important to note that the man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho was stripped of anything that communicated his class or ethnic identity. These were not prerequisites for offering care. The command to love our neighbor is not bound by passport, ethnic background, or class. Our love for others is to be indiscriminate.

The biblical texts speaking to refugees are best treated with detail and nuance that our time does not permit. A number of the stranger/sojourner passages appear in the Pentateuch but this does not mean we can write them off because it is OT law. Even a cursory survey demonstrates the need to relate to the sojourner with kindness and equity:

- Treat the stranger kindly- Exod 22:21; Lev 19:33
- Treat the stranger like the local (“one statute”)- Lev 24:22; Num 9:14
- Those who oppress the sojourner will be judged- Malachi 3:5 “those who thrust aside the sojourner”

These passages are relevant for us because they are tied to God’s character and show a consistent approach to responding to the sojourner. Anthony Casey goes into depth on the three different Hebrew words translated as sojourner/stranger/alien/foreigner. Each word is used in slightly different ways, but the general theme is to show dignity and care.<sup>11</sup> A number of scholars have done a deep exegetical plunge on the most common of these, *ger*.<sup>12</sup> Mark Glanville defines *ger* as a person who is geographically displaced and dependent in his or her new context.<sup>13</sup> Although further definition and nuance is needed, this category does seem to include the refugee (used here to include asylum seekers and internally displaced persons). He goes on to describe the

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<sup>10</sup> Michael D. Crane, “The Vital Role of Faith Communities in the Lives of Urban Refugees,” *International Journal of Interreligious and Intercultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (December 2020): 29, <https://doi.org/10.32795/ijiis.vol3.iss2.2020.708>.

<sup>11</sup> The three Hebrew words: *ger*, *towshab*, and *nakar* each carry unique significance. Casey explains: In the Old Testament, consideration of foreigners primarily had to do with religious identification. So long as any foreigner covenanted with Israel and Yahweh through circumcision and adherence to the Law, they were to be accepted and treated equally as an ethnic Israelite (*ger*). Even other foreigners who did not covenant were to be cared for and treated with dignity. However, they could not join in the covenantal relationship with Israel for religious matters (*towshab*). Some foreigners were to be totally avoided, but this injunction was usually directly related to religious matters such as the selling of idols and worship of foreign/false gods (*nakar*). Yet, even the *nakar* do not escape God’s arm of mercy, as is made clear in Isaiah. It seems that essentially it was religious practice and not ethnicity that was the problem in the Old Testament narratives. Ethnicity, or “foreignness,” did not hinder anyone from following Yahweh and becoming a covenant member of the house of Israel with all attendant rights and privileges. In fact, the idea of God drawing all nations, peoples, and tribes to Himself runs throughout the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi (*mishpahah*). Anthony Casey, “Caring for the Stranger in Our Midst: Biblical and Practical Guidelines for Local Church Ministry in the Midst of a Refugee Crisis” (Evangelical Missiological Society: Regional Meeting, Wake Forest, N. C., 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Mark R. Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger as Kindred in Deuteronomy* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6zddg1>; Mark A. Awabdy, *Immigrants and Innovative Law: Deuteronomy’s Theological and Social Vision for the גר* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Ruth Ebach, *Das Fremde und das Eigene* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Mark R. Glanville, “The Gēr (Stranger) in Deuteronomy: Family for the Displaced” 137, no. 3 (2018): 601.

“dependent stranger” as “dependent, landless, and on the lowest rung of the social ladder.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the sojourner or stranger is marked by exceptional vulnerability and God’s people are to respond to them with kindness.

Christian welcome, in addition to kindness, is an opportunity give witness to Christ. The gospel demonstrated and proclaimed to those on the move means the gospel can travel far and wide. Alan Cross notes:

In a world that is globally connected through technology and travel, global mission is not just about sending missionaries to the ends of the earth. It is also about receiving sojourners from unreached people groups with sacrificial love, hospitality, and the gospel. Just as we are preparing missionaries to go, we should also be preparing churches to receive the sojourners, refugee, and wanderer who comes to us.<sup>15</sup>

There is nothing stagnant about the gospel. There is a continuous receiving and sending aspect that the church should model.

### **Family Incorporation**

The sojourner who fears Yahweh, is conjoined in the people of God. Exodus 12:19 calls for someone who disregards the right observance of Passover to be cut off from the congregation of God’s people, whether sojourner or native of the land.

Our care for refugees is rooted firmly in the character of God who loves the sojourner and calls his people to do the same. Perhaps one of the clearest passages illustrating a deeper incorporation of the sojourner is Deuteronomy 10:17-19:

<sup>17</sup> For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. <sup>18</sup> He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the *sojourner*, giving him food and clothing. <sup>19</sup> Love the *sojourner*, therefore, for you were *sojourners* in the land of Egypt. (ESV, emphasis mine)

This passage uses the language of covenant and kinship to connect God, God’s people and the stranger together. God loves both the Israelite and the stranger, which leads to the command to love the stranger. Family incorporation in the Old Testament goes far deeper than shared shelter and rights. Deuteronomy 31:12-13 is a passage commonly used to speak of passing on the faith to the next generation, but we miss that the sojourner is also included in this passage.

<sup>12</sup> Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the *sojourner* within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, <sup>13</sup> and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to

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<sup>14</sup> Glanville, 602.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Cross, “Receiving Faith: The Hospitality of God Amid the Crisis of Global Migration,” in *Halfway Up the Mountain: Restoring God’s Purpose in This Chaotic World*, ed. Mark Wagner and William Wagner, WEA World of Theology Series 18 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 247.

fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.” (ESV, emphasis mine)

The sojourner (ger) is explicitly included among those who are to hear the Torah. The language of covenant and kinship throughout the Torah means the sojourner, including the refugee, is to be welcomed and treated with kindness, which means spiritual inclusion.

### **The Sojourning People of God**

The gospel and God’s people are not to be sedentary or stationary. The biblical narrative is clear that God wishes to be known to the ends of the earth and God’s people are to be vessels of the good news to everyone, everywhere. Abraham was called to go to an unknown land. Moses was tasked with taking Israel out of the land they were in for 400 years. It was those who were exiled who were tasked with revitalizing faith in Judah.

The church in the New Testament thrives when it embraces mobility, particularly proceeding from cities. We should note as well that the church that embraces mobility must also embrace risk. Pentecost brings people from great distances to Jerusalem to hear the gospel and presumably herald the good news in their lands (Acts 2:5-11). Persecution forces the church in Jerusalem to disperse and these religious refugees shared the gospel as they were dispersed (Acts 8:1, 4). The gospel reaches Antioch due to these dispersed Christians (Acts 11:19) which led to them laying hands on Paul and Barnabas who would take the gospel from one city to the next. Often, they were as much pushed out (forcibly displaced) as they were planning to leave as they preached. We are told in Acts 19:9-10 that the church in Asia grew from the consistent teaching in downtown Ephesus. There was enough movement in and out of the city that the gospel travelled to the surrounding cities. This idea of the church on the move is made clear in Peter’s first letter when he calls the church the foreign diaspora (1 Pet 1:1), which is believed to allude to Abraham’s sojourn as well as the exile.<sup>16</sup> Peter does not mean that the church should always literally be moving, but that it should have the posture of foreign diaspora. Schreiner captures the pain of a refugee or alien for the church “as God’s suffering people, having no place of rest in this world.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, the refugee experience can aid in our understanding of what the church should be.

I just heard about a pastor I know in Alabama who is struggling because his church is satisfied with the small, aging congregation and resists attempt to make any changes in order to reach others with the gospel. The church does not thrive in this position. The biblical commands to love refugees and even seek to include them in our spiritual family come through the universal commands to love one another and treat all people as created in the image of God as well as from the particular passages relating to the sojourner. The church is at its best when it shares characteristics of the sojourner.

The prevalence of migration in the biblical narrative calls us to two important adjustments as it relates to refugees. First, the church needs to adjust the ways we see and understand refugees so

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<sup>16</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 81.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003), 50.

that our response more accurately reflects the character of God, who loves the sojourner. Second, the church will do well to see itself as a sojourner who is to be a light to the nations. The church is facing countless ethical and worldview issues. How the church responds to refugees and sojourners should not be so complicated. But it does require deeper immersion in the biblical narrative so that we might “Love the *sojourner*, therefore, for you were *sojourners* in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:19).

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