

Rethinking Refujesus

Biblical Perspectives on a Popular Icon

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Abstract

The claim that ‘Jesus was a refugee’ or that Christians follow a ‘migrant messiah’ has become a shibboleth among those who advocate a more benevolent response to migrants. This manner of identifying Jesus has gained traction in the past decade, even being promoted by politicians and pop stars. In response, ‘Refujesus’ has been criticized by those who view migration as a threat. Proponents on all sides of this debate refer to the ‘escape to Egypt’ (Matt. 2.13–23), but are often more concerned with reading contemporary questions about migration into the text, rather than the text itself. This paper will argue that while describing Jesus as a refugee does have exegetical merit, the New Testament has more to offer ethical responses to migration by offering a fundamental shift in perspective through a migration-informed exegesis.

Keywords

Refujesus, Migration, Refugees, Exegeses, Biblical Theology, Political Theology

Introduction

The identification of Jesus as a refugee, or some category of displaced person, has proven to be both an influential and controversial image in contemporary discourse about migration.¹ The basis of the claim that ‘Jesus was a refugee’ or, to quote Arturo J. Bañuelas,

¹ For example, Dave Smith depicts the holy family as asylum seekers asking, ‘Jesus and His Family Sought Asylum - What Welcome Would They Have Found in Modern Britain?’ Dave Smith, *The Book of Boaz* (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2014).



'Jesus Christ... the migrant messiah'² has thrust the 'escape to Egypt' narrative into the cultural limelight.³ Though the claim that Jesus was a displaced person refers to Matt. 2.13–23, when phrases like 'Jesus was a refugee' are used, it is most often as a rhetorical strategy freighted with ethical implications, rather than an exegetical comment on the text. To describe the escape of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from the horror of Herod's attempted infanticide as a type of forced migration *is* accurate language to describe what happens in the narrative. Yet in popular culture, the Jesus-as-refugee image intends to be ethically prescriptive rather than exegetically descriptive.

To illustrate this point, a brief reception history of how this idea has been used in popular culture will be offered.⁴ Janice Capel Anderson has already shown how early Christian tradition has imaginatively filled Matthew's narrative gap between the holy family's initial flight and return.⁵ Anderson comments that the reception of the refugee Jesus could not be fully covered in her essay and writes, 'I hope to encourage others to explore further.'⁶ First, I intend to take up her challenge by providing, to a limited extent, a *contemporary* reception of the 'escape to Egypt' image in popular music, images, and politics. Secondly, it will be suggested that the debate often represents wrangling over language due to the ethical implications of how something is named. Thirdly, the enduring popularity of Jesus as a refugee within evangelicalism will be presented. Fourthly, a migration-informed exegesis of Matthew's escape narrative will highlight issues that are often neglected; in particular, the holy family's dislocation upon return in Matt. 2.22. Finally, a proposal will be made that a migration-informed exegesis of the New Testament offers a shift in perspective that offers a useful starting point for ethical responses to migration.

² Monsignor Arturo J. Bañuelas, 'Border Spirituality: "Tu Eres Mi Ortro Yo"' (Catholica Immigrant Integration Initiative Conference, Santa Clara School of Law, Center for Migration Studies, March 12, 2019); See also Joshua Jipp, 'The Migrant Messiah and the Boundary Crossing Messianic Community in Luke-Acts', in *Global Migration and Christian Faith: Implications for Identity and Mission*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Vincent E. Bacote (Eugene: Cascade, 2021), 67–83.

³ 'Migrant' and 'migration' are not used pejoratively in this paper, rather it is intended as a general descriptor that encompasses many kinds of human movement. See Hein de Haas et al., *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, Sixth ed. (London: MacMillan International Higher Education, 2020), 25.

⁴ The popularity of the 'refugee Jesus' image means that an exhaustive survey of this image is well beyond the scope of this paper. The examples in this paper are, to the best of my knowledge, representative of major trends in the reception of and use of this image.

⁵ Janice Capel Anderson, 'Jesus Was a Refugee: Reception of Matthew 2:13–23,' in *Anatomies of the Gospels and Beyond*, ed. by Mikeal C. Parsons et al., (Leiden: Brill, 2018) 91–108. A reception history of the flight to Egypt with a focus on its representation in European Art can be found in Martin O'Kane 'The flight into Egypt: Icon of Refuge for the H(a)unted,' in *Borders, Boundaries and the Bible*, ed. by Martin O'Kane (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 15–60.

⁶ Anderson, 'Jesus Was a Refugee,' 92.

Refujesus: A Pop Icon?

Jesus the refugee has become something of a cultural phenomenon. The level of its contemporary cultural currency can be observed in U2's 2017 song 'American Soul'. Irish rocker Bono bemoans the gulf between the reality of contemporary American politics and the dream of a welcoming immigrant nation.⁷ At the climax of the song, he exclaims: 'Let it be unity / Let it be community / For refugees like you and me / A country to receive us / Will you be our sanctuary / Refujesus'.⁸ 'Refujesus', is an obvious play on words, combining the name 'Jesus' with 'refugee'. According to Bono, Jesus should be identified as a forcibly displaced person and, in turn, can be identified with the displaced. Given the use of the first person plural pronouns, the song appears to blur the lines between metaphorical and actual displacement, but the political connotations are obvious.⁹ Prior to the release of this song, the songwriter made the identification of Jesus as a refugee overt in an earlier 2016 video message to the American megachurch Willow Creek, 'Jesus was a displaced person, his family fleeing to Egypt for fear of the life of their first born child. Yep, Jesus was a refugee.'¹⁰

The neologism 'Refujesus' did not originate with U2, but its use by such a mainstream artist provides some evidence of the image's currency within popular culture. Earlier, in 2010, the Australian punk quartet The Decline released an acerbic protest song of the same title, which concludes with the lines, 'There's a fine line between national pride and racist bigotry / You're ignorant if you deny we grew from the same seeds. / Convicts, immigrants, Asylum seekers, refugees. - We're all the same,'¹¹ after these lines follows an audio sample of John Howard's 2001 campaign launch speech: 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.'¹² Both songs by U2 and The Decline are not explicitly religious, but they draw on the image of Jesus as a refugee to stand in contrast to what they view as exclusionary attitudes and immigration policies, particularly by those who claim to be Christian.

The use of 'Refujesus' in these songs carries with it an implied polemic: in the Bible, Jesus and his family are described as needing to flee violence to take refuge in another location. This stands in contrast to those who claim to welcome Jesus in their lives, but would like to see borders closed to refugees and asylum seekers. The Australian comedy

⁷ A sentiment immortalized in Emma Lazarus' famous 1883 sonnet 'The New Colossus,' inscribed on the Statue of Liberty.

⁸ U2, 'American Soul,' in *Songs of Experience* (Universal Music, 2017).

⁹ Elias Leight, 'Hear U2, Kendrick Lamar on Jagged New Song 'American Soul',' *Rolling Stone*, 17 November 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/hear-u2-kendrick-lamar-on-jagged-new-song-american-soul-124887/> (accessed 20 August 2022).

¹⁰ Quoted in 'Bono Nails the Refugee Crisis in this Mini-sermon About Jesus,' *Premier Christianity*, 26 April 2016, <https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/bono-nails-the-refugee-crisis-in-this-mini-sermon-about-jesus/154.article> (accessed 4 June 2022).

¹¹ The Decline, 'Refujesus,' in *I'm Not Gonna Lie To You* (Thousand Islands Records, 2010).

¹² John Howard, 'An Address – Liberal Party,' (Federal Election, Sydney, Australia, 28 October, 2001), <https://speakola.com/political/john-howard-election-campaign-launch-2001> (accessed 30 May 2022).

Show Tonightly with Tom Ballard made this polemic all the more explicit in their own song titled 'Refugesus'. The sketch opens with comedians appearing on stage as a faux Christian pop group that praises Prime Minister Tony Abbot's public expression of Christian faith, then they sing: 'There's nothing more Christian than closing the borders / we love Jesus, Jesus, but not Refugesus / if you want to win votes then you got to stop boats / to do what pleases Jesus deny them all visas / and you can't get more Christian than that... don't cross our border / even if you walk on water.'¹³ The song attempts to satirize politically conservative Christians who claim to identify with Jesus, but would turn away the holy family if they turned up at their own borders. At the core of this political image of the refugee Jesus is an attempt to underscore this alleged hypocrisy.

Contemporary Christian songwriters have also picked up on this theme, bringing the image of Jesus as a refugee into a more worshipful meditation.¹⁴ In their song 'Bethlehem' (a reworking of 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'), Over the Rhine use the image in the context of lament: 'Mary she was just a kid / Jesus was a refugee / A virgin and a vagabond / Yearning to be free / Now in the dark streets shining / Is their last chance of a dream.'¹⁵ The worship group The Common Hymnal have a song simply titled 'Refugee' that opens with the lines: 'My Savior was born a refugee / Was hunted in his own country / From heaven, an unplanned pregnancy / Adopted by his own family.'¹⁶ The video that accompanies the song on YouTube opens with text that encourages Christians to engage their theological imagination:

Imagine if Joseph and Mary were trying to find asylum today in order to give their newly-born a chance to have a life and a future... If refugees were demonised, back then, the way that they are now, they could have been imprisoned inhumanely or deported back to their home country where infant Jesus faced certain death.¹⁷

The language is implicitly political, with the mention of 'trying to find asylum' and 'imprisoned inhumanely or deported back'.¹⁸ This recalls the controversial images of migrants being detained and facing deportation at the US-Mexico border under the Trump administration's 'Migrant Protection Protocols',¹⁹ popularly known as the 'Remain in Mexico'

¹³ Tom Ballard, 'Refugesus,' in *Tonightly Albumblly* (Australian Broadcasting Company, 2018).

¹⁴ There are some exceptions to the political application of the refugee Jesus image. It can also be a more personal metaphor, as in the late songwriter Andrew Dorf relating 'Refugesus' to his personal sense of loneliness. A similar use appears in FTSE's song 'Refugesus,' where the displaced messiah offers condolence in the midst of religious uncertainty.

¹⁵ Over the Rhine, 'Bethlehem,' in *Blood Oranges in the Snow* (Scampering Songs Publishing, 2014).

¹⁶ Common Hymnal, 'Refugee - Live,' in *Common Hymnal* (Common Exchange, 2020)

¹⁷ Common Hymnal, 'Common Hymnal | Refugee | David Brymer, Latifah Alattas,' *Common Hymnal*, 26 July 2019, 0:00 to 0:30, <https://youtu.be/DIIYOxURDQ0> (accessed September 9, 2022).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ On the power of these images in media and their effect on public opinion, see Jack Mills, Raquel Oliveira, and Silvia Gomes, 'Lives in Cages: A Media Analysis of Incarceration Experiences Across Generations on the US-Mexico Border,' in *Incarceration and Generation*, vol II (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 227–272; Jill K. Fleuriot and Mari Castellano, 'Media, Place-Making, and Concept-Metaphors: The US-Mexico Border During the Rise of Donald Trump,' *Media, Culture & Society* 42 (2020): 880–89.

policy.²⁰ No direct reference is made to policy matters (as in *The Decline's* 'Refugesus'). The intent of the song is to arouse greater compassion by those who live in what migration scholars have termed 'receiving societies.'²¹ The Jesus who Christians worship had an experience similar to those seeking protection at national borders. Another worship song, 'Refugee King' by Liz Vice also brings the refugee Jesus into Christian worship: 'Away from the manger they ran for their lives / The crying boy Jesus, a son they must hide... Stay near me LORD Jesus when danger is nigh / And keep us from Herods and all of their lies / I love the LORD Jesus, the Refugee King'.²² The opening lines of each verse are similar to the traditional melody of 'Away in a Manger,' but it makes the holy family's flight from Herod the centre of its message, which is omitted from the hymn. A parallel with Jesus' experience of forced displacement is drawn to contemporary situations of threat with the shift to first person pronouns. Like The Common Hymnal's 'Refugee,' this song works on the Christian imagination, finding solace in Jesus as both refugee and king who is near to those facing troubles.

Portrayals of the flight to Egypt have long been common in the visual arts, but the image of the refugee Jesus has found fresh energy in the wake of mass population upheavals, such as precipitated by the Syrian Civil War in 2011.²³ The refugee Jesus has become popular in modern iconography. Some examples are Kelly Latimore's contemporary icons such as *La Sagrada Familia*, *Our Lady of the Journey*, and *Refugees: The Holy Family*.²⁴ The illustrator and animator Daisy Mojave Holland has produced a similar image, called *Jesus the Refugee*. Here Jesus is a fully grown man, keeping a refugee child above the water.²⁵ Many of these depictions show some similarity to Robert Lentz's 2002 painting *Christ of Maryknoll*.²⁶ Lentz shared his icon was inspired by the plight of Latinx

²⁰ Though the Biden administration initially repealed the Migration Protection Protocols, they were reinstated in December 2021, with modifications as MPP 2.0. For a discussion on the similarities between MPP 1.0 and MPP 2.0, see American Immigration Council, 'The "Migrant Protection Protocols,"' The American Immigration Council, 7 Jan 2022,

https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/the_migrant_protection_protocols_0.pdf (accessed 15 June 2022); See also Homeland Security, 'Migrant Protection Protocols,' Homeland Security, 24 January 2019, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2019/01/24/migrant-protection-protocols>, (accessed 10 June 2019).

²¹ de Haas et al., *The Age of Migration*, 28-30.

²² Liz Vice, 'Refugee King,' Single (Liz Vice Music, 2019).

²³ Anderson, 'Jesus Was a Refugee,' 91-108; O'Kane, 'The Flight into Egypt,' 15-60.

²⁴ Kelly Latimore, *La Sagrada Familia*, Painting, 8x11in., Kelly Latimore Icons, <https://kellylatimoreicons.com/products/la-sagrada-familia> (accessed 9 September 2022); *Our Lady of the Journey*, Painting, 8x11in., Kelly Latimore Icons, <https://kellylatimoreicons.com/en-gb/products/our-lady-of-the-journey> (accessed 9 September 2022); *Refugees: The Holy Family*, Painting, 8x11in., Kelly Latimore Icons, <https://kellylatimoreicons.com/en-gb/products/refugees-the-holy-family> (accessed 9 September 2022).

²⁵ Daisy Mojave Holland, *Jesus the Refugee*, Painting, <https://daisymojaveholland.wordpress.com/easter/> (accessed 9 September 2022).

²⁶ Robert Lentz, *Christ of Maryknoll*, Painting, Trinity Stores, <https://www.trinitystores.com/artwork/christ-maryknoll> (accessed 9 September 2022).

migrants in New Mexico.²⁷ All of these images are widely shared on social media posts to help illustrate the point that Jesus was a refugee or other kind of migrant.

In contrast to the iconography, other visual depictions are more overtly polemic. Political cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz's *Merry Christmas* riffs on John Hood's famous (though now removed) Caltrans road signs warning motorists about migrants crossing the highway; in Alcaraz's image the migrants are festooned with halos, de-anonymising the silhouetted figures of Hood's road sign.²⁸ David Hayward, known by his social media alias 'Naked Pastor,' allows no room for ambiguity in his cartoon *Refugees, Right?* In the cartoon, Mary and Joseph are illustrated en route to Egypt. Joseph says to Mary, 'We're fleeing our homeland to escape persecution, to protect our child, and to find a better life for ourselves, that makes us refugees, right?' To which Mary responds, 'Ya [sic], but don't broadcast it. Some people don't want to identify us as refugees because that would provide biblical evidence that their attitude towards refugees stinks!'²⁹ Hayward lays claim to biblical accuracy over and against those who allegedly ignore that the holy family were refugees.

The image of Jesus as a refugee has been thoroughly subjected to 'memeification,' with many of the traditional images of the flight to Egypt emblazoned with phrases describing Jesus as a refugee or some other category of migrant.³⁰ *La fuite en Égypte* by the French Orientalist Eugène Girardet is particularly popular in this genre.³¹ One of the crucial aspects of these portrayals is that the historical Jesus was a displaced person, which stands in contrast to those who claim to know Jesus, but fail to recognize him in the presence of contemporary migrants. One popular meme that attempts to contrast the 'colonizer Jesus' with the 'historical Jesus' argues that the refugee Jesus is the historically accurate portrayal, rather than the idolized Caucasian Jesus.³² This is a recurring theme in the 'memeified'

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cindy Carcamo, 'With Only One Left, Iconic Yellow Road Sign Showing Running Immigrants Now Borders on the Extinct,' *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-immigrants-running-road-sign-20170614-htmlstory.html> (accessed 27 May 2022).

²⁹ David Hayward, *Refugees, Right?*, Illustration, Naked Pastor, <https://nakedpastor.com/products/copy-of-the-fatal-assumption-we-care> (9 September 2022).

³⁰ The Ipsos Encyclopedia defines 'memeification' as 'the conscious design of meme for delivering information through effective, contagious messages.' See 'Memeification,' *Ipsos Encyclopedia*, 6 June 2016, <https://www.ipsos.com/en/ipsos-encyclopedia-memeification#:~:text=Definition-,Memeification> (accessed 21 Jun 2022). As a neologism, there is some inconsistency in the spelling of this term - Betsy Rymes opts for 'memeificaiton.' For a sociolinguistic analysis of memes, see Betsy Rymes, *How We Talk about Language: Exploring Citizen Sociolinguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 66–97. For an argument in favour of the use of memes as central to contemporary political engagement, see Jonathan Dean, 'Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics,' *Political Studies Review* 17.3 (2019), 255–66.

³¹ Due to the nature of internet memes, it is difficult to find any attributed source for these images and the many variations on the theme; one example can be found @glm86, 'So glad someone made this meme. Jesus was a refugee.' Twitter Post, 24 June 2018. A Google Image search will bring up hundreds of similar images.

³² Again, it is difficult to find a source for this image, but an example can be found @Stop_Trump20, Twitter Post, 8 April 2021.

refugee Jesus: claims that the refugee Jesus is a historical reality that has been conveniently disregarded by many of his followers.³³

The image has also been taken up by politicians on the left of the political spectrum and works well given the platform's 280-character limit. The British MP David Lammy tweeted, 'This Easter I am celebrating with my family, but thinking of those around the world suffering war and persecution who cannot. It's a great shame our government has forgotten that *Jesus was a refugee*.'³⁴ In 2019, former American Democratic presidential hopeful Pete Buttigieg tweeted a similar message at Christmas, 'Today I join millions around the world in celebrating the arrival of divinity on earth, who came into this world not in riches but in poverty, not as a citizen but *as a refugee*. No matter where or how we celebrate, merry Christmas.'³⁵

The politicization of this phrase has raised the ire of some conservative commentators. In response that is highly characteristic of other such criticisms, Bill Muehlenberg says that to call Jesus a refugee is inaccurate.³⁶ The argument cites the 1951 'Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,' focusing on the latter part of the definition, 'is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.'³⁷ The holy family return to the land of Israel in Matt. 2.20. Moreover, at the time of Herod's reign, Egypt was part of the Roman Empire. Therefore, it is argued, that Jesus never crossed a national border and thus cannot be described as a refugee under the UNHCR convention. To the extent which Jesus was a refugee, he could be considered an acceptable migrant who did not cause undue social

³³ This is but a small sampling of the internet memes on this theme; for another reception history of the nativity in social media, see Richard Goode, 'No Room for the 3 "Kings": Refugees, the Nativity and the Social Media,' *Newman Research Centre for the Bible and Its Reception*, 16 Dec 2016, <https://bibleresearchtoday.com/2016/12/16/no-room-for-the-3-kings-refugees-the-nativity-and-the-social-media/> (accessed 15 June 2022).

³⁴ @DavidLammy, Twitter Post, 17 April 2022, emphasis mine. Labour MPs, Jeremy Corbyn and Claudia Webbe, both tweeted a similar message at Easter in 2019: 'One of the greatest moral challenges of our time is the refugee crisis and at Easter we're reminded of the teachings of Jesus, a refugee, whose parents were forced to flee their home. I wish everyone in Britain and across the world a happy Easter', @jeremycorbyn, Twitter Post, 21 April 2019, and 'This Easter we have a moral duty to remember the teachings of Jesus, a refugee, whose parents were forced to flee their home. Today, with 84m refugees worldwide more people than ever are forced to flee war, persecution and violence. Jesus said "Welcome the Strange [sic] Happy Easter" @ClaudiaWebbe, Twitter Post, 17 April 2022

³⁵ @PeteButtigieg, Twitter Post, 25 December 2019, emphasis mine. A year earlier, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez offered a similar Christmas greeting, 'Joy to the World! Merry Christmas everyone - here's to a holiday filled with happiness, family, and love for all people. (Including refugee babies in mangers + their parents.)', @AOC, Twitter Post 25 December 2018.

³⁶ For an almost identical lines of reasoning see Dave Pellowe, 'Jesus Was Not a Refugee,' *The Good Sauce*, 19 December 2018, <https://goodsauce.news/jesus-was-not-a-refugee/> (accessed 5 June 2022).

³⁷ 'As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951, and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.' UN General Assembly, 'Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees,' 28 July 1951, United Nations, Treaty Series, Vol. 189, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3be01b964.html> (accessed 5 June 2022), 154.

disruption, because the holy family went to a location where there was a sizable Jewish Diaspora community and returned home as soon as possible.³⁸

The word 'refugee,' of course, existed prior to the 1951 convention to describe people who have been forcibly displaced.³⁹ It should not come as a surprise that Matthew's story of displacement should find resonance in a world where migration has become one of the most debated topics and that contemporary language would be applied to an ancient story with similar dynamics at play. An Ngram linguistic analysis of the phrase 'Jesus was a refugee' in *Google Books* shows that the phrase first enters the English cultural lexicon only after the Second World War and the introduction of an international legal framework for refugee protection.⁴⁰ As of 15 June 2002, Google's online Ngram viewer also marks an exponential increase in the use of 'Jesus was a refugee' around the time of the US 1980 Refugee Act, and population upheavals during the wars in Iraq and Syria. Correlation is not causation, but what the Ngram does display is an increase in the use of 'refugee' being associated with Jesus as the issue becomes more prevalent in culture.

Jesus Was (Not) A Refugee: Wrangling Over Language

An underlying tension in this partial survey of the image of the refugee Jesus in popular culture is the issue of language. In our current so-called 'age of migration,' there are numerous ways to describes categories of migration and migrants.⁴¹ The inherent difficulties of migration language is described by Emma Haddad (borrowing from Paul Tabori):

The 'impenetrable jungle' of semantics that surrounds the refugee... The domain is further complicated by the abundance of words and labels used in everyday parlance, and in the media in particular, to discuss 'refugees' and associated issues of 'asylum', words that have become so intertwined and conflated that it becomes continually harder to distinguish between them...⁴²

For this reason, organizations like The International Organization for Migration and the European Commission have published migration glossaries to promote accuracy and consistency in the way that migration-related language is used.⁴³ As both of these

³⁸ Pellowe, 'Jesus Was Not a Refugee.'

³⁹ Will Daddario, et al., 'What is Refugee?,' *Performance Philosophy* 4.1 (2018), 206–33.

⁴⁰ Though not exhaustive, Google Books has digitized 40 million books and as such, is a fairly reliable indicator of popular usage of the phrase. On the uses of Ngram analysis, see Anna Zięba, 'Google Books Ngram Viewer in Socio-cultural Research,' *Research in Language*, 16.3 (2018), 357–76; Michael Pettit, 'Historical Time in the Age of Big Data: Cultural Psychology, Historical Change, and the Google Books Ngram Viewer,' *History of Psychology* 19.2 (2016), 141; Nadja Younes and Ulf-Dietrich Reips, 'Guideline for Improving the Reliability of Google Ngram Studies: Evidence from Religious Terms,' *Plos One* 14.3 (2019), 1–17.

⁴¹ de Haas et al., *Age of Migration*, 1–13.

⁴² Emma Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 24; Paul Tabori, *The Anatomy of Exile: A Semantic and Historical Study* (London: Harrap, 1972), 23; Andrew E. Shacknove, 'Who Is a Refugee?,' *Ethics* 95.2 (1985), 276.

⁴³ UN Migration, 'Glossary on Migration,' *International Migration Law*, 2019, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf (accessed 9 September 2022); European Commission, 'Asylum and Migration

documents show, the glossaries are constantly in-flux, responding to new contexts and forms of migration.⁴⁴ The European Commission's glossary makes space for more than one definition under 'refugee.'⁴⁵ For legal purposes, a refugee is a person who matches the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, but the European Commission makes room for 'refugee (de facto),'⁴⁶ which describes a person who fits the description of 'refugee' but lacks legal recognition as such. The use of language in discussions of migration is important in shaping opinion about migration.⁴⁷

The critical responses of aforementioned conservative commentators such as Muehlenberg reflect something of this linguistic wrangling. In one respect, they are correct to point out anachronisms in the use of contemporary migration-related language to ancient migrations. Historically, it is indeed impossible to speak of the holy family seeking asylum in the modern sense of appealing for legal protection under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. However, to then turn to the 1951 Convention to say who *is not* a refugee on the basis of that definition, perpetuates the same anachronism. The issue being debated concerns the ethical implications of how Jesus is identified, not the most accurate historical description of how to describe Jesus' migration in the text.

While it may appear an obvious point, such attempts to stop the definition of refugee being applied to Jesus through appeal to contemporary law, fail to recognize that the word 'refugee' existed prior to and has a broader semantic range than the 1951 legal definition alone. The English 'refugee' is a loan word from the French 'refugier,' which was first used to describe Huguenots who arrived in England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. The French derives from the Latin 'fugere'⁴⁸ and the Classical Greek φυγάς (*phugás*, BDAG). Alison Jeffers puts it succinctly: 'Linguistically refugees are people who flee danger and seek safety elsewhere.'⁴⁹ At a basic semantic level, because the holy family are forced to leave due to targeted violence, this constitutes a forced migration and there is no reason to say that they cannot be considered *de facto* refugees.

Given the political situation during the holy family's escape, with Egypt being under Roman rule, perhaps the closest migration category to describe the situation would be as 'internally displaced people (IDP).' This is not to lessen the horror of the Matthean narrative.

Glossary 2.0: A Tool for Better Comparability,' European Migration Network, January 2012, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2837/79019> (accessed 9 September 2022).

⁴⁴ For example, a climate/environmental refugee is a relatively new category of human movement that sits in tension with the post-war language of the 1951 UN Convention.

⁴⁵ European Commission, 'Asylum and Migration Glossary,' 161–70.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁷ See Alicia Adsera and Mariola Pytlíková, 'The Role of Language in Shaping International Migration,' *The Economic Journal* 125.586 (2015), F49–F81 and Rebecca Hamlin, 'Migrants? Refugees? Terminology Is Contested, Powerful, and Evolving,' Migration Policy Institute, 24 March 2022, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/terminology-migrants-refugees-illegal-undocumented-evolving> (accessed 21 June 2022).

⁴⁸ T. F. Hoad, *Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 395.

⁴⁹ Alison Jeffers, *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: Performing Global Identities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

According to the UNHCR, IDPs are ‘among the most vulnerable in the world’.⁵⁰ Here something of the rhetorical aspect of the debate surrounding the refugee Jesus is highlighted. IDP is a less well-known term and ‘Jesus was an IDP’ or ‘Jesus was a de facto refugee’ lacks the resonance of ‘Jesus was a refugee’ or ‘Refugesus.’

Due to the need to flee violence, Matt. 2.13–23 means that Jesus can be accurately described as a refugee. As a descriptive category, there is little to dispute this. However, what stands at the crux of applying migration-related language to Jesus in popular culture is that the act of describing Jesus as a refugee (or not) has ethical implications. For those that identify Jesus as a refugee, more compassionate responses are required, both personally and politically. In the popular portrayals of Refugesus discussed above, the rhetorical question is posed: how can you worship a refugee if you cannot stand to have them in your midst? For those who try to argue that Jesus was not a refugee, or place him in the category of the good, non-disruptive, migrant who does not stick around and drain resources, Jesus offers no rebuke to protectionism and can use his example in support of such policies.

This dispute highlights what the philosopher Rosi Braidotti has identified as ‘the power of naming.’⁵¹ If Jesus and his family can be described as refugees, even given historical distance, then how they are understood cannot be entirely detached from contemporary perceptions of refugees. As Braidotti continues, naming ‘activates the process of putting into words, that is to say bringing into symbolic representation, that which has been left on the margins of society.’⁵² This is one reason why Refugesus carries so much weight, and attracts such controversy, in contemporary discourse. How something is named contributes to the collective consciousness about how an issue is understood. Stating that Jesus can be accurately described as a refugee as an exegetical descriptor cannot be entirely stripped of its ethical connotations. Describing Jesus as a refugee makes that which is marginal to members of a host society central to how the primary figure in Christian tradition is depicted.

The Refugee Jesus: An Enduring Evangelical Image

The inherent power of naming Jesus in this manner makes sense of why the conservative commentator Lucas Miles has flagged the phrase ‘Jesus was a refugee’ as one of the cons used by liberals to infiltrate the church with sub-Christian ideologies.⁵³ However, contrary

⁵⁰ United Nations High Commission for Refugees United Kingdom, ‘Internally Displaced People,’ *UNHCR UK* <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/internally-displaced-people.html> (accessed 18 June 2022).

⁵¹ Rosi Braidotti, ‘The Power of Naming,’ in *Information Sources in Women’s Studies and Feminism*, ed. by Hope Olsen (Boston: De Gruyter, 2002), 175.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Lucas Miles, *The Christian Left: How Liberal Thought Has Hijacked the Church* (Minnesota: BroadStreet Publishing, 2021), 19. Similar arguments can be found in John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 124 and Bruce Warnock, *Observations on Redemption* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, 2019), 23.

to Miles' suggestion, the phrase has been used consistently by evangelicals in publications about migration. In 2009, in their response to migration reform, the National Association of Evangelicals stated that 'In the New Testament, Joseph and Mary fled with Jesus to escape Herod's anger and became refugees in Egypt.'⁵⁴ This was received without garnering controversy; if anything, current debates about the phrase coincide with a wider societal shift with 'refugee' being conflated with other migration categories.⁵⁵ Craig Keener has identified this shift in the evangelical response to the phrase 'Jesus was a refugee.' In his 1997 commentary on Matthew,⁵⁶ Keener described the 'flight to Egypt' narrative using this language (and continues to in his 2009 commentary).⁵⁷ Keener observed that the phrase 'Jesus was a refugee' could be used without incident in the 1990s but has become increasingly contentious.⁵⁸

It is commonplace in evangelical books about migration to have sections or chapters titled 'Jesus was a refugee.'⁵⁹ The popularity of this description spans the breadth of the evangelical spectrum, not only more socially progressive or liberal voices. For example, even conservative stalwart John Piper has described Jesus as a refugee: 'For Jesus, it was affliction from the beginning. His birth was a scandal. He was threatened and hated by political rulers. *He became a refugee in Egypt.* And he died a criminal. We do not deserve any less affliction because he was perfect.'⁶⁰ Jenny Yang, in a piece published on the theologically conservative evangelical website *The Gospel Coalition* proposes that 'God's incarnate Son was both a downwardly mobile migrant... Every Christian is led by a Middle Eastern refugee who faced the daunting pressures of exclusion and insecurity.'⁶¹ Yang's article attracted a large number of critical reactions on social media. Given the anonymized nature of much social media commentary, how much of that ire reflected the views of *The Gospel Coalition's* core audience, or if it was simply a vocal minority, cannot be established. Still, the article was deemed appropriate enough by the site's editors to be published under their

⁵⁴ 'Immigration,' National Association of Evangelicals, 1 January 2009, <https://www.nae.org/immigration-2009/> (accessed 11 June 2022).

⁵⁵ This is especially true in the UK and the USA. See Tina Askanius and Tobias Linné, 'Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries' (UNHCR: 2015). This is not restricted to Western host nations: see Aseel Zibin, 'A Corpus-based Study of Metaphors Used to Describe Syrian Refugees in Jordanian Politico-economic Discourse: A Critical Metaphor Analysis Approach,' *Pragmatics and Society*, 11.4 (2020): 640–63.

⁵⁶ Craig Keener, *Matthew* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997).

⁵⁷ Craig Keener, *Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 109.

⁵⁸ Craig Keener, 'Jesus Was a Refugee - Matthew 2:13-15,' Bible Background: Research and Commentary from Dr Craig Keener, 25 May 2022, <https://craigkeener.com/jesus-was-a-refugee-matthew-213-15/> (accessed 22 June 2022).

⁵⁹ For example, see M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), Patrick Johnstone & Dean Merrill, *Serving God in a Migrant Crisis* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2018), Stephan Bauman, et al., *Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016).

⁶⁰ @desiringGod, Twitter Post, 28 December 2018. Emphasis mine.

⁶¹ Jenny Yang, 'A Word of Hope for the Refugee,' *The Gospel Coalition*, 23 Dec 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/word-of-hope-refugee/> (accessed 1 Jun 2022).

banner. The point in highlighting these references is that describing Jesus as a refugee was, and remains, a popular image within mainstream evangelicalism.⁶²

Despite the controversy Refugesus can attract, the ethical imperative of 'Jesus was a refugee' possibly has more traction in evangelicalism due to its stress on personal experience of the risen Christ. If a summary can be made, the argument within evangelicalism is that if Christ, who was a refugee, is welcomed in our lives, the believer should continue to model a similar welcome. Matt. 2.13 is regularly coupled with Matt. 25.35.⁶³ When Jesus describes himself as a stranger, this looks both backward and forward. Backward, to the experience of being a child refugee and, forward, to the importance of seeing the face of Jesus in contemporary strangers.

Migration and Matthew's Messiah

Markus Zehnder has criticized this popular hermeneutic, though he agrees with the evangelical consensus that 'refugee' is an accurate exegetical descriptor: 'There is in fact no doubt that Jesus—together with his parents—would qualify as refugees.'⁶⁴ However, he goes on to argue that this is a flimsy basis for forming an ethical response to migration: 'The use of the episode in the current migration debate by proponents of liberal immigration policies, then, is largely a matter of over-interpretation, unwarranted generalization, and eisegesis.'⁶⁵ Zehnder is correct to point out that Matthew's primary point in the escape to Egypt narrative is theological, the fulfilment of Hos. 11.1 and Mosaic parallels, rather than migration.⁶⁶ He also observes that though the initial escape is freighted with ethical significance, the return (Matt. 2.21) is not.

While Zehnder makes a valid criticism of the popular hermeneutic, his subsequent comment that the holy family were not reliant on state benefits appears to reflect a similar eisegesis, albeit in a different political direction. While Matthew clearly has a theological purpose in the 'flight to Egypt' narrative, this does not straitjacket the narrative's potential. The theological point is still made within the context of a story of forced migration that is modelled on a collective experience of migration, the Exodus and exile. This experience, and retelling and remembrance within the community, is foundational to understanding the Israelite legal framework for hospitality to migrants (Exod. 22.21, 23.9, Lev. 19.34, and Deut. 10.19). The biblical witness does not bifurcate the experience of migration from its

⁶² Some other examples of similar statements: Stephen McQuoid wrote in 'Europe on the Move: Refugee Crisis and Migration', eVision, Summer 2018: 'We should not forget that Jesus himself was once a refugee!' See also, Jonatán Soriano 'Forced Displacement is in the Bible, But Few Christians Understand What that Means for How We Treat People', Evangelical Focus Europe, 23 June 2020, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/life-tech/6705/forced-displacement-is-in-the-bible-but-very-few-christians-have-understood-what-that-means-for-how-we-treat-people> (accessed 25 August 2022).

⁶³ For example Johnstone & Dean Merrill, *Serving*, 65.

⁶⁴ Markus Zehnder, *The Bible and Immigration* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2021), 73.

⁶⁵ Zehnder, *The Bible and Immigration*, 75.

⁶⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 36.

embodied theology of migration. Another example of this is the reference to Jer. 31.15 in Matt. 2.18. Jesus' experience theologically recapitulates exile, but the context of migration is crucial to understanding Matthew's message. As John Nolland has argued, '[Matthew] is concerned here to make the claim that the infant Jesus participated in a *version of the Exile...* The recapitulation of the life of the nation in the life of Jesus is in some way, for Matthew, *foundational for Jesus' significance in the purposes of God.*'⁶⁷ The fulfilment of prophecy cannot be untethered from history and collective consequence of the effect of forced mass migration.⁶⁸ The significance of the narrative is diminished if we focus on one at the expense of the other. The narrative shows God as being active and carrying out his purposes in the midst of forced displacements.

Despite concerns I have regarding Zehnder's argument and conclusions,⁶⁹ he highlights an important issue: 'Jesus was a refugee' arguments often fail in presenting a consistent hermeneutic; the exegetical task is left undone, and a leap is made to contemporary migration issues. Proposals made on the basis of identifying Jesus as *something* to form a foundational ethic would fall under the same criticism. For example: Jesus was a foetus, therefore we should advocate against abortion. Jesus was biologically male, therefore we should prioritize care for men. Jesus walked as his primary mode of transportation, therefore it is a Christian obligation to avoid motorized transport. Jesus ate fish, therefore his followers should pursue a strict pescatarian diet. To draw such parallels can easily veer into the ridiculous, even if the cause might be valid. As already argued, identifying Jesus as a refugee has embedded ethical implications via the power of naming, but the New Testament has more to offer ethical thinking on migration. More fundamentally, engaging with the text exegetically offers contemporary readers in host societies an opportunity to engage with questions of migration from another point of view: that is to say, with a migration-informed perspective on the exegetical task. Matt. 2.22–23 is a helpful example here.

⁶⁷ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 123. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁸ On the effect of collective trauma and group identity see Selma Porobić, 'Social Identity Transformations and Social Trauma Nexus', in *Social Trauma – An Interdisciplinary Textbook*, ed. by Andreas Hamburger, Camellia Hancheva, and Vamik D Volkan (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 253–60.

⁶⁹ A review of Zehnder's book is beyond the scope of this essay, but a few comments will hopefully suffice. While Zehnder is correct to criticize the hermeneutics of those promoting what he describes as liberal immigration policies, his own constructive case for protectionist policies suffers from similar hermeneutical issues. Of concern is the use of Acts 17.26, where a direct line is drawn from 'creational order' to maintain hard national borders and ethnic separation. As is well documented, Acts 17.26 provided theological justification for apartheid in South Africa and segregation in the US. This is not to suggest Zehnder supports such policies (he is unequivocal that racism cannot be tolerated), but the problematic use of this passage requires due acknowledgment in this context. Moreover, this verse in the context of Paul's speech is descriptive rather than prescriptive and has the salvation of all people in view. Also, Zehnder relegates prophecy to predictions about future dispensations, rather than recognising the genre's ethical function to its original and contemporary audiences. The reliance on questionable sources (e.g. provocateurs like Andy Ngo and the Gatestone Institute) weakens the appeal for a holistic and unbiased assessment of the costs and benefits of migration. These issues noted and despite my disagreements, I am grateful for Zehnder's critical work and well-identified hermeneutical deficiencies that should encourage more robust biblical theologies of migration in the future.

On many sides of the discussion about Jesus as a refugee, the flight to Egypt narrative is depicted as a one-way refugee flight or a binary of escape and return. Both fail to account for the full complexity of Matthew's narrative. Often, Matt. 2.22 is completely overlooked. In this verse, Matthew shows that an undercurrent of violence and political threat remains in the narrative, despite the holy family's attempt to return. After Joseph is told via divine command to return to Israel (Matt. 2.20), Matthew makes it clear that a threat remains due to Archelaus' reign (Matt. 2.22). The picture in Matthew is not an unhindered return, but one of further displacement upon an attempt to return home.

A migration-informed perspective on the text offers further insight into the dynamics of the narrative. Joseph's dream in Matt. 2.22 comes to him with no specific mention of the agent behind the warning (note the passive participle, $\chi\rho\eta\mu\alpha\tau\iota\sigma\theta\epsilon\iota\ \zeta$), in contrast to Matt. 2.20. Interestingly, the dream comes *after* the information that Joseph hears about Archelaus and the fear it causes. The absence of a divine agent identified in the dream does not negate the possibility of divine involvement in the vision, but the narrative makes space for psychological factors and allows for human agency.⁷⁰ Given Matthew's prophetic trajectory, the eventual destination of Nazareth (Matt 2.23) references Isa. 11.1 and/or 42.6, but this remains set within a story of migration that reflects the reality of such movements.⁷¹ In Matthew's depiction of the holy family's migration, of note is Hein de Haas' 'aspirations-capabilities framework'.⁷² In this model, 'all forms of migration [are] a function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate with given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures.'⁷³ The divine commands to leave Bethlehem (Matt. 2.13) and return (Matt. 2.20) can be understood as a form of religiously motivated migration⁷⁴ within the taxonomy of migration studies. Joseph's aspirations to leave and return are shaped by divine influence, but his capability to return to Bethlehem is obstructed by the regional politics of Archelaus' reign, and Joseph exerts agency as a migrant to move somewhere safer in Israel.⁷⁵

This is not to suggest that Matthew consciously attempted to describe a first century displacement according to contemporary migration studies. Matthew's theological agenda in the narrative is clearly at the forefront. That acknowledged, Matthew's prophetic historiography is set within a context of migration and reflects the dynamics that have been

⁷⁰ E. A. Welsh and A. E. Brodsky, 'After Every Darkness is Light: Resilient Afghan Women Coping with Violence and Immigration', *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 1.3 (2010), 163–74.

⁷¹ See the discussion in Hagner, *Matthew*, 41.

⁷² Hein de Haas, 'A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework', *Comparative Migration Studies* 9.1 (2021), 17.

⁷³ de Haas, 'A Theory of Migration.' 17.

⁷⁴ Croy Anderson, 'Religiously Motivated Migration', *Sociological Quarterly* 57 (2016), 404. For an analysis of religiously, non-rationally driven migration, see also the description of 'missionaries as migrants' in Leo Lucassen and Aniek X Smit, 'The Repugnant Other: Soldiers, Missionaries, and Aid Workers as Organizational Migrants', *Journal of World History* 26.1 (2015), 1–39 and Kari Storstein Haug, 'Migration in Missiological Research', *International Review of Mission* 107.1 (2018), 279–93.

⁷⁵ Josephus' account of the killing of 3000 Jews during Passover (Jos. Ant. 17.218) is an example of Jewish perceptions of the threat posed by Archelaus' rule.

identified in contemporary migration studies.⁷⁶ Matthew's gospel was composed in a world shaped by high levels of migration. Human movement and mobility was accelerated, enabled, and coerced by the Roman Empire, therefore interpreters should not be surprised to find that migration has left an imprint on the text. In the exegetical task, a migratory world forms a significant aspect of the text's *Stiz im Leben*.

A Proposal: Migration-informed Exegesis

I have attempted to argue that to describe Jesus as a refugee, according to Matthew's narrative, is an accurate exegetical descriptor. This manner of naming Jesus does have ethical implications, but this on its own does not provide a foundational ethic for responding to migration. One of the issues is that advocates of the Refugesus image often move too quickly to contemporary applications, when the New Testament has more to offer as a starting point for migration ethics. Of primary importance is Christian self-understanding, shaped by the text, for faithful praxis. This task begins with exegesis. In his seminal work on biblical ethics, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays argued for 'careful descriptive exegesis as the first step in the construction of New Testament ethics,' if it is to be done faithfully.⁷⁷ When considering moral responses to migration, it is important to understand how migration shaped the social world of the New Testament, and by implication, its perspective.

Rome enabled human mobility, in ways hitherto unexperienced in the ancient world, that accelerated both voluntary and forced migrations across the Empire.⁷⁸ The Roman road network stood as a tribute to the reach of the Empire's power. Alain de Lille may have coined the proverb 'Mille viae ducunt homines per saecula Romam'⁷⁹ in AD 1175, but Lien Foubert and David Breeze point out that, taken literally, 'not all roads led to Rome.'⁸⁰ However, they all led to the empire symbolically. The roads enabled Rome's dominance,

⁷⁶ The historicity of Matthew's account is disputed by some scholars. Here I assume the reliability of Matthew's account, but this is not the point of this article nor does the argument stand or fall on this issue. The point is that Matthew describes the holy family's migration in ways that bear resemblance to what migration scholars have observed. Even if the 'escape to Egypt' story is a Matthean innovation, the narrative is still set within a plausible depiction of actual migrations.

⁷⁷ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), 47.

⁷⁸ See the significant recent studies: Luuk de Ligt and Laurens Ernst Tacoma, *Migration and Mobility in the Early Roman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), Elio Lo Cascio et al., 'The Impact of Mobility and Migration in the Roman Empire: Proceedings of the Twelfth Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire (Rome, 17-19 June 2015)' (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Laurens Ernst Tacoma, *Moving Romans: Migration to Rome in the Principate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); James Clackson et al., *Migration, Mobility and Language Contact in and Around the Ancient Mediterranean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁷⁹ Translated 'A thousand roads lead men forever to Rome.'

⁸⁰ Lien Foubert and David Breeze 'Mobility in the Roman Empire', in *Past Mobilities*, ed. by Jim Leary (London: Routledge, 2014), 176.

allowing for effective administration of conquered lands and ease of travel for officials.⁸¹ The Roman roads were not constructed as a charitable act to increase diversity or multiculturalism, but this emerged as a by-product of imperial infrastructure.

Rens Tacoma, combining the insights of bioarchaeology with written sources (such as Suetonius, the *Res Gestae*, and Cassius Dio), suggested that the foreign-born population in Rome could be estimated as somewhere between '20 to 30%'.⁸² Though we might naturally expect such levels of migration to the city of Rome, being at the heart of the Empire, evidence for high levels of migration also exists on Roman frontiers and other urban centres.⁸³ Given that migration was common in the Roman Empire, the first audiences of the New Testament documents were likely to have included migrants and those who experienced the social disruption and transformation in the wake of migration movements within their societies.⁸⁴ When approaching the New Testament texts, the socio-historical situation of a migratory world should influence our understanding of the social world of early Christians.⁸⁵

To return to Hays, this descriptive exegesis allows for what he describes as the 'integrative act of the imagination.'⁸⁶ In the case of migration, the integrative act can require shifting perspective in order to understand the text exegetically. Too often the text is read with the assumptions of a receiving or host society bias, rather than the marginal perspective of the New Testament documents. Some examples outside Matthew can illustrate this point. Stephen's speech in Acts 7 presents a revised migration history of Israel

⁸¹ Raymond Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, trans. by N.H. Field (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 202–209 and Luca De Benedictis et al., 'The Long-term Effects of the Historical Roman Road Network: Trade Costs of Italian Provinces,' (University of Cagliari and Sassari, 2018).

⁸² Quoted in Elio Lo Cascio, 'The Impact of Migration on the Demographic Profile of the City of Rome: A Reassessment,' in *Migration and Mobility in the Early Roman Empire*, ed. by Luuk de Ligt and Laurens E. Tacoma (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 25.

⁸³ For example David J. Breeze, *Bearsden: the Story of a Roman Fort* (Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing, 2016) and David J. Breeze, 'The Antonine Wall: KinneilFortlet (Illus. 7), Rough Castle Fort (Illus 8–9), Bar Hill (Illus. 11–12), Bearsden Bath House (Illus. 13–14),' *Archaeological Journal* 164.1 (2007), 30–39.; Umut Erel, 'Migrating Cultural Capital: Bourdieu in Migration Studies,' *Sociology* 44.4 (2010), 642–60 and Stephany Leach et al., 'Migration and Diversity in Roman Britain: A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Identification of Immigrants in Roman York, England,' in *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 140.3 (2009), 546–61.

⁸⁴ It is worth noting that 'disruption' here is a neutral term, rather than a value judgement. The disruption paradigm acknowledges that both social and individual identity is disturbed when it comes into contact with difference – be that a hardening of identity, assimilation, or hybridity. In any case, the status quo is disrupted and changed. For affluent societies (a category that applies to the Roman Empire) disruption can be gradual or lead to eventual transformation and or assimilation in multiple directions. As Baker and Tsuda observe, 'If the society is resilient... migration may not end up being disruptive in the long term, since the host society may eventually return to the original status quo/equilibrium or a new, transformative status quo may be established over time.' See Brenda J Baker and Takeyuki Tsuda, 'Conclusion: Migration and Disruptions from Prehistory to Present,' in *Migration and Disruptions*, ed. by Hella Eckard (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 13–26.

⁸⁵ To my mind, some fine examples can be found in Jipp, 'The Migrant Messiah,' 67–83; Hays, 'What is the Place of My Rest?', 150–68; and Meiken Antje Buchholz, 'Considerations About the Theological Meaning of Migration in the Book of Acts,' *European Journal of Theology* 30.1 (2021), 87–117.

⁸⁶ Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 298, 310.

where the past and future experience of Diaspora is legitimized.⁸⁷ F. F. Bruce summarized the theological thrust of the speech this way: 'As the Old Israel has its dispersion among the Gentiles, so must the new people of God be dispersed.'⁸⁸

Migration is central to the story that the New Testament writers inherit and take forward into early Christian experience. Given the migratory social context of the Roman world, migration language directed to the church (1 Pet. 1.1, 'to the exiles of the dispersion' and 1 Pet. 2.11 'I urge you as aliens and exiles', NRSV), should not be over-spiritualized or allegorized to the obfuscation of the historical experiences of migrants, in which such language is rooted. Paul also employs migration terminology in Eph. 2.12: 'you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise' (NRSV). The epistle is addressed to geographically disparate Christians,⁸⁹ but identifies them as symbolically gathered in Christ;⁹⁰ given the plausibility of migrants in the early Christian community, the Pauline metaphor takes on additional significance. These few examples, in a migration-informed perspective, show how the exegetical task helps form the Christian theological imagination by causing readers in receiving societies to view questions related to migration from the standpoint of 'those who were scattered' (as in Acts 8.4, NRSV).

As the church meditates upon and allows the text to shift its perspective, even rehearsing the text in our contemporary contexts, we return to the texts with fresh questions. If personal experience can be offered here, my own newfound attentiveness to the presence of migrants in the text started once I read the Bible with Christian refugees.⁹¹ They saw aspects of their experience reflected in the text, which I had failed to notice (despite being a migrant myself, but always with the comfort of that being a voluntary decision). Upon reading Acts 7, the first thing my refugee friends commented on is the way in which Stephen speech is replete with examples of forced migration. As already suggested, in Acts, the speech offers a theological legitimization for the experience of Christian scattering. Taking this forward to their own situations, the refugees could also discern God's presence in the midst of their own displacements. Too often, migration is problematized as a host society 'issue' rather than the presence of human beings who bear

⁸⁷ See Gregory E. Sterling, "'Opening the Scriptures': The Legitimation of the Jewish Diaspora and the Early Christian Mission', in *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke's Narrative Claim Upon Israel's Legacy*, ed. by David P. Moessner (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999).

⁸⁸ Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 163.

⁸⁹ Admittedly, this argument is stronger if the epistle is considered an encyclical (as in Ben Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 256–58. See also Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 78–79.

⁹⁰ I borrow 'scattered but gathered' language from the recent Langham volume. See Sadiri Joy Tira and Tetsunao Yamamori (ed.), *Scattered and Gathered: a Global Compendium of Diaspora Missiology* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2020).

⁹¹ I am grateful for the community at Parkhead Nazarene Church in Glasgow (Scotland) for facilitating these meetings and their consistent hospitality to the whole community.

the *imago Dei*. In the examples above (though not limited to these) the New Testament offers a perspective on migration from, to borrow a phrase from Stephan Scheel and Martina Tazzioli, 'the perspective of mobility'.⁹² Admittedly, this change of perspective does not resolve the challenges posed by migration. However, it does offer Christians in host societies a fundamental shift in perspective from which to approach their responses to migration.

Conclusion

Can we say that Jesus was a refugee? Yes, there is good reason to describe Jesus in this manner. Does this have ethical implications? Yes, even if the phrase does not constitute a foundational ethic on its own. Rather, recognizing Jesus as a refugee helps us to ask different questions of the text, to demarginalize migrants from our readings of the New Testament, and (for those Christians in host societies) to fundamentally shift our perspective as we approach the many challenges and blessings of migration.⁹³

⁹² Stephan Scheel and Martina Tazzioli, 'Who is a Migrant? Abandoning the Nation-state Point of View in the Study of Migration', *Migration Politics* 1.2 (2022), 4.

⁹³ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Tyndale Fellowship Conference in 2022. I am grateful for the critical comments I received from the Tyndale Fellowship New Testament Study Group.