

JESUS WAS A REFUGEE: UNPACKING THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This article is an in-depth exploration of the divine purpose for Jesus' refugeehood (recorded in Matthew 2) and its theological implications. Part One finds three reasons for Jesus' displacement: (1) to recapitulate the displacement in Israel's story, (2) to recapitulate the exile of Adam and Eve, (3) to point forward to the Church's calling to be 'aliens and strangers' in the world. From this basis, Part Two draws two contemporary implications: (1) to transform refugees from 'other' to 'same' in the eyes of Christian citizens, (2) to reassess the notion of a 'Christian nation'.

'As far as I'm concerned', she said and glared at him fiercely, 'Christ was just another D.P.'

Flannery O'Connor, 'The Displaced Person'¹

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'

Matthew 2:13-15 ESV

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¹ Flannery O'Connor, 'The Displaced Person', in *Complete Stories* (London: Faber, 2009), 229.

That Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were once refugees, according to the gospel of Matthew, is mentioned by almost every Christian text on migration, both academic and popular.² Yet most treat this event's theological significance as self-evident. Some speak of Jesus' identification with the poor and marginalized,³ but depict this in general terms that could have been equally applicable had Jesus been a different kind of marginalized figure, a disabled person for example.⁴ Glenn Butner's *Jesus the Refugee* goes a little further, offering a powerful and illuminating 'thought experiment' that asks what the Holy Family's flight to Egypt might have been like had it occurred today.⁵ Butner's purpose is to raise awareness of the systemic injustices in the current refugee regime by showing how terribly the Holy Family would be treated today, and to call Christians to a renewed solidarity with refugees in light of that awareness. As such, it contains much helpful insight for the Christian ethics of forced migration, but it has almost no overlap with this article.⁶

There is more to learn from Jesus' displacement than a broad identification with the marginalized, a coincidental identification with refugees, or even a simple solidarity with refugees in view of Jesus' identification with them. This is evident from the context of the biblical account. Three times in Matthew 2, the evangelist emphasizes that the events he is recounting are no accident but a prophetic fulfilment, i.e. something that was preordained with the coming of the Messiah.⁷ Following that cue, this article contends that Jesus' refugeehood took place as a necessary aspect of the Incarnation. Jesus' status as a refugee thus has Christological significance, which develops, as all Christology should, into anthropological, ecclesiological, eschatological, and ethical significance. I shall argue that Jesus' displacement recapitulates the displacement of all

² See *inter alia*: Daniel G. Groody, 'Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees', *Theological Studies* (Baltimore) 70, no. 3 (2009): 649; Stephan Bauman, Matthew Soerens, and Dr Issam Smeir, *Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016), 31-33; M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2013), 105-6, 113-14; M. Daniel Carroll R., *The Bible and Borders: Hearing God's Word on Immigration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 87-88; James Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 131-35; Pope Pius XII, 'Exsul Familia Nazarethana', in *The Holy See*, 1952, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius12/p12exsul.htm>; Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell, *Our God Is Undocumented: Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 159-77; Fleur Houston, *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself: The Bible, Refugees and Asylum*, *Biblical Challenges in the Contemporary World* (London: Routledge, 2015), 134-36; Dave Smith, *The Book of Boaz: Jesus and His Family Sought Asylum – What Welcome Would They Have Found in Modern Britain?* (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2014), 61-62; Susanna Snyder, *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church* (London: Ashgate, 2012), 132-33; VanThanh Nguyen, *What Does the Bible Say about Strangers, Migrants, and Refugees* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2021), 73-74.

³ Donald Senior, "'Beloved Aliens and Exiles": New Testament Perspectives on Migration', in *A Promised Land, a Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, edited by Daniel Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Aquiles Ernesto Martínez, 'Jesus, the Immigrant Child: A Diasporic Reading of Matthew 2:1-23', *Apuntes* 26, no. 3 (2006): 84-114.

⁴ This is also true of Deidre Cornell's book, *Jesus Was a Migrant* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014). Notwithstanding its compassionate insight, the book contains no properly theological reflection on the meaning of Jesus' displacement, but is content simply to give it as a reason for the ease with which many migrants identify with Jesus in their moments of need.

⁵ D. Glenn Butner Jr., *Jesus the Refugee: Ancient Injustice and Modern Solidarity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023).

⁶ Butner Jr., *Jesus the Refugee*.

⁷ Herod's infanticide is presented as a fulfilment of a prophecy by Jeremiah (Matthew 2:17-18); the move to Nazareth is seen as fulfilling a prophecy that scholars have found hard to source (Matthew 2:23); and the return from Egypt is depicted as the fulfilment of a prophecy by Hosea (Matthew 2:15).

humanity in Adam and Eve and of the people of God in Abraham, and stands as a symbol of the displacement of his body, the Church. Displacement is therefore the real condition of all human beings, and of the Church in particular, regardless of their superficial status in relation to the kingdoms of the world. But these insights do not remain at a theoretical level. Thus I conclude by proposing two ethical and political implications of Jesus' refugeehood for Christians today. First, it transforms our relation to refugees from one of 'otherness' into one of 'sameness'. Any position that speaks in a hostile way about refugees has revealed itself as coming from someone who sees themselves as 'at home' in the world. Second, it transforms the notion of a 'Christian nation', if not quite into a self-contradiction, at least into a radically different concept than any typically used in political discourse today.

This article is thus aimed at a cross-fertilization of two disciplines. It shows what a 'refugee hermeneutic' of scripture, informed by refugee studies, can teach theology. But it also shows how theology can transform refugee studies.

Three prefatory qualifications. First, this article does not enter into the question of the historicity of the events recorded in Matthew 2, as such a discussion would bring in much larger questions of the epistemological basis for historical criticism which stray too far from the article's purpose.⁸ This article treats Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as historical and would remind sceptics that what matters for our purposes are Matthew's theological reasons for that portrayal, which, regardless of its historicity, can inform us concerning New Testament theology.

Secondly, the meaning of the word 'refugee' is highly disputed in the literature, and there are definitions which would apply to nobody in the Bible due to the absence of the notions of human rights and of the modern nation-state before the modern era.⁹ Much of the dispute turns on the reason for a person's displacement. In order to show continuities between biblical times and our own time, I apply the term to forced displacement (but not internal displacement) for any reason, i.e. anyone who has had to leave the culture or nation they grew up in even though they would rather have remained there, due to a threat to their life, safety, or freedom.

A further precision of the term 'refugee' relates to my third prefatory note. This article has some overlaps with the theology of exile detailed in the work of people like Daniel

⁸ Nonetheless, the question of the historicity of Matthew 2 is not irrelevant for refugee ethics and is a locus for more fruitful cross-fertilisation between refugee studies and theology. Butner notes that 'some historians have come to doubt Matthew's story [of the flight to Egypt] for the same reasons that courts often doubt refugees' stories', namely, discrepancies in the account due to the effect of trauma on memory (*Jesus the Refugee*, 30). The wider debate about the theological approach to historical criticism can be found in (*inter alia*): Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, second edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013); Seth Heringer, *Uniting History and Theology: A Theological Critique of the Historical Method* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2018); Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, 'Biblical Interpretation in Crisis', *First Things*, 1988, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/04/biblical-interpretation-in-crisis>.

⁹ For other definitions of the word refugee, see *inter alia*: Alexander Betts and Paul Collier, *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System* (London: Penguin, 2018), 44-45; Matthew Gibney, 'The Ethics of Refugees', *Philosophy Compass* 13, no. 10 (2018): 2; T. Alexander Aleinikoff and Leah Zamore, *The Arc of Protection: Reforming the International Refugee Regime* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 134; David Owen, *What Do We Owe to Refugees?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 35-65; Marion Couldrey and Jenny Peebles, eds., 'Recognising Refugees', *Forced Migration Review*, no. 65 (2020).

Smith-Christopher, Paul Williams, and others.¹⁰ Admittedly, the first two backdrops to Jesus' refugeehood (Israel, and Adam and Eve) imply no difference between a refugee and an exile, but the third introduces an important distinction. A refugee is an exile, but an exile is not necessarily a refugee. Refugeehood implies not only that someone has been displaced from their homeland, but also that they have come into contact with a foreign power.¹¹ This distinction becomes crucial when we move to Part Two of the article, because the practical implications presuppose displacement not just *from* somewhere but also *to* somewhere with an existing culture and people. Moreover, theologies of exile tend to be premised on the church's marginalization in society as an empirical fact. Focusing on refugeehood has the effect of reminding the church of its displacement—and ideological conflict with the powers of the 'earthly city'—as a spiritual reality even when Christians are comparatively comfortable in society and do not feel marginalized at all.

Part One: The Theology of Displacement: A Christological Reading of Jesus Being a Refugee

Why was Jesus a refugee? The question can be answered superficially: because his family fled to escape Herod's massacre. But what interests us here are final rather than efficient causes, to borrow Aristotelian terminology. What was the divine purpose behind Jesus' displacement? Was there even a divine purpose? I shall answer 'yes' to the latter question in the first part of my answer to the former. What follows are three proposed purposes to Jesus being a refugee. First, Jesus was a refugee so that he might fulfil his calling as the faithful representative of Israel by recapitulating Israel's story. Second, he was a refugee as a symbol of and participation in the state of displacement of all humanity from the Garden of Eden. Third, Jesus was a refugee as a symbol of and participation in the Church's, that is, his body's, status as aliens and strangers in the world.

Jesus was displaced because the people of God are displaced

We begin with the clearest and most uncontroversial reason for Jesus' displacement in Matthew 2:13-15, one which Matthew himself gives: 'This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son"' (Matthew 2:15b ESV).

This is a curious text for many reasons which will be addressed below. To begin with, the very fact that the flight to Egypt is counted as a fulfilled prophecy makes it clear that, at least according to Matthew, it was no accident. As Eduard Schweizer writes, 'the fact that these are biblical statements does, of course, imply that this whole journey is a part of God's plan and stands under his protection.'¹² God intended for

¹⁰ See *inter alia*: Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (1989; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015); Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2002); Paul S. Williams, *Exiles on Mission: How Christians Can Thrive in a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020); Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006); Richard John Neuhaus, *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

¹¹ This point comes from Aleinikoff and Zamore: 'Refugees are not simply people forced to flee their homes; they are people who, forced to leave their homes, come into contact with the power of other states' (*The Arc of Protection*, 134). On the basis of a similar distinction, Casey Strine argues that 'involuntary migration' is a more appropriate term for some, but not all, of the traditionally-called 'exile' narratives in the Old Testament. See C. A. Strine, 'Is 'Exile' Enough?', *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 7, no. 3 (2018): 289-315.

¹² Eduard Schweizer, 'Matthew's Church', in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, ed. Graham Stanton, trans. Robert Morgan, second edition, *Studies in New Testament Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 153.

Jesus to be displaced, just as he intended Jesus to die and rise again. This does not imply that God approved of Herod's infanticide or that the actors in the story have no free will—any more than the crucifixion implies that God approves of brutal murder of the innocent. It is one instance of the recurring biblical theme of divine governance over all history, such that nothing can ever derail God's plans or tear the course of history away from the path he has ordained for it. Space does not permit a thorough investigation here of how evil can be incorporated into the divine plan or how free will can coincide with predestined events.¹³ However it may be, the Bible narrates the Holy Family's flight to Egypt as something that God ordained and not as an accident of circumstance.

But if we turn from the *existence* of the prophecy to interrogate its *content*, we come up against a difficulty. The way in which Matthew invokes Hosea 11:1 may seem puzzling at first sight, since its 'prophecy' appears *prima facie* to be no prophecy at all, but a recollection of a moment in Israel's history.

This puzzle can be explained by means of the biblical theology of *recapitulation*. This is based on the principle that Jesus, in his role as the Messiah, took upon himself the calling of the people of Israel in order to fulfil that calling in his own person. Repeating key moments in Israel's history is a necessary part of establishing himself as the one true Israelite who will succeed where Israel failed. Seen in this light, Hosea 11:1 is read as recalling an event in prophetic mode, thereby implying that it must be recapitulated in the person of the Messiah. Matthew's gospel presupposes this way of interpreting Hosea, as many scholars now recognize.¹⁴ The exodus from Egypt is evoked in a 'typo-

¹³ Unfortunately, a poor grasp of theodicy derails Aquiles Ernesto Martínez's otherwise helpful article ('Jesus, the Immigrant Child'). He shows full awareness that 'God appears to be the ultimate pushing factor since everything that occurs in the story is under God's control and part of a larger plan' (90). Yet he finds it deeply disturbing that God in his sovereignty protects Jesus from Herod's infanticide but does not prevent the infanticide itself: 'It is mind-boggling that the God of Matthew "saves" Jesus and his family and the magi, but "allows" innocent children to be slaughtered. Why does Herod go unpunished? Is this what we call justice? Why doesn't the evangelist fiercely condemn Herod's demonic actions? How can a good God allow or cause for good people to suffer and for victimizers to go unpunished?' (106). It is strange that this particular instance of suffering bothers him so much, when the vast array of suffering throughout history, both in and outside the Bible, dwarfs this infanticide into insignificance. Martínez writes: 'The same God who cares for widows, orphans, and foreigners, seems to be the same God who remains indifferent before atrocities. Is this OK with us or should we, as concerned Christians, do something about it and reconceptualize the image of God?' (108). This raises enormous questions about evil, justice, and divine omnipotence that far exceed the scope of the chosen topic, and Matthew 2 offers no new perspective on them, yet Martínez seems surprisingly unaware of this.

¹⁴ 'The bifurcation of retrospection and prediction is an unnecessary one when dealing with Hosea', writes Nicholas Piotrowski (*Matthew's New David at the End of Exile: A Socio-Rhetorical Study of Scriptural Quotations, Matthew's New David at the End of Exile* [Brill, 2016], 124). See also G.K. Beale, 'The Use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15: One More Time', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55, no. 4 (2012): 710; W.D. Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 30-31. Similar arguments in favour of recapitulation can be found in Tracy L. Howard, though she denies that the prediction was part of Hosea's original authorial intention: 'Matthew portrayed Jesus as the One who completes all that Israel as a nation was designed to perform. Jesus recapitulated in a positive sense the history of the nation. He is the obedient Son in whom God delights.' ('The Use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15: An Alternative Solution', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143, no. 572 [October 1986]: 324). See also Joel Kennedy, *The Recapitulation of Israel: Use of Israel's History in Matthew 1:1-4:11* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 142. For arguments for and against this interpretation of Matthew 2:15, see Gert Kwakkel, "'Out of Egypt I Have Called My Son": Matthew 2:15 and Hosea 11:1 in Dutch and American Evangelical Interpretation', in *Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation: Studies Presented to Professor Eep Talstra on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, edited by W.Th. van Peursen and J.W. Dyk (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

logical' way that plays on a 'transferable model' of displacement found throughout the Old Testament, as R.T. France puts it:

Matthew's christological interpretation ... takes the OT text and locates it within an over-arching scheme of fulfillment which finds in Jesus the end-point of numerous prophetic trajectories. When Jesus 'came out of Egypt', that was to be the signal for a new exodus in which Jesus would fill the role not only of the God-sent deliverer but also of God's 'son' Israel himself.¹⁵

Jesus' displacement to Egypt re-enacts Israel's displacement from Egypt in the great Exodus event, Israel's deliverance from slavery and oppression.¹⁶ In short, Jesus was displaced in order to fulfil his role as true and faithful representative of Israel, who were also displaced.

One possible objection to this argument is that the fulfilled prophecy is only the migration to/from Egypt. Its 'forced' nature need not be an essential part of the fulfilment. What God ordained and what Jesus had to recapitulate was simply the act of coming out of Egypt, regardless of whether this act was under circumstances of forced displacement or not. This would mean that, although migration was a necessary part of the Incarnation, forced migration was not.

The best response to this challenge is to show how forced migration is everywhere in the Old Testament, including in its most theologically significant moments. This provides evidence that Jesus' displacement continues a biblical pattern (or 'typological model' to use France's language above) and strengthens the case that it was necessary.

The Exodus is far from the only displacement event in the Old Testament. The two biggest and most identity-forming moments in Israel's history are both forced migrations: the aforementioned Exodus and the Exile.¹⁷ For this reason, the theme of displacement is dominant throughout the major and minor prophets.¹⁸ Moreover, I suggest that every major Old Testament character experienced forced displacement. Let us briefly survey them in no particular order: Elijah fled Israel to escape the murderous wrath of Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-3). David was displaced twice: first, when his life was under threat from King Saul and he was forced to leave Israel to preserve his life (1 Samuel 20); second, when his son Absalom launched a temporarily successful insurrection, forcing him to flee for his safety (2 Sam 15:13-16).¹⁹ Moses was forced to flee Egypt to live in Midian for forty years (Exodus 2:15). Jacob left his home to escape the revenge of his brother Esau (Gen 27:41-45). Joseph was trafficked as a slave (Genesis 37), and later his entire family migrated to Egypt as a result of a famine (Genesis 46). Daniel and Esther are

¹⁵ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 37.

¹⁶ Israel's freedom was compromised while remaining in Egypt, which is what makes the Exodus count as a forced migration, even though Egypt was not technically her homeland.

¹⁷ For an exegetical treatment of the Exile that reads it in light of the traumatic experiences of refugees, see Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*.

¹⁸ See Mark J. Boda et al., eds., *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2015).

¹⁹ For more detail on David as a refugee, see C.A. Strine, 'On the Road Again: King David as Involuntary Migrant', *Open Theology* 7, no. 1 (January 2021): 401-12.

exiles from their homeland throughout the books that recount their stories.²⁰ Abraham first chose to leave his home in obedience to God's command (Gen 12:1-9), making him a migrant. But immediately after he flees to Egypt to escape a famine (Gen 12:10).²¹ Finally, the first human beings in the biblical narrative are also displaced. Exiles from Eden, Adam and Eve are forced to live in a foreign and hostile environment that is not their home (Genesis 3:23-24).

Of this long list, two examples are worth exploring further due to their theological significance: Abraham, and Adam and Eve.

Let us begin with Abraham. Jews, Christians, and Muslims look to Abraham as their Father (see Romans 4:11-12; Deuteronomy 26:5).²² This means that to be a member of one of those religions is to be part of the family of a migrant, unsettled, on the move. Nor is displacement simply a matter of origins, something that can be forgotten when the people have acquired geographical stability. When Israel was entrusted with²³ the promised land to settle in, God made a point of reminding them that they were to live in it as though they were displaced people, grateful to be granted the use of territory not their own: 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers [גֵרִים] and sojourners [תּוֹשָׁבִים] with me' (Leviticus 25:23 ESV). There is a growing scholarly consensus that the Hebrew word גֵר denotes a displaced person.²⁴ It is thus embedded in the heart of God's law that the people of God are to think of themselves as displaced, *even* during their period of relative territorial stability.

Thus, throughout the Old Testament, from Abraham to Exodus to Promised Land to Exile, God's people are displaced. Christologically, we may say that by experiencing displacement in his own person, Jesus highlighted displacement as a point of continuity between the Old and the New Covenants. It is therefore in the spiritual DNA of members of all Abrahamic religions, and especially Christians, not to be fully at home anywhere on earth.²⁵

²⁰ This list has the effect of reversing the question: what biblical characters of significance were *not* refugees? I can think of a handful: Isaac, Solomon, Samuel, Saul, Elisha. Ruth was also not a refugee even though she was a migrant, having chosen to follow Naomi to Israel.

²¹ For an exposition of how Abraham's journey to Egypt highlights the vulnerability of the migrant in the face of a foreign power, see Mark Hamilton, *Jesus, King of Strangers: What the Bible Really Says about Immigration* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 16-25.

²² See also Sadeq Sajjadi, 'Abraham', in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, edited by Farhad Daftary and Wilferd Madelung, trans. Farzin Negahban (London: Brill, in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015).

²³ I say the land was 'entrusted' to Israel rather than 'given' on the basis of Christopher Wright's analysis: 'The verb *natan*, normally translated 'to give', often has the more technical sense of 'assign, deed, transfer, convey' when combined with the land. ... It was not just an arbitrary and unconditional gift, but a constituent grant that formed part of the total package of their relationship henceforth. Israel's enjoyment of the covenanted *gift*, therefore, demanded their reciprocal obligations to the covenanting *giver*. ... Israel could not treat the gift of the land as a license to abuse it, because *the land was still YHWH's land*. He retained the ultimate title of ownership and therefore also the ultimate right of moral authority over how it was used' (*Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* [Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004], 93). See also Yohanna Katanacho, 'Christ Is the Owner of Haaretz', *Christian Scholar's Review* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 425-41.

²⁴ See Mark Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger As Kindred in Deuteronomy* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2018), especially pages 36-41; Markus Zehnder, *The Bible and Immigration: A Critical and Empirical Reassessment* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021), 21; Bob Wielenga, 'The Ger [Immigrant] in Postexilic Prophetic Eschatology: The Perspectives of Ezekiel 47:22-23 and Malachi 3:5', in *Die Skriflig : Tydskrif van Die Gereformeerde Teologiese Vereniging* 54, no. 1 (2020): 2. For an alternative definition, see Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 52.

²⁵ This point is made forcefully in Christopher M. Hays, 'What Is the Place of My Rest? Being Migrant People(s) of the God of All the Earth', *Open Theology* 7, no. 1 (January 2021): 150-68.

Jesus was displaced because all humanity are displaced

But this observation only scratches the surface. To say that Jesus was a displaced person because the people of God are displaced only pushes the question back a stage without answering it. Why, then, are the people of God displaced?

There are two answers to this question which open up a theological anthropology and an ecclesiology. Let us turn first of all in the anthropological direction. The people of God are displaced because they represent humanity, and humanity is in a state of displacement. Israel represents all of humanity just as Jesus represents Israel, and so, by second degree, Jesus also represents all humanity. Jesus' displacement mirrors this anthropological displacement by recapitulating, not only Israel, but *through* Israel also Adam and Eve.

As briefly noted earlier, Adam and Eve, the parents of all humankind, were exiled from Eden (Genesis 3:22-24). From a Christian perspective, Adam and Eve represent all humanity (Romans 5:12-15), meaning that whatever is true of them is true of every human being in their natural state. Two examples: Adam and Eve sinned and corrupted their nature, which humanity inherits; Adam and Eve brought upon themselves the curse of death, which is why human beings also die (1 Corinthians 15:22). Therefore, if Adam and Eve are exiled, it means that all humanity is in a state of exile from the garden of Eden. Human beings are born into a state of being displaced from our true homeland, torn in our inner being, unable to return and find rest (Hebrews 3:11). We long for the home we have never known and feel ill at ease in this world.

This *theological* anthropology of displacement finds a surprising corroboration in the French thinker Julia Kristeva's *philosophical* anthropology, according to which foreignness is part of the inward human condition. On the basis of Freudian psychoanalysis, Kristeva argues in *Strangers to Ourselves* that xenophobia has its origins in a repressed knowledge of our own foreignness, our inability to feel fully at home as who we are.

'Foreigner: a choked up rage deep down in my throat, a black angel clouding transparency', she begins. Although the foreigner is 'the image of hatred and of the other', yet the strange truth with which she wants us to reckon is that 'the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity.'²⁶ Kristeva sources this insight in Freud's concept of the unconscious. It is the idea of the unconscious, she says, that 'integrates within the assumed unity of human beings an *otherness* that is both biological *and* symbolic and becomes an integral part of the *same*. Henceforth the foreigner is neither a race nor a nation. The foreigner is neither glorified as a secret *Volksgeist* nor banished as disruptive of rationalist urbanity. Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided.'²⁷ Our hatred of foreigners is the outward manifestation of our inner strangeness to ourselves that we cannot bear to admit. It is our unconscious awareness that we are foreign that drives us to xenophobia, for 'how could one tolerate a foreigner if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself?'²⁸

Although she makes it the cause of all hostility towards foreigners, Kristeva suggests no reason or cause for this inner dividedness. Theologically, we might

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1.

²⁷ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 181. Italics original.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

supplement her account with the story of exile from the Garden of Eden and thereby give it a foundation. Yet what is interesting about her account is that she witnesses to the natural memory of this exile, even for those who do not confess the Christian faith. Hers is a 'natural theology' of the displacement of humankind from its original home.

Jesus, as the second Adam, experienced displacement like the first Adam so as to share in the condition of all human beings.²⁹ This is the second reason Jesus was a refugee.

Jesus was a refugee because the Church is called to refugeehood

'To the exiles [παρεπιδήμιος] of the Dispersion', writes Peter (1 Peter 1:1 NRSV), addressing in the first instance the churches in Asia Minor, but from a canonical perspective addressing the entire Christian church. The very first descriptor Peter uses of the Church is *exiles*, people who have been forcibly displaced from their true home. This designation sets the agenda for his entire letter, as if Peter wanted his letter to be read by people who are conscious of themselves as exiles, and its message understood in that light. To drive the point home, Peter repeats with emphasis in the next chapter: 'I urge you as aliens [παροίκους] and exiles [παρεπιδήμιος] ...' (1 Peter 2:11 NRSV). We find this same pair of Greek words in two places in the LXX: first in Genesis 23:3, when Abraham tells the Hittites, 'I am a stranger [πάροικος] and an alien [παρεπίδημος] residing among you'; and then in Psalm 39:12, when the psalmist says to YHWH: 'I am your passing guest [πάροικος], an alien [παρεπίδημος], like all my forebears.' In both cases, these translate the Hebrew words תושב and גר, the latter of which (as noted above) denotes a displaced person. Moreover, the specific situation of these 'exiles' is clearly one of subjection to a foreign power and culture. Therefore in modern terms, Peter addresses the Church as refugees.³⁰

Jesus' refugeehood does not only point typologically backward to the Old Testament; it also points forward as a model of the community he founded and which shares in his life. When a person is baptized, they are disconnected from the ancestry of the first Adam and connected instead to the ancestry of the second Adam, Jesus (Colossians 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 15:22; Romans 5:12). They die to the old self and its ways, and they rise again to a new self which is empowered by the Spirit of Jesus. But in spite of this dramatic change, the status of being a refugee is not something that changes. Christians are not those who are most at home in the world. On the contrary, before becoming Christians they might have had the illusion of being at home, due to the acclimatization to living in a sinful world that comes with habituation. Baptism is a sharp wake-up call, a reminder of our original created status as not belonging in this world of

²⁹ Someone might object to this that Adam's displacement is a consequence and sign of his sinfulness, a trait Jesus does not share in and thus should not symbolise. I accept the point but would respond by pointing to Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:13-15) which is a theological puzzle for the same reason. All we can say about it is that Jesus seemed to feel the need to share in the symbolism or consequences of humanity's sinful state even though he was without sin.

³⁰ For a more detailed look at Peter's use of exile in 1 Peter, see Reinhard Feldmeier, *Die Christen als Fremde: die Metapher der Fremde in der antiken Welt, im Urchristentum und im 1. Petrusbrief*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 64 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992). As Miroslav Volf summarises, Feldmeier persuasively argues that 'the key metaphor which 1 Peter employs to express the Christian relationship to culture is the metaphor of "aliens"' ('Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter', *Ex Auditu* 10 [1994]: 16).

sin, and a conferral of a new redeemed status as citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20).³¹ Those who submit to the Lordship of Christ obtain heavenly citizenship, but this has the corollary of making them no longer citizens of earth. For the time being, until Jesus returns, they are exiles who do not belong on earth.

Christians' self-understanding as aliens and exiles in the world had an importance for the early Church that can hardly be overestimated. Clement of Rome begins his letter to the Corinthians by writing from 'the Church of God which sojourns [παροικοῦσα] at Rome, to the Church of God sojourning [παροικούση] at Corinth.' Polycarp similarly addresses his letter 'to the Church of God sojourning [παροικούση] at Philippi',³² and the Martyrdom of Polycarp goes further, addressing the entire 'Holy Catholic Church of Resident Aliens everywhere [πάσαις ταῖς κατὰ πάντα τόπον τῆς ἁγίας καὶ καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας παροικίαις]'.³³ Finally, the epistle to Diognetus describes Christians as ones who 'dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners [ἄραιοι]. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners [ξένοι]. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. ... They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens [πολιτεύονται] of heaven.'³⁴

One might object that this early church language does not necessarily imply any 'forced' migration, but simply the status of foreigner in a strange land. Granted there are several strands to the patristic trope of foreignness and these cannot be flattened out univocally as meaning one and the same thing in every usage.³⁵ All I wish to argue is that the notion of exile is one such strand that stands behind the church's self-understanding as alien. The word ἄραιοος only appears four times in the New Testament: two do not refer to the church³⁶ and one does but speaks of the Gentiles as no longer alienated from God's people.³⁷ This means that the patristic use of ἄραιοος as an ongoing aspect of the church's identity is probably an intertextual reference to 1 Peter, who, as we saw, pairs it with παρεπίδημος, thereby explicitly attributing refugee status to the church by means of the metaphor of exile. In any case, the difference between seeing the church as in exile versus merely as resident aliens turns on the lack of choice about their situation. One might choose to be a Christian,

³¹ N.T. Wright points out that heavenly citizenship does not mean Christians are destined to go to heaven, but that earth is a colony of heaven and will eventually be fully incorporated into the heavenly kingdom. The point is valid, but it does not substantially affect the characterisation of Christians as aliens and strangers in the world in the present. See Tom Wright, *Simply Good News: Why The Gospel Is News And What Makes It Good* (London: SPCK, 2015), 94-95; see also N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (London: SPCK, 2004); for more detail on the metaphor of citizenship, see Mitchell Lee Holley, "'Live as Worthy Citizens': The Πολιτεῦομαι Metaphor in Philippians' (Th.M., Kentucky, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019).

³² *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 1, 3 vols, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Boston, MA: Christian Literature Company, 1885).

³³ My translation. For the original Greek, see *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume I: I Clement. II Clement. Ignatius. Polycarp. Didache*, ed. and trans. Bart Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 366. I owe the finding of the Polycarp references to Benjamin H. Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners: Self as Other in Early Christianity, Aliens and Sojourners* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 1.

³⁴ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Roberts and Donaldson.

³⁵ A few of these, but by no means all, are explored in detail in Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners*.

³⁶ Acts 7:6 'God spoke in these terms, that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others'; Acts 7:29 'Moses fled and became a resident alien in the land of Midian'.

³⁷ Ephesians 2:9 'So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God'.

but *as* a Christian one has no choice about one's consequent alienation from the world. The early Christians longed for the eschaton, when heaven and earth would be united and they would finally reach their true home. This longing implies not being comfortable or happy where they were. Hence exile, i.e. refugee status, is a more accurate and appropriate term than simple migrant status.

Jesus, as the founder of the Church, experienced displacement and thereby set an example to his followers that they understand themselves rightly when they understand themselves as displaced. This is the third reason Jesus was a refugee.

Part Two: Ethical and Political Applications

It is now time to gather these theological insights together in order to make explicit their significance. Jesus' refugeehood points to three dimensions of human existence: the exile of all humanity from the Garden of Eden, the permanent displacement of God's people, and more precisely the heavenly citizenship and earthly refugeehood of the Church. So what? What difference does it make to Christian ethical action to take on board these theological truths?

Self-designation as foreign can be used, and is indeed being used, in political discourse in more than one way. Benjamin Dunning observes that the 'move to construct the self as other, so strongly rooted in the history of the tradition, is alive and well, and continues to be used in the articulation of Christian identity to varying theological, social, and political ends.'³⁸ It is put to work, he observes, in many contemporary theologies, from Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon³⁹ to Jim Wallis,⁴⁰ Scot McKnight,⁴¹ and Miroslav Volf.⁴² The primary use of alien identity by these scholars, Dunning argues, is to distinguish the Christian community from the surrounding culture, so as to set an expectation that Christians do not conform to the norms and values of that culture, having instead their own norms and values. He warns that this usage can sometimes be twisted into a persecution complex or a self-depiction as the underdog even when one has quite a lot of political power. We must therefore be aware of 'the potential for abuses' that self-characterization as alien 'can open up', such as the effect of

rendering a community's practices and attitudes relatively immune from critique—since any critique or questioning (particularly from the outside) only fuels the general plausibility of the narrative that positions the group at the cultural margins. Thus, while by no means an inevitable result, an alien identity stance can offer a rhetorical justification to ignore the need for the critical reassessment of one's own practices and ways of thinking—both individually and institutionally.⁴³

Dunning's analysis of the contemporary use of alien identity is, in fact, predominantly negative, and seems not to bear in mind the wisdom of that ancient Latin saying,

³⁸ Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners*, 109.

³⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989).

⁴⁰ Founder of the 'Sojourners' ministry. See <https://sojo.net/>.

⁴¹ Scot McKnight, *First Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

⁴² Volf, 'Soft Difference'.

⁴³ Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners*, 115.

abusus non tollit usum.⁴⁴ Dunning focuses almost entirely on the potential for abuse of the alien identity trope. At the end of several pages of warnings, he gives one short paragraph to its potential to be used in the more positive way I will propose below. 'An identity rooted in alien status', he writes, 'may lead to a greater concern for (and solidarity with) others who are marginalized.' But he hastily adds that 'this is not always the case.'⁴⁵

Of course it is not always the case. Those who inhabit a confessionally Christian space must not be blind to the possible dangers of taking on alien identity. But neither are we at liberty to dispense with such a core and pervasive biblical identity marker on the basis of its potential dangers. After we have asked 'how can this designation be abused?' it is right to ask next: 'what are the appropriate uses of this designation?'

Most of the rest of this essay will be about the right constructive use of foreign self-designation, but taking Dunning's warning seriously means that we must first identify some possible misapplications of refugee theology before moving on to discuss the correct applications. I note three misapplications in particular.

First, it is not the argument of this essay that we (humans, God's people, Christians) are 'metaphorically' or 'symbolically' refugees in contrast to 'real' refugees that the UNHCR recognizes as such. To adopt that language is to strip theology of its claim to describe ultimate reality and to confer 'real' status only on what can be physically seen and empirically measured. We are not merely refugees in a derivative, symbolic sense, in contrast to 'real' refugees. If the word 'symbol' is used, it must be understood according to the doctrine of pre-eminence, which reverses the order of originality.⁴⁶ For example, biological parenthood 'symbolizes' God's fatherhood and helps us understand that God is our father. But that does not mean that God's fatherhood is only a symbol and biological parenthood is the reality. The opposite is the case. God's fatherhood is infinitely more real and original, and biological fatherhood symbolizes it in the visible world so that we can better understand God's eternal fatherhood. In the same way, physical displacement is less real than the original displacement of all humanity to which the Bible testifies. Today's political refugees are a visible symbol of the refugeehood that we all share in common.

A second possible misapplication goes in the opposite direction. The reversal of ontological priority must not be misunderstood to diminish the trauma of physical displacement. The doctrine of pre-eminence is not meant in any way to make light of the suffering that is distinctive of physically displaced people in the world today, as if its being less original makes it less painful and horrendous for those who experience it. To return to the parallel with the idea of fatherhood: just as we must take biological fatherhood extremely seriously as a factor in people's wellbeing, not remotely diminished in importance by its ontological subordination to 'true' divine fatherhood, so we must take physical displacement seriously as the traumatic and destructive event that it is.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The abuse does not abolish the use.

⁴⁵ Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners*, 115.

⁴⁶ See Silvianna Aspray, 'Pre-Eminent', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. Andrew Louth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁴⁷ We find a similar point in the letter of James, a passage which in no way denies that being spiritually well-fed is infinitely more important than being physically well-fed: 'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill", and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?' (2:15-16 NRSV).

The third and final misapplication would be to romanticize the experience of refugees to the point where their situation is no longer seen as an evil that must be combated and prevented if at all possible. To be 'at home' is a created good that is not available in its fullness in the world's present condition, but that does not prevent it from being our originally intended state and final destination.⁴⁸ If we share in some way the displacement that refugees experience, then what we share is something contrary to God's created design for humanity in the world. The 'dis' in displacement implies a 'placement'—an earthly good—that would be a foreshadowing of our final home when heaven and earth are united forever.

Having attempted to ward off some of the things Jesus' refugeehood does *not* mean, we now turn to what it *does* mean. I shall propose two uses without claiming that these are the only two. First, self-designation of refugeehood has the potential to break down conceptions of otherness and replace them with a recognition of sameness, especially in regard to political refugees and asylum seekers today. Second, it calls into question the very idea of a 'Christian nation'.

Transforming the otherness of refugees into sameness

Nobody who reads the news can have failed to notice the growing hostility towards refugees in the majority of Western nations. This is made embarrassingly explicit in the UK policy of creating a 'hostile environment' for immigrants, but is no less real elsewhere. As Catherine Briddick writes, 'In the 'global north', successive waves of anti-refugee policies have so eroded the institution of asylum that it almost seems lost. ... The EU, and states including Australia, the UK, and US, have all, in different ways and to different extents, adopted regimes that externalize and evade their ethical and legal obligations to refugees.'⁴⁹ Camera footage has revealed that several governments have begun the illegal practice of 'pushbacks'—forcibly turning around boats full of migrants and towing them back to their point of departure.⁵⁰ Although refugees fleeing the Ukraine war have been treated with greater compassion and welcome, this is in many ways the exception that proves the rule.

Why there is so much hostility towards refugees and asylum seekers? What motivates so much anger and resistance towards immigrants? Why are Western nations closing their borders to all these people in desperate need, spending billions of dollars keeping them away from our territories? Where does this opposition come from?

The answer, it seems to me, is this: hostility to strangers comes from people who feel that *their* home, *their* culture, *their* livelihood is under threat. It comes from people who have something to lose—comfort, security, a sense of home where they are. It comes

⁴⁸ Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

⁴⁹ Catherine Briddick, 'Mobility and Sanctuary: How to Revive Asylum in Europe | OHRH', accessed 28 July 2022, <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/mobility-and-sanctuary-how-to-revive-asylum-in-europe/>.

⁵⁰ See *inter alia*: Fergal Keane, 'Pope Condemns Treatment of Migrants in Europe', *BBC News*, 5 December 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59538413>; Channel Rescue [@ChannelRescue], '1/3 Today We Witnessed Border Force Practising Pushbacks. 2 of Our Vols Watched in Horror as Dinghies, Full of Border Force Staff Wearing Life Jackets, Were Forcibly Turned around by Two or Three Jet Skis Using Techniques Such as Circling the Boats and Nudging with the Jet Skis.' <https://t.co/9zKlXmleSm>, Tweet, *Twitter*, 13 September 2021, <https://twitter.com/ChannelRescue/status/1437479294155071494>; Rajeev Syal, 'Union Considers Legal Action over Channel Refugee "Pushbacks"', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2021, sec. UK news, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/nov/14/union-considers-legal-action-over-channel-refugee-pushbacks>.

from people who have turned the created good of home into an idol, an overly-realized eschatological hope. It comes from people who feel that they belong where they are and that therefore other people don't belong there—from those, in other words, who do *not* think of themselves as foreigners and exiles in the world. Furthermore, it comes from people who think of refugees as other than themselves.

Such hostility cannot be undone and turned into welcome as long as refugees are seen as the 'Other'. But reflection on the permanent displacement of God's people in view of their participation in the life of Christ might be what is needed to catalyze a new recognition of refugees, not as Other, but as the Same as ourselves.

Recent discourse on the concept of the 'Other' can be confusing because it stems from two different traditions of thought. One tradition, following the seminal work of Edward Said,⁵¹ is a social theory that treats 'othering' as a morally reprehensible act whereby one excludes someone else from one's interests, concerns, and social group. Summarizing this tradition, Alison Mountz writes: 'to other is to mark, separate, identify, discriminate, exclude or label a person or group as deviant.'⁵² On this reading, there ought to be no 'Other'; hence, Mountz concludes, 'the hope is that those who have been conceptualized as "other" will move to populate the center; that the very concept of "other" will eventually cease to exist.'⁵³ The second tradition follows Emmanuel Lévinas' ground-breaking ethics in a complete reversal of this construal.⁵⁴ Lévinas depicts the Other as the site of the manifestation of the divine and of the most severe ethical imperatives, precisely because they are Other. It is the Otherness of the Other that places an ethical demand on our behavior. On this reading, everyone ought to remain Other and to deny their Otherness is the worst of crimes.

These two opposing positions are mediated in Paul Ricœur's Gifford Lectures, published as *Oneself As Another*.⁵⁵ On the one hand, Ricœur agrees with Lévinas that Otherness must be respected as Other and not squeezed into the mold of the Same. That is to say, we should not project our own desires and interests onto those different from us or force them to behave like us. To recognize the Otherness of the Other enlarges the self's horizon, whereas a closed ontology that absorbs the Other into the self results in violence to the Other and an ever-increasing solipsism of a self *incurvatus in se*, the primary characteristic of sin in the Christian tradition.⁵⁶ But Ricœur also poses some challenges to the ultimate coherence of Lévinas' position. He argues that the very basis for the ethical injunction to respect the Other comes from a prior recognition of Sameness. It is because the Other is a human being, like myself, that they have a right to my respect, even my respect of their Otherness: 'Who is hostage to the Other if not a Same?'⁵⁷ Without an underlying Sameness, not only could there be no basis for an ethical

⁵¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978).

⁵² Alison Mountz, 'The Other', in *Key Concepts in Political Geography*, edited by Carolyn Gallaher et al. (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 269.

⁵³ Mountz, 'The Other', 269.

⁵⁴ See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981).

⁵⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁵⁶ See Matt Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther and Barth on 'Homo Incurvatus in Se'* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

⁵⁷ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 340.

injunction but also no ability to know how the ethical imperative cashes out in practical action. For example, why assume that violence to the Other is against their wishes? Is this not to project our own ideas of how we want to be treated on those whose desires might be completely different? Only by seeing themselves as more fundamentally 'like us' (oneself *as* another in Ricœur's words) are we capable of any meaningful ethical action.⁵⁸

Following this Ricœurian conception, we can see how a recognition of a prior Sameness between ourselves and refugees can be the basis for ethical action towards them, because as Christians we share in the same plight of homelessness. Julia Kristeva again offers a fascinating testimony to this same logic. 'The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners.'⁵⁹ 'The foreigner ... disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities.'⁶⁰ We must have 'the courage to call ourselves disintegrated in order not to integrate foreigners and even less so to hunt them down, but rather to welcome them to that uncanny strangeness, which is as much theirs as it is ours.'⁶¹

A recognition of commonality between Christians and refugees constitutes a critique of all those Christian discourses that depict refugees and immigrants as Other without a prior recognition of Sameness. Consider the following example. 'We have a problem', write Nigel Biggar and James Hoffmeier identically.⁶² What is the problem? For Biggar it is mass immigration, and for Hoffmeier it is illegal immigration. Who is the 'we' who have a problem? For both, it is not Christians but national citizens. No problem *for immigrants* is mentioned or even alluded to by either of them. Perhaps they think immigrants have no problems. Or perhaps they do not care what those problems are. Nor do they speak of a problem for humanity in general, or a problem or challenge for the Church. The 'problem' they have chosen to write extensively about and focus their attention on—the problem they believe worthy of discussion—is not the life-threatening problem that faces the 100 million forcibly migrated people in the world, but the more modest societal problem that these same 100 million people pose to the wealthy Western nations of the UK and the USA respectively. In other words, it is a problem *for* denizens and immigrants are the problem.

This is not the language of those who identify with refugees. It is a language which sees 'them' as fundamentally different to 'us', where 'we' are people at home where we are. Insofar as we think of refugees in terms of 'them' threatening to occupy 'our' space, 'our' home, invade 'our' culture, then we are not thinking of ourselves as

⁵⁸ This position aligns with the complex interaction between otherness and sameness that we find in Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 147: 'To welcome the other is to recognize one who is the same as me. Yet to welcome the other is to be in a place of welcome, to be at home and thus in relationship with others who are more like me than the "stranger" who is welcomed. However, to truly welcome another is to welcome one who is like nobody else, affording them the concrete respect that communicates recognition of their unique particularity'.

⁵⁹ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 192.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 191-92.

⁶² Nigel Biggar, 'Whatever Happened to the Canaanites? Principles of a Christian Ethic of Mass Immigration', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 35, no. 1 (2022): 128; Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 19.

foreigners and exiles in the world. If our reaction to refugees is discomfort, a disruption to our happy lifestyle, then we do not think of ourselves as foreigners and exiles in the world. As Donald Senior puts it, 'the attachment of the Christian experience to the experience of migration, of having left home and familiarity behind, is also used by a variety of New Testament traditions as a critique of false values and false security. Contrary to human wisdom, those who are comfortable in place, fortified with the security of land and possessions and food, are also in danger of delusion about ultimate reality.'⁶³

This way of applying the ontology of displacement to an ethics of welcome has clear precedent in the Bible. 'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien,' commands the Covenant Code; why? 'for you were aliens in the land of Egypt' (Exodus 22:21 NRSV, emphasis added). One chapter later, the same point is repeated for emphasis: 'You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt' (Exodus 23:9 NRSV, emphasis added). The Holiness Code echoes the same sentiment: 'When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God' (Leviticus 19:33-34, emphasis added). Almost all laws in the *Torah* are given without offering any reason or motivation to obey them. After all, it is the point of the law that it be obeyed, and offering motivations and reasons makes it sound more like advice than instruction. But here, uniquely, the law offers a motivation. Why should I have compassion for the displaced? Because I know what it is like, I remember. Of course this law only properly came into effect for a generation of Israelites who had not been in Egypt. Its addressees had no personal, individual memory of being refugees. They are in the same situation as ourselves: hearers of a Word spoken to our ancestors but meant for us, today, as part of our identity. We were strangers in the land of Egypt, therefore *we* must welcome the stranger in recognition of their sameness to ourselves.

Transforming the idea of a 'Christian nation'

The second practical application of the Church self-identifying as displaced that I want to propose is that it makes the idea of a 'Christian nation' confusing at best and misleading at worst. What is a Christian nation? A nation made up of people who self-identify as Christians? A nation governed by Christian principles? A nation with a Christian heritage? In his landmark work, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, John Fea suggests three possible definitions of 'Christian nation'.⁶⁴ If we 'define "Christian" as a body of doctrine', then we can 'examine either the nation's founding documents or the religious beliefs of the founders to see if those beliefs measure up to the standards of Christian orthodoxy.'⁶⁵ If we take a definition on the basis of orthopraxy, we must instead ask: 'did the behavior, practice, and decisions of the founders and the governments that they established conform to the spiritual and moral teachings of Christianity?'⁶⁶ Fea then offers severe qualifications for his own preferred definition:

⁶³ Senior, "'Beloved Aliens and Exiles": New Testament Perspectives on Migration', 27.

⁶⁴ John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Though I am skeptical of the idea that any society on this side of eternity can be truly called Christian, it does seem that a society can reflect, in a limited sense, Christian principles if the vast majority of its members are doing their best, through the power of God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, to live authentic Christian lives.⁶⁷

Although Fea's chosen definition may be attractive, its focus on the private individual living a Christian life avoids the biggest and most controversial question facing Christians in the political arena: what does Christian political action look like? What makes this or that political tenet distinctively Christian? A nation may theoretically contain a majority of citizens who 'live authentic Christian lives', as Fea puts it, and yet still have laws and policies that, by historical accident, are profoundly unchristian.

However, none of these definitions comes close to the way the term 'Christian nation' is most commonly used in political discourse. According to David T. Smith, the prevalent usage of the term comes from 'the perception of a religion as representative of the nation—a fusion of national and religious identity.'⁶⁸ He offers one example: 'in their recent study of American Christian nationalism, Whitehead and Perry (2020) argue that Christian nationalist beliefs fuse multiple markers of traditional American identity (Christianity, whiteness, conservatism) into a single cultural framework.'⁶⁹ Smith concludes that 'the political power of the Christian nation idea comes from being an essential feature of the nation, not just an historical legacy or a description of majority religious identity.'⁷⁰ In other words, those who make political use of the slogan 'Christian nation' do not simply mean to refer to demographics or history, but to a Christianness in the idea of the nation itself. Nevertheless, what is understood by 'Christianness' in regard to national law and government remains up for grabs and can vary dramatically. For example, in the United States, one study found a strong correlation between Americans who understand themselves to belong to a Christian nation and Americans who want to see greater restrictions on immigration.⁷¹ For these Americans, being a 'Christian nation' has all the emphasis on 'nation', with its corollaries of keeping non-nationals out as much as possible.

If Christians are those who do not belong to any nation (following the characterization of the second-century epistle to Diognetus as quoted above), then the notion of a 'Christian nation' explodes into self-contradictions. We are forced to take up Fea's above-quoted skepticism whether 'any society on this side of eternity can be truly called Christian', no longer a cautious reservation but a profound theological truth. There is only one Christian nation and it is in heaven, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁶⁸ David T. Smith, 'No Longer a "Christian Nation": Why Australia's Christian Right Loses Policy Battles Even When It Wins Elections', *Religion, State & Society* 49, no. 3 (2021): 233.

⁶⁹ Smith, 'No Longer a "Christian Nation"', 233. His citation refers to Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷⁰ Smith, 'No Longer a "Christian Nation"', 233.

⁷¹ Jeremy Brooke Straughn and Scott L. Feld, 'America as a "Christian Nation"? Understanding Religious Boundaries of National Identity in the United States', *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2010): 286, 291. Many thanks to Ruth Norris who read an early draft of this article and suggested helpful New Testament resources to supplement the argument.

Yet I can see a way of saving the notion of a 'Christian nation' in the light of a theology of displacement. It involves an imaginative thought-experiment. Suppose that there were a nation in the world formed entirely by refugees from other nations. What would such a nation look like? In some ways, what bonded these refugees together would be stronger than what bonds the citizens of most nations together today. They would be united by a common experience of dislocation and brokenness, where each remembers being torn from a different homeland. But in other ways, none of these refugees would feel any original or historical attachment to their current nationality. Above all, we can be sure of one thing: a nation made up entirely of refugees would be much less likely to turn away other refugees who sought entry. Nor would they merely reluctantly obey an international law coercing them into accepting refugees, making the process as difficult as possible and finding any excuse they can to reject asylum applications. They might, indeed, have border controls and not be prepared to let anyone at all into their territory. But it would be hard to imagine these border controls treating asylum applicants in the dehumanizing way that is now prevalent in Western nations.

This thought-experiment shows how much national attitudes towards refugees might shift if citizens saw their nation in a less ultimate way as their original home, and if they saw themselves and refugees as having in common an underlying homelessness. And at least for democratic nation-states, national attitudes are the well-spring from which national politics flows. If everyone in the West who self-identified as Christian were consequently to see themselves as displaced, we might see dramatic shifts in sentiment towards asylum seekers and a greater willingness to welcome them into their nation.

Conclusion

Jesus was a refugee for three reasons: (1) to recapitulate the displacement of God's people, Israel, of whom he is the final representative and summation; (2) to identify with the displacement of all humanity from the Garden of Eden as symbolized by the exile of Adam and Eve; (3) to lead the Church by example into understanding itself as exiles and strangers in the world, a community made up of those whose true citizenship is in heaven. Through their identification with Christ, Christians self-identify as foreign in a truer sense than any temporal foreigner in an earthly nation. This foreign identity can be used politically in a myriad ways of which I have focused on two: (1) it can transform our perception of refugees, no longer as different from us but as the same; (2) it can transform what the idea of a 'Christian nation' really means, from a problematic fusion of national and religious identity to a nation with the essential characteristic of openness towards temporal refugees seeking entry.

What are the practical implications of what I am saying? Is this a call for open borders? By no means. The modest contribution of this article is to propose a change in attitude and in self-understanding, one that would undoubtedly have wide-reaching implications for immigration policy, but it is not the task of this article to spell out those implications by proposing any concrete immigration policy. This is not the place to shoehorn in an individual political outlook under the pretense that it flows naturally from the theology here outlined. This contribution maps out a direction for Christian foreign policy, but the destination can only be known by those who follow the path it has laid out.