

## **MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE**

**Rupen Das**

*It is rootlessness and not meaninglessness that characterizes the current crisis. There can be no meanings apart from roots.*<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann

One of the dominating realities of our world today is the forced displacement of large numbers of people because of conflicts or natural disasters, and migration for socioeconomic reasons. The slums and poor neighborhoods of the cities are filled with people who have moved from other parts of the country looking for work, and with refugees who have fled crises in their home countries. Out of the top ten countries that play host to the greatest number of refugees in the world, nine of the ten countries are in the Majority World. Conflicts and economic crises are also forcing people out from the Majority World to countries in the Global North. Europe hosts 82.3 million migrants and North America 58.6 million.

Migration has been a reality since the beginning of time. It was the process through which people found places to build homes and communities that could sustain them. It is a phenomenon of human history that permeates the biblical narrative. The movement of people (both forced and voluntary) weaves through biblical history, not as a background to the main narrative, but as fundamental to God's purposes. 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).<sup>2</sup>

Just as He did throughout biblical history, the present global refugee crisis and migration is being used by God for the Great Commission and for renewing His Church. Today Christian immigrants and refugees from Asia, Africa and Latin America are revitalizing the church in the West. Church

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Wright, "An Old Testament Perspective" (Oxford, 2016), 1.

historian Phillip Jenkins writes about the impact of immigrants on traditional Christianity in Europe, UK, and North America.

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.<sup>3</sup>

Forced displacement and migration is also providing unparalleled opportunities to reach people from difficult to access countries with the Gospel. Migrants and refugees who are away from all that is familiar to them, lost and alone in their new locations, seem to be much more open to Jesus Christ than they were in their homes which they had left. 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.<sup>4</sup>

This is a *Kairos* moment in history when the massive displacement of people has made so many of the refugees and migrants yearn for an anchor in the midst of the turmoil and chaos of their lives. They are finding this anchor in the God who says "he will never leave you nor forsake you." (Deut. 31:6) and in a citizenship in the Kingdom of God which can never be stripped from them (Phil. 3:20).

Yet the reality of migration has been widely ignored by theology. Theologian Daniel Groody writes, "Theology, however, is almost never mentioned in major works or at centres of migration studies...Even among theologians the topic of migration is largely undocumented."<sup>5</sup> While there is research and literature on migrant churches, there is considerably less theological exploration on the phenomena of displacement. What is missed in all of this is that migration in the biblical narrative and in the Old Testament teachings on how foreigners (refugees and migrants) should be treated, reveals something fundamental about who God is and His intentions for creation.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 113, 115.

<sup>4</sup> Jenny McGill, *Religious Identity and Cultural Negotiation: Toward a Theology of Christian Identity in Migration* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 204-205.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel G. Groody, *Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees - Monograph 15* (Oxford: Crowther Centre Monographs, 2010).

## The God who Migrates

The biblical narrative of migration is founded on the bedrock that God does not remain distant but moves into the physical reality of human beings. Herbert Lockyer in an old Christian classic *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs* uses the imagery of different coloured threads that God uses to weave through one's life. There is a multi-coloured thread that weaves throughout the fabric of the biblical narrative. It is about a God who leaves the comfort and splendour of His throne to enter into His creation that is now deeply flawed and warped. The Apostle John writes, "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." (Jn 3:13 ESV)<sup>6</sup> This God identifies Himself as *Immanuel*, God who with us.

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann wonders why God would do that. He refers to the Jewish Rabbi Abraham Heschel's concept of the *pathos of God*.<sup>7</sup> This *pathos* is not what he calls "irrational human emotions", but describes a God who is affected by events, human actions and suffering in history. This world is no longer the way He had created and intended it to be. Moltmann writes, "He is affected by them because he is interested in his creation, his people..."<sup>8</sup> This *pathos* is contrasted with the *apatheia* (the absence of suffering or passion/emotions) of the gods that Judaism and early Christianity encountered in the religions of the ancient world, and what many non-Christians today experience with the idols and gods they worship, who somehow do not seem to care what happens to human beings.

God moves into human history because He feels very deeply about the suffering He sees and is moved by compassion. Theologian D. Preman Niles writes that the Greek word translated compassion in the New Testament is *splanchnizomai* and literally means, "to be moved in the inward parts." It connotes a strong physical and emotional reaction, "a gut-wrenching response."<sup>9</sup> God is no longer distant and uncaring. He will now forever be known as the God who dwells among His people. Moses in his dialogue with God pleads, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? *What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?*" (Ex 33:15-16).

## The Importance of Place to Understand Displacement and Migration

The idea of being migrants, pilgrims and strangers is so foundational within Scripture that it is one of the metaphors that define how the people of God should live. Chris Wright states that since Abraham, the notion of sojourning has now become part of our theological, historical and spiritual DNA.<sup>10</sup> 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 worshipers of an eternal King regardless of their ethnicity, race, or nationality. The concept of sojourners and pilgrims was in constant tension with the need to engage with the world

<sup>6</sup> "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." (Jn. 6:51)

<sup>7</sup> Heschel's discussion on the pathos of God is in his book *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

<sup>8</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1974), 270.

<sup>9</sup> D. Preman Niles, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 79. The word *splanchnizomai* only occurs in the Gospels and is only used to describe Jesus' reactions as He relates to people.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, "An Old Testament Perspective," 2.

to demonstrate the reality of the Kingdom of God and its King. Early Church historian Alan Kreider writes, “In the ancient world, when Christians were at their best, they sensed a dynamic interplay between indigenizing and being pilgrims, between affirmation and critique. They lived in the existential tension between being at home and being strangers.”<sup>11</sup>

Displacement was never God’s primary intention. When He created human beings, He placed them in a specific location in time and space where they would enjoy the blessings of His creation and be stewards of what He had created. The opening drama of Genesis presents a theology of place “in the context of a complex, dynamic understanding of creation as ordered by God,” where humanity is placed within, not above, the fabric of creation.<sup>12</sup> All things - plants, creatures and most of all, humans - were created to fit within a dynamic arrangement, so as to foster and increase life. Our world – with all of its physical, social and cultural dimensions - is the context within which God chooses to bless human beings.

However, the reality of their rebellion against God forces them out of their home. 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.”<sup>13</sup> She uses the example of the forced displacements of Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, who by their faith and lifestyle challenged the preconceived notions and worldviews of the kings and the elite to consider 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 identities.”<sup>14</sup> Migration and displacement, especially of God’s people, was also a blessing to the host nations. The prophet Jeremiah encouraged ancient Israel in exile to “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)

To understand displacement and migration in the biblical narrative, it is important to understand the meaning of the land which becomes a home. The theologian Walter Brueggemann explains that physical places have meaning in the biblical narrative. He writes, “land is never simply physical dirt but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience.”<sup>15</sup> Physical land in a specific place with all the familiar sights, sounds, smells, and memories is where people have their sense of belonging. It is this specific land which gives them life as they grow their own food or where they earn their living, where they raise their family, make their home, and set up places to worship and encounter spiritual reality. Brueggemann, looking at the Old Testament narrative through the lens of the land, suggests that the central

<sup>11</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2016), Kindle Location 2885.

<sup>12</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), Kindle Location 296.

<sup>13</sup> McGill, *Religious Identity and Cultural Negotiation*, 199.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann *The Land*, 2.

problem is homelessness (anomie<sup>16</sup>).<sup>17</sup> The New Testament affirms this narrative when the letter to the Hebrews refers to certain Old Testament characters as “being strangers and exiles” and “seeking a homeland” (Heb. 11:13-14 ESV). God then responds to the problem of displacement and the loss of their home by bringing them into an eternal city, a new home, and a new identity in a heavenly country (v.16), a Kingdom which lasts into eternity.

### **Migration and Displacement in the Biblical Narrative**

Migration in the biblical narrative is about enabling human beings, especially God’s people to find a home. In this biblical narrative, if they migrate, it is because they are searching for a place to call home, where they would enjoy the blessings of God and be able to worship Him. If they are forcibly displaced it could be because one of two reasons. Either the sins of the community or nation have so grieved God that He forces them out of their place of blessing, their homes, or because of tyranny and oppression, where the authorities oppose the worship of the living God revealed in Jesus Christ.

This then is the framework within which to understand displacement and migration in the biblical narrative. Through creation, God provided Adam and Eve with a place which became home. The importance of land which becomes home is described by New Testament scholar Gary Burge. “Each of us wants a place that we can call home, a place we may think of as our own, where familiar things are available, where old stories may be retold, where we experience connection with a legacy that stretches out behind us.”<sup>18</sup> This desire for home is a God given quality that is foundational in defining our identity as individuals. We see this in the life of Christ. At the Last Supper “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.” (Jn 13:3) Jesus’ identity lay in the fact that His home and His inheritance were with God. Secure in His identity, he could humble Himself and be a servant.

Adam and Eve’s banishment by God from their home because of rebellion, destroyed their security, their understanding of themselves, and any future they may have dreamed of. Yet in the midst of their forced displacement, God provided clothing for them so that they could cope with the consequences of shame as they became aware of themselves and who they were in a whole new light. Even in their exile from His presence, God never abandoned them but gave them a future and blessed them with children (Gen. 4:1), and enabled them to worship Him (Gen. 4:3-4). Even though the ground was now cursed because of their disobedience, if they worked hard, they would not starve but God would provide food for them.<sup>19</sup> (Gen. 3:17-19) Cain was judged for his jealousy, violence, and the murder he committed, and is forcibly displaced and banished from the area where he had made his home. Knowing that Cain would be vulnerable away from God’s presence (Gen. 4:14), God gave Cain a physical mark so that as he wandered he would be protected

<sup>16</sup> Dictionary.com defines it *anomie* as “a state or condition of individuals or society characterized by a breakdown or absence of social norms and values, as in the case of uprooted people.” Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “social instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values; *also*: personal unrest, alienation, and uncertainty that comes from a lack of purpose or ideals.”

<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann *The Land*, 187.

<sup>18</sup> Gary Burge, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to “Holy Land” Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), ix.

<sup>19</sup> Compare this with God’s punishment of Cain in Gen. 4:12 “When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crop...” See the comments in Footnote 20.

and not harmed. Despite the hideousness of his actions God alleviated his fears and addressed his vulnerability.

After the great flood, the three sons of Noah migrate into the Near East and Asia Minor, Egypt, and parts of Greece establishing the major societies of the then known world. Genesis 10 ends with the statement that “these nations [descendants of Noah’s sons] spread out over the earth after the flood.” They were fulfilling the mandate given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28 “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue<sup>20</sup> it.” However, Genesis 11:2 states that the group that was moving eastward stopped at the plain of Shinar, in present day Iraq. Rather than settling in the land which was watered by the great rivers and building homes and subduing the land to enjoy the blessings of God, in their arrogance they started to build a monument to extol their greatness rather than worship the creator God. So, God forcibly displaced them and caused them to scatter across the world.

The migration of Abraham is a motif for God’s purposes for His people. Abraham encountered the living God in his ancestral home in Ur of the Chaldees and then in Haran. Both Ur and Haran were centres for the worship of the moon god Nannar, and he felt like an alien in the midst of the idolatry and the culture that it spawned, which included human sacrifice. Hebrews 11:8-10 describes the purpose of Abraham’s migration.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

The home he looked forward to was a place where he could build a godly legacy (his inheritance) and where he could worship the God who had called him, because God was in the process of building an eternal dwelling place for him and his descendants.

The story of Hagar is intriguing as she was the victim of Sarah’s manipulation and Abraham’s impatience with God. When Hagar and Ismael were forced out from Abraham’s family and tribe, God sees their desperation and seeks them out and nourishes them and promises them a future.

Jacob does go back to his father’s homeland in Mesopotamia to find a wife. He did not migrate back to his ancestral home and his stay was only for a season before he returns to Canaan. However, Jacob later does migrate to Egypt with his whole family. God uses the migration to deliver them from famine. Scripture is silent as to whether they should have returned to Canaan when the famine was over. What we do know is that they stayed on in Egypt. Initially they were given the choice lands to settle in. But that was not the home that they had been promised, and their experience took a dark turn as they are forced into slavery.

<sup>20</sup> Hebrew word for subdue is *Kavash* (כָּבַשׁ) which means to be brought under control or subdue. The idea being bringing something under control (Micah 7:19). It will require considerable effort. It is similar in meaning to the Hebrew word *Radah*, which means to have dominion over. The word *Radah* is related to other words which mean descend, go down, wander and spread. It literally means to rule by going down and walking among the subjects as an equal. It means not to have dominion as a dictator but through a relationship.

If the motif of Abraham's migration is that of God providing a home for His people, the second dominant motif of migration in the biblical narrative is that of the deliverance of God's people from slavery. The exodus, the wilderness wanderings, and finally the entry into the promised land is symbolic in Christian literature of a person's journey from being enslaved in sin, to redemption, and finally entry into the Kingdom of God. Even as they wandered in the desert homeless because of their disobedience, God provided for their daily physical needs.

The story of Ruth highlights God's concern for those who are migrants and who in the process have lost their homes and inheritance. Naomi was a Jew outside her homeland, who because of the death of her husband and two sons had lost any visible means of support. But God provided her with a faithful companion who is not a Jew, but became her provider and support. Finally, God brought her back to her homeland and provided her with a home and an inheritance through Ruth and Boaz's marriage and children they have.

Centuries later, as pagan worship, idolatry, and social injustice became deeply embedded in Israel, God sent prophets to warn them of impending judgment if they did not return to Him.

- They had betrayed Him and His love for them. They were unfaithful to the covenant they had with God and they worshiped idols. (Hos. 2:1-3, 8-13; Amos 2:7b-8, 10-17; 5:25-27; Ex. 32:1; Mic. 2:1-2; Isa. 5:8-24)
- They were unjust in their dealings and exploited the poor and the minorities in their midst (Amos 2: 6-7a; 5: 7-12; Mic. 6:6-8)

Finally, He does judge them. As they reject Him as God worthy of worship and as King to be obeyed, His verdict is damning. First, the ten tribes of the North Kingdom of Israel are conquered and forcibly displaced in 722 BC. God does not discipline them and return them to the land. Instead they are lost to history. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was conquered in 586 BC and the elite were carried into exile<sup>21</sup> because of idolatry and social injustice. God never abandoned ancient Israel in exile and promised that they would be restored at the right time (Jer. 29: 10-14). He even instructed them on what to do so that He could bless them in exile (Jer. 29: 4-8) thus helping to transform their displacement from a time of apparent hopelessness to a season of refinement and growth. Then God remembers His covenant and return them to the land which He had promised Abraham and his descendants.

Finally, in the New Testament we see a number of instances of forced displacement. Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled Bethlehem and the massacre of the innocents and took refuge in Egypt till it was

<sup>21</sup> The total population of Palestine at this point was probably about a million people with 800,000 in the Northern Kingdom and the remainder in Judah. According to evidence, Sargon II carried off 27,290 persons from Samaria and the Northern Kingdom. It is estimated that Nebuchadnezzar deported only about 10,000 from Judah in 597 B.C., consisting mainly of people of rank and station, blacksmiths and locksmiths, mostly from the cities. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965), 66-67. See also II Ki.24: 14-16. The ones who remained in the land were the poorest, who previously had not owned any property. They were given vineyards and field (even though this was short-lived) to prevent the fields from falling into disuse and provide subsistence for the Babylonian conquerors.<sup>21</sup> J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 291. Richard I. Bradshaw, *Exile*. 1999, accessed January 18, 2013, [http://www.biblestudies.org.uk/article\\_exile.html](http://www.biblestudies.org.uk/article_exile.html). See also cf. II Ki. 25: 11-12 and Jer. 39:10; 52: 15-16.

safe to return to their family home in Nazareth. It fulfilled the prophecy from Hosea 11:1 “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”<sup>22</sup>

In order to ensure the growth of His church, God used persecution to forcibly displace and scatter the followers of Christ from out of Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). As a result of this the church was established in Antioch, Phoenicia and Cyprus (Acts 11:19). Antioch then became one of the great missionary sending churches. The church continued to grow throughout the New Testament period through migration. Examples were Aquila and Priscilla who had moved from Italy to Corinth and then later moved back to Rome, Apollos who had moved from Alexandria to Ephesus, and Epenetus who had been converted in the province of Asia and then moved to Rome, among many other migrations recorded in the Letters of the New Testament.

## Conclusion

Migration and displacement are realities that are woven into the fabric of history and the biblical narrative. They are often the result of corrupt socioeconomic, political and religious systems. When people cry out to the living God, He responds to their immediate needs. But His ultimate concern is for them to find a home in His Eternal Kingdom, a security that lasts for eternity. God’s treatment of His people in the Old Testament is a glimpse of what His Kingdom would be like when it finally arrives in all its fullness. The Prophets paint a picture of this Kingdom where sorrows would cease, pain would be no more, and injustice eliminated (Isa. 65:17-25). Jesus finally announced the arrival of God’s Kingdom. It surprised people because it was so different than what anyone expected. Rather than establishing an earthly kingdom, He declared the reign of God is not limited to only the physical world. The Gospels thus present a world where “sacred space is no longer defined simply in terms [that are physical] ...but wherever Jesus is present with his followers.”<sup>23</sup> The book of Hebrew refers to certain Old Testament characters as “being strangers and exiles” and “seeking a homeland” (Heb. 11: 13-14 ESV). It points to a new understanding of identity and citizenship that is no longer tied to a specific physical location.

Brueggemann writes that “our lives are set between expulsion and anticipation, of losing and expecting, of being uprooted and re-rooted, of being dislocated because of impertinence and being relocated in trust.”<sup>24</sup> The biblical narrative for migration and displacement teaches us one lesson: home is not found in any physical place in the world, but rather in God calling us out into a new consciousness,<sup>25</sup> that of being rooted in an eternal Kingdom. For us the example is Jesus Himself, who knew “that he had come from God and was returning to God.” (Jn 13:3)

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Matt.2:15.

<sup>23</sup> J.K. Riches quoted in Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell*, Kindle Location 2061.

<sup>24</sup> Brueggemann, *The Land*, 15-16.

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**Author:** Rev. Dr. Rupen Das is the Executive Director of the Canadian Bible Society and Research Professor at Tyndale University and Seminary in Toronto.