Research Article

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Setting a New Course? A Practical Discussion about Migration and the Bible

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Abstract: That stories of migration are found in the Bible is not a debate, although the meaning to be taken from the presence of such stories is ambiguous. Notably, the writing of recent theologians on migration emphasizes *response* to migration, rather than the *experience* of migration. An analysis of six articles spanning two decades shows three overlapping themes in these writings: the identity of “stranger,” the responsibility of help, and hospitality. These themes are linked especially to a parable (Luke 10:25–37) and to a story of judgment (Matthew 25:31–46). In this article, scholarly interpretations of these themes are brought into conversation with interviews with adolescents who have migrated to Europe. The three themes are explored not in search of a normative biblical response to migrants, but considered in light of the lived religious experiences of adolescents who have migrated.

Keywords: adolescent migrants, lived religion, stranger, guest-peer

It is not a debate that the Bible contains stories of migration. The forced exile of the first humans from the garden in Genesis begins a series of narratives in which the main protagonists migrate repeatedly across borders, in some cases more than once. Moreover, not all of these journeys are linear, involving departure from one location and permanent arrival at another. The meaning to be taken from such biblical stories of migration is not entirely clear. Many of these journeys, and those who take them, are not described in entirely or clearly positive or negative terms. This complexity is true of texts in both testaments, as each migration narrative offers a different perspective on émigrés and immigrants. The result is that there is, at best, an ambiguous relationship between the Bible and migration.

A similar ambiguity is apparent in the experiences of adolescents who have migrated to or within Europe. These journeys are rarely entirely positive or negative. For many adolescent migrants, lived religious practices help them make meaning from their experiences during and after migration. As a practical theologian, my research has focused on the intersection between lived religion, adolescence, and migration, including interviewing adolescents who migrated to Greece (2019), Spain (2020), and Belgium (2021) using interpretive phenomenological analysis. In total, there were 60 participants in the study, in the age range from 15 to 20 years. In what follows, the perspectives of these adolescent migrants regarding their experience and religious practices are brought into conversation with three key theological themes related to the Bible and migration. Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the identity of the adolescents whose voices are highlighted. The role of religion in the process of migration adds a practical dimension to our understanding of migration concerns in the Bible.

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A number of recent theological projects have highlighted the significance of migration within the Bible. In 2003, Christine Pohl penned a fairly comprehensive overview of themes of migration in the Bible.¹ One of these themes is the identity of ancient Hebrews as wanderers or “strangers.” A second concerns the imperative to help or care for strangers, relying for its motivation on the experience of the ancient Hebrews as strangers themselves (Leviticus 19:17 and 34, 25:23; Deuteronomy 26:5–15).² A third suggests that hospitality, since it is a “central motif in the New Testament,” is a normative response to migration.³

These themes have been repeatedly revisited by theologians writing on migration over the subsequent two decades. Given this, it seems fitting to compare the treatment of these themes by different theologians. The six articles selected for consideration here make particularly prominent use of the Bible in dealing with the topic of migration, and thus provide a useful window into recent trends in this regard.⁴ The authors also represent a number of different contexts and disciplines within theology.⁵ Thus Pohl, an American professor of Christian ethics, focuses on hospitality and mission,⁶ while Nico Botha is concerned with migration into South Africa through the lens of missiology.⁷ The focus on Old Testament social ethics for American biblical scholar M. Daniel Carroll R. brings to the fore a biblical perspective on migration in mission, specifically the call on the people of God to share material “blessings” and spiritual truth with others.⁸ Immigration from Latin America into the United States is similarly the starting point for Claudio Carvalhaes, who however takes a liturgical perspective,⁹ while theologian Jorge Castillo Guerra studies Latin American migration to western Europe.¹⁰ Finally, the Australian missiologist Ross Langmead writes about welcoming refugees as *xenos* – strangers, guests, and hosts.¹¹

A thematic review was conducted using NVivo software, with one article from each of these scholars coded for content, then queried for use of similar word patterns. This process identified three themes that overlapped among these six articles: the identity of “stranger,” the responsibility of help, and hospitality. In what follows, these articles’ treatment of these themes will be explored in conversation with Luke 10:25–37 and Matthew 25:31–46, then brought into conversation with the comments of adolescent migrants.

1 A familiar *xenos*

This section explores the use of the term “stranger,” as it is used or problematized in these articles to refer to immigrants, as well as the broader concept of *xenos*, the meaning of which relies on context. Each of these six theologians addresses the treatment of migrants as the “stranger,” anchoring their discussion in stories from one or both testaments. Langmead’s framework, which identifies a three-part use of *xenos*, guides the analysis of these discussions.

¹ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration.”

² Ibid., 5–7.

³ Ibid., 7–8.

⁴ All of these authors have written other works on migration. The articles were chosen from a field of 80 on several criteria. On a practical level, they are peer-reviewed articles published after 2000 – books and book chapters were excluded. Each article discusses these three themes discussed in Pohl’s article. Most importantly, each one elaborates their perspective based on passages from the Bible, not simply just referring to a verse.

⁵ These are all Western or Euro-centric contexts, which is perhaps the reason for the presence of certain themes, along with particular underlying power assumptions. These assumptions are problematized below; however, a full decolonial treatment is not within the scope of this article.

⁶ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 1.

⁷ Botha, “A Theological Perspective on Migrants and Migration Focusing on the Southern African Development Community (SADC),” 108.

⁸ Carroll, “Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission,” 16–7.

⁹ Carvalhaes, “We Are All Immigrants! Imago Dei, Citizenship, and The Im/Possibility of Hospitality.”

¹⁰ Castillo Guerra, “From the Faith and Life of a Migrant to a Theology of Migration and Intercultural Convivencia.”

¹¹ Langmead, “Refugees as Guests and Hosts.”

1.1 Theological treatments of *xenos* and migrants

In contemporary usage, “stranger” is typically applied to the newcomer, the interloper, or the Other, in contrast to the identity of the receiver or host. Indeed, in current English usage the term suggests more than simply “an unknown person” – it carries the connotation of danger. However, here in this article, “stranger” indicates someone who is external to oneself: someone unknown, or someone from another place. Each of these authors uses the term to communicate meanings gleaned from the biblical texts. Thus, Pohl grounds her discussion in the Old Testament identification of the people of God as “strangers,”¹² suggesting that this is not only a remembered and reenacted identity but was an actual identity as long as the Hebrew people lived as “guests in God’s land.”¹³ That is, the relationship between the people and God is framed not only in an experience of rescue in the past, but as an ongoing relationship between host and guest. This is a decidedly community identity, which demands constant realignment; however, Pohl’s emphasis is on the way that the people of God use their own experience as strangers to guide their subsequent interactions with (other) strangers. Carvalhaes, in turn, reminds us that “it was God who set Abram and Sarai on a migrant’s path” and it is also God who reminded the people of God to care for the stranger among them because of their own history.¹⁴ Carroll’s article focuses on Genesis, treating outsider identity as an individual rather than community identity and arguing that God “does not choose a nation” but the man Abram, whose family then becomes a nation.¹⁵ The identity “stranger” may rightly be applied both to individuals and to a community.

Botha suggests identifying the early church as “*paroikia* [sic] or strangers ... in the letters of Peter.”¹⁶ Here, the experience of being sojourners (*paroikos*) or strangers (*xenos*) is taken in a metaphorical sense: rather than a literal relocation, Botha considers the early church to be composed of apocalyptic sojourners or strangers whose real citizenship is in heaven. This understanding of the spiritual experience as a metaphorical journey has a long history within Christian tradition.

Castillo Guerra begins with the actual border crossings of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels, focusing on the “migrant” as emigrant, immigrant, and migrant. These identities are tied to both physical events – leaving and entering a land – and to “symbolic territories,”¹⁷ as Castillo Guerra recognizes both the literal, physical relocation, and an existential one. Literal and metaphorical border-crossing is also centered by Carvalhaes, who boldly proposes that “we are all immigrants.”¹⁸ The image of the-human-as-immigrant is grounded in humanity’s creation and subsequent dispersion across the world. Suggesting that self-identification as a stranger helps to orient the community toward God and each other, Carvalhaes echoes Pohl’s explanation of stranger in the Old Testament, but applies humanity’s shared history as immigrants to the present-day church. Complementing this broader understanding through a discussion of the term “stranger,” Ross Langmead notes that *xenos* can mean “stranger” but can also mean “guest” or “host.” The difference between whether the other is understood as stranger or guest lies not with the other but with our own response.¹⁹

Such a range of interpretations underscores the complexity inherent to the concept of the “stranger.” For some, the label is an individual one. For others, it is a community identity. Rather than considering these as exclusive notions, the individual and the community understanding are both possible. Thus, Langmead offers the ambiguity of the word *xenos* when it is devoid of context as a way of nuancing the

¹² Actually Christine Pohl uses the word “aliens” but today that word has a negative connotation which was not intended in the original. For this reason and the purpose of consistency, “aliens” has been changed to “strangers.”

¹³ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 6.

¹⁴ Carvalhaes, “We Are All Immigrants! Imago Dei, Citizenship, and The Im/Possibility of Hospitality,” 7.

¹⁵ Carroll, “Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission,” 16.

¹⁶ Botha, “A Theological Perspective on Migrants and Migration Focusing on the Southern African Development Community (SADC),” 111–2.

¹⁷ Castillo Guerra, “From the Faith and Life of a Migrant to a Theology of Migration and Intercultural Convivencia,” 113.

¹⁸ Carvalhaes, “We Are All Immigrants! Imago Dei, Citizenship, and The Im/Possibility of Hospitality,” 4–5, 9–10.

¹⁹ Langmead, “Refugees as Guests and Hosts,” 176.

conversation about migration: just as context imbues the word *xenos* with meaning, context can clarify or assign meaning to migrants as strangers or guests.

In Europe, where secularization of public spaces has made religious identity a private matter, young adolescent migrants revealed that their religious identities tend to draw the label of stranger, rather than guest. This became evident in some responses to the interview question about their own religious practice. In Spain, two adolescents in two separate interviews gave similar answers, each without hesitation. Marcos, 18, said “I can’t forget my God;” Iker, 15, stated “I don’t forget my God.” In their own way, both elaborated how their own remembering of God stood in contrast to their perceptions of their host community. Many other participants similarly explained that, when they were treated as a stranger, it was as an individual and as a (suspected) member of a religious community.

At the same time, those who are settled may equally be strangers to those newly arrived. In the words of Mark, a 15-year old living in Greece: “I don’t know why they look at me like this [*makes skeptical, wary face*]. I don’t know if that’s the religion or he don’t believe in God, I don’t know why.” Based on his interactions with the persons he had encountered, this youth thought that normative response to migrants by the community’s Christians might be rejection. Some adolescents who migrate become involved in these reciprocal rejections: their interactions lead them to conclude that to be a newcomer is automatically to be rejected – and the newcomers, in turn, reject the community where they are trying to settle.

1.2 The “host”

From this we turn to the interpretation of *xenos* as host. As Langmead observes, whether a person is stranger or guest depends on the one who presumes the role of “host.” Identifying the stranger as someone else keeps the experience of being a stranger a theoretical one; being a stranger means that one cannot also act as host.

This presumption is evident in the literature: the Christian community is largely understood to take the role of host. Although the word “host” does not even appear in two of the articles, the Christian community is persistently and presumptively identified as receivers of the carefully defined “stranger.” Of the 33 times “host” is used explicitly (in the remaining four articles), 19 refer to the Christian host community, 6 times to God or Jesus as host, 5 times to the stranger or migrant as host, and the remaining 3 to the host as a general concept. The Christian community thus dominates the role of host. Perhaps this is, in part, due to four of the six theologians being from Western, Christian cultures and taking a Christian perspective as a starting point. Practically speaking, one duty of the host is to judge the other/stranger/guest as either welcome or unwelcome. This judgment can be communicated in nonverbal ways, as Mark described of his experiences in Greece.

However, when a community explicitly acknowledges the other/stranger/guest as *also* a potential host, this may forestall judgment and leave space for relationships to develop. God reminded the people to care for the stranger among them because of their own history.²⁰ That is, the people of God were called to remember their own experience as migrants – as a group – for the purposes of community inclusion and the care of outsiders. This remembered migrant experience was a call to offer not only welcome but also legal protection and social provisions.²¹ When the role of the people of God as guests in God’s land is made central, it is God who takes up the role of host.²² The people of God thus take the role of fellow “guest,” and extend the welcome they themselves received.

²⁰ See Carvalhaes, “We Are All Immigrants! Imago Dei, Citizenship, and The Im/Possibility of Hospitality,” 7. See also: Leviticus 19:33–4; 25:23, 35; Deuteronomy 10:18–19; 24:17–8.

²¹ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 6. See also: Leviticus 19:33–4; 25:23, 35; Deuteronomy 10:18–19; 24:17–8.

²² Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 6.

This concept is furthered by the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), in which the capacity to care for the needs of another is determined not by citizenship, but by willingness. In its original context this assertion was surprising, if not offensive. In the parable in Luke 10 there is no inequitable host–guest relationship: the focus is on “neighbor” – a peer relationship – and its accompanying obligations. Notably, the two who pass by the wounded man see him, yet choose not to act. Similarly, Matthew 25:31–46 concerns seeing and helping others in need. In that passage, those who fail to act argue that they did not act because they did not recognize Jesus in (the need of) the other person. In the Matthew 25 passage, aid is withheld when seeing a person does not provoke a recognition of the image of God in that person. In the Luke passage, the victim of violence is also seen, but not recognized, by the two who pass by. When aid is rendered in either passage, human dignity is affirmed by seeing others *and* offering appropriate care – acting as a neighbor, a fellow guest, a peer.

Among the Christian organizations and churches that assist newcomers in the communities I visited, there is a strong commitment to begin with tangible needs: food, clothing, shelter, language, skill training, and job training. In these spaces, it is possible for deep, meaningful relationships to grow. For Selena, 16, in Greece, a particular Christian worker was often invited to her home, becoming an honorary “auntie.” In Spain, Marcos, 18, found meaningful relationships at a church that included other migrants. In Belgium, Sebastian, 16, an important coaching relationship developed with a youth worker at church. For these adolescents, the need for deep relationships was as tangible as the need for shelter. This calls Christian communities to reflect with care on their role. Based on the biblical passages noted above and the comments of the adolescent migrants, it might be beneficial for Christians to begin from the mindset of “neighbor”: a guest-peer, rather than “host.”

1.3 Pushing the boundaries

Usually the role of host is automatically attributed to the one who owns or inhabits the space of interaction. Pohl, however, draws attention to the fact that the Old Testament depicts the land as belonging to God; God’s people are therefore also guests in the land. Centering God’s ultimate ownership provided the basis for an understanding of God’s people as strangers, which in turn helped them to identify more closely with other marginalized persons, including migrants. In contemporary contexts this may be applied even more broadly, in terms of all of creation belonging to God. Land ownership, according to Carvalhaes, provokes a temptation to “a totalizing entitlement to everything: land, resources and the people.”²³ When ownership becomes about accruing resources, it can supplant one’s identification as neighbor, peer, or fellow guest. When God is considered the owner, however, people are always God’s guests in creation.

The remembered and re-enacted identity of God’s people as strangers and guests helped form a profound community identity. By the first century, however, a reminder of the people’s identity as guests in God’s land was needed. One such reminder is embedded in the parable of the wicked tenants, which appears in the three synoptic gospels (Matt 21:33–46//Mark 12:1–12//Luke 20:9–19). While not typically understood as a parable about migration, it highlights that the landowner is God and that the tenants are only present as guests. It is a negative example, but for present purposes, it is significant that the role of host is retained by God. All human actors are in the role of guests and invited to act in specific roles. By underscoring the role of the people in the land as guests, God reserves the role of host to Godself.

This is not to negate cases in which the Bible does uphold boundaries within or between the roles of host and guest. Although it gave certain legal protections to strangers, Israelite law did not extend to every social or political situation: “those who came to Israel without leaving behind their sociopolitical connections and their foreign religious identity were excluded from its social and religious life.”²⁴ Those who

²³ Carvalhaes, “We Are All Immigrants! Imago Dei, Citizenship, and The Im/Possibility of Hospitality,” 6.

²⁴ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 6.

maintained a different religious identity were separated (see Exodus 34:10–16; Deuteronomy 7:1–6; Joshua 24:14–20). It is clear that there is not a single, exact “biblical” response to a newcomer. The treatment of the stranger was based on several components, among them were the history of the people of God (Leviticus 19:33–34); as a duty to God (Deuteronomy 10:17–19); and the willingness of the stranger to adapt (Exodus 34:10–16).

In the same way that a response to a newcomer comes out of multiple roles, being a newcomer includes several roles. Those who move are “not only emigrants (who left) and immigrants (who entered) but also migrants (who have to negotiate various borders in society).”²⁵ Rather than deny these differences, Castillo Guerra suggests that these experiences enrich a migrant understanding of God. The differing experiences of the one who left, the one who entered, and the one trying to navigate in a new society all reside within in one person. Applying this more complex framework to understanding the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus’s identification of the neighbor with someone who is normally considered “a stranger, an outsider, a heretic from a despised people” invites us to understand the other in a new way, liberated “from religious, cultural, or nationalistic prejudice.”²⁶ Rather than interpret the parable through familiar stereotypes, we can be challenged that each character bears the image of God – even those we may dislike. What is more, each one is responsible (at least according to Matthew 25:31–46) to act in response to the image of God in other humans.

Like the traveler in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who understood the danger of having no support system after a traumatic event, migrants bring new perspectives to practices of spirituality. In Greece, adolescents contrasted their new local churches with their previous churches, emphasizing lived practice rather than abstract learning: “In [previous location] I was more talking about things happening, but I’d never seen it before ... here I realize why I have this faith. It’s not just feeling like it’s true, I really see it’s true” (Libby, 18). In the terms of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), this is the difference between identifying as a religious person and responding with mercy to the image of God in another person.

Adolescent migrants also identify depth of religious teaching as significant. Ashley, 17, grew up in a place where the church was not permitted openly. Her Christian community would gather for music, but this was not satisfying; in contrast, she felt more deeply connected to her church in Greece, where “there were people who were supporting me to grow up in Christianity, to grow up mentally.” These adolescents are looking to the church to provide intellectual satisfaction, emotional support, a group identity, and examples of lived practice. This may be helpful for those deciding whether to put more resources into a sound system, or more resources into equipping and training teachers and mentors.

Different approaches to time were also noted by the adolescent migrants I interviewed. Discussing his church in Spain, Marcos explained that in Europe even in church “everything is about time ... So Africa mentality is different from here, even though it is the same God.” Without declaring one treatment of time better or normative, Marcos makes clear that churches both worship the same Christian God. This offers an opportunity to re-consider worship practices or read the Bible through a lens that prioritizes time differently than our own cultural preference. This may, in turn, offer spiritual insights and depth that would otherwise be overlooked. By way of example, it is possible to reappraise the Good Samaritan based on punctuality. Perhaps the two who saw the wounded man and passed by chose not to be late. Yet the third person, who did stop to help, considered it the best use of time. Offering emergency assistance to someone comes at a personal cost. In this story, it took more than a day for the Samaritan to render aid. Similarly, the story of judgment in Matthew 25 also has a time component within the story. The time for demonstrating mercy is during life, it is something that is necessary to repeat, and to do so in a variety of ways. In both passages, those who acted rightly treated the other as a guest-peer by giving away not only their resources, but also their time.

This brings us back to the term *xenos*, and the fact that whether one is received as guest or as stranger depends on context. Just as the attitude of the host determines their reception of the newcomer, the

²⁵ Castillo Guerra, “From the Faith and Life of a Migrant to a Theology of Migration and Intercultural Convivencia,” 113.

²⁶ Ibid., 121.

newcomer may also choose to act as guest, or may choose to remain as stranger. In Old Testament law, full participation in the community required an intentional choice. Mark, the adolescent migrant in Greece, chooses for the time being to remain as stranger, having being treated as stranger – having concluded that this is “not important because we know we will get out of [Greece]. We will not stay here.” His solution to rejection is to distance himself emotionally and physically from the place of rejection. Although the local community provided material aid, there was not an openness by the local [Christian] community to equitable relationships. Ashley and Libby, by contrast, did not mention material aid, but described being welcomed as guests to the point that they felt themselves to be peers. Youth who have migrated teach us that it is not only important to be treated as guest-peer, but that this can influence whether someone responds by taking up the role of guest or the role of stranger.

2 God help us!

Much theological reflection on migration is “motivated to generate evaluative criteria to foster political and social sensitivity to the vulnerability of migrants,” in order to highlight the importance of receiving newcomers as welcome guests.²⁷ In such efforts, the temptation is to focus only on biblical narratives of migration which are somehow favorable toward migrants. Pohl resists this when she notes the boundaries and limitations placed on migrants in Israelite law.²⁸ More recently, HyeRan Kim-Cragg has brought together the interpretations of Judith Butler and Jean-Pierre Ruiz on Ezekiel to conclude that one purpose of the prophet’s actions was to highlight “the precariousness of migrant lives.”²⁹ This includes the fact that migration almost always entails loss.³⁰ This may be particularly the case for adolescents. Recognition of this precarity is helpfully provocative for theology.³¹

2.1 Responsibility for help in the Bible

The move from recognition to action is an important next step. But what constitutes help? Often the term “help” is understood to mean basic material aid – food, shelter, clothing. This is the example we have in Luke 10:25–34, where the Samaritan provides for the immediate physical needs of the victim of violence. Sometimes help may include ongoing support, as the Samaritan offers in Luke 10:35. However, as we saw in Section 1.2, when adolescent migrants were asked about help they received, they told stories about relationships, rather than focusing on material aid. In this article, therefore, “help” includes any combination of these various types of assistance.

The focus in this section is on the question of with whom the responsibility for help lies. In his analysis of Genesis, Carroll observes that migrants lack the familial support system available to those who have lived in one community for generations.³² When challenges are encountered, newcomers thus typically have a much more limited local support system. Two young immigrants in Spain, Bisat and Hadja, both 17, explained to me who they could turn to for help as unaccompanied minors. Bisat explained that he would call the director of a local non-profit, “maybe she’ll ask the other boys in [city name]. She calls him [points to Hadja] and he can help me.” This informal social network, established through a formal aid network, may feel family-like, but it is also limited. Not having family nearby is, according to Hadja, an “enormous

²⁷ Ibid., 109.

²⁸ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 5–7.

²⁹ Kim-Cragg, “A Postcolonial Portrait of Migrants as Vulnerable and Resistant,” 1–14, 9–10.

³⁰ Ibid., 9–10.

³¹ Admirand, “The Ethics of Displacement and Migration in the Abrahamic Faiths,” 671–87.

³² Carroll, “Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission,” 20.

problem,” Hadja explained: “I ... we... all the foreigners have this problem: the family before our move and the family when you move.” Each of these boys came from large, extended families, on which they had relied for many forms of support prior to migrating. In Spain, this support network was completely missing. These missing family networks were mentioned by both adolescents who were unaccompanied and by those who moved with their parents. It was an unanticipated loss due to migration.

Clearly, it is not only those in the ancient world who rely on a system of relationships for support. Even in individualistic western societies with formalized helping services, human networks can make the difference between surviving and thriving. There were several strategies to address this gap. Among refugees from Syria in Greece, a messaging app was used to communicate where to find help for things like food and washing. Among young migrants to Spain, informal offers of help and support were as essential as formal aid organizations in finding accommodation and work. People who had been strangers before migrating but had travelled together formed tight bonds.

These combinations of formal and informal systems were not without tension – in some ways not unlike the experience of Abram in Genesis 20. There, the tension comes when Abram and Sarai cross into Egypt during a famine, Sarai’s beauty presents a potential difficulty in finding help for those under Abram’s care and protection.³³ Carroll understands this as demonstrating the responsibility to help family members,³⁴ which can come into conflict with those attempting to control a territorial border. This is but one example of tension between someone who needs support and a formal migration system.

There is no indication that such tensions will disappear, either within Christian communities or in the wider societies of which they are a part. Today’s immigration policies bring to the fore a tension between formal and informal networks, as pointed out by Pohl,³⁵ Carroll,³⁶ Langmead,³⁷ and Carvalhaes.³⁸ This tension seems to put at odds responsibility and hospitality. Nevertheless, in his teachings, Jesus expanded on the imperative to offer help in the Israelite law.

2.2 Help is (in)tense

The language of “help” or “helping” in theological discussions of migration most often refers to the ways in which biblical texts or theological standpoints can be used to bolster material support from local congregations for the stranger/guest/other, embodied as migrant person.³⁹ “Help,” limited to the meeting of practical physical needs, it is argued was treated as a personal duty in antiquity. Travelers, though they were strangers, could expect to be “received into a family, and their short-lived needs were met out of the family’s resources.”⁴⁰ While the practice of taking in strangers from the town square has largely been abandoned, some adolescents reported experiencing exactly this.

According to Mark, 15, the practice of approaching a stranger to make certain that they have food and know their way around was still common before having to leave his Kurdish village. In a specific example, Cheikh, a 17-year old immigrant from Senegal, explained, “in moments of struggle you sometimes cross paths with good empathetic people who are ready to help.” Cheikh went on to tell of one person “who, upon

³³ Ibid., 12–4.

³⁴ Ibid., 13–4.

³⁵ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 4.

³⁶ Carroll, “Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission,” 18, 23–4.

³⁷ Langmead, “Refugees as Guests and Hosts,” 173.

³⁸ Carvalhaes, “We Are All Immigrants! Imago Dei, Citizenship, and The Im/Possibility of Hospitality,” 12–3.

³⁹ Using an NVivo word query, in 105 occurrences of synonyms of the word “help,” 43 were used in connection with the idea of migration helping readers understand the text of the Bible or, more commonly, with the Bible helping current Christians better understand the plight of migrants. Additionally, one occurrence stated that migration in the Bible helps migrants to see God and ten occurrences suggested that migration in the Bible helps today’s church to see its true identity as stranger.

⁴⁰ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 6.

learning about my story, took me to his home and gave me work.” The help described by Cheikh and other immigrant adolescents in Spain was not conditional or limited, but included personal risk; the person who took him in was questioned more than once about Cheikh’s employment. Since he was undocumented, Cheikh eventually left to try to prevent trouble for that person. But Cheikh met another person who helped: “I was seated by the side of the road and a lady came and asked me why I was there. When I told her about my story, she invited me to stay at her place.” Providing space in one’s home is an uncommon, often unthinkable risk for many Western Christians. Such offers go beyond the normalized provision of assistance through an intermediary or professional aid organization. There is a frequent tension between the general impulse to demonstrate mercy and the enactment of mercy in a particular case.

Offers of direct help are often characterized as unusually generous, or even risky, but there was a time when this was common, everyday practice, based on human dignity. The call to uphold “basic human rights” is, according to Pohl, “a deeply biblical notion in our dangerous and destructive world, and it must be held together with our more particular commitments and communities of faith.”⁴¹ There is a perceived tension between an existential understanding of Christians’ responsibility to those who migrate and the practice of offering tangible assistance to particular individuals. There is also a tension between advocacy for human rights based in the *imago dei* that holds an openness to all along with the need to express the particularities of a Christian community. Holding these tensions loosely, so as to find balance in specific contexts, would involve such a “reorientation” that it would change “how we live and how we orient our families, churches, and mission organizations.”⁴² More specifically, it would force a shift from programmatic responses to personal responses.

Such a reorientation would also require new ways of reading and understanding the relationship of the Bible to contemporary migration. In his summons to read the Bible with a “hermeneutic of ‘stranger,’” Botha declares that God is a migrant, particularly in the incarnation of Christ.⁴³ A hermeneutic of this kind, in which the voice of the migrant is prioritized, is also employed by scholars such as Jean-Pierre Ruiz, in order to highlight similarities between migrants at the US-Mexico border and migrants in the Bible.⁴⁴ The experience of God as *xenos* is also underscored in the passage of the sheep and the goats in the Matthew 25:31–46, in which God is both stranger and host: the Lord, seated on the throne as host, explains that he was also the stranger whom those present welcomed – or did not.

Pohl also points to the passage on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), in order to highlight the fluidity of the roles of stranger, guest, and host. In that story, Jesus joins two disciples on the road and, after journeying together all day, Jesus is invited into their home. It is during the meal that “Jesus becomes their host, and he becomes known to them in the breaking of the bread.”⁴⁵ The movement from guest to host in this story illustrates a similar shift to the Good Samaritan passage. The presumption of who is host is challenged in both.

In these discussions of the Christian responsibility to “help” the migrant, power is usually presumed to rest with the host. This was evident in Cheikh’s comments: those who offer help are perceived as generous and as having access to needed resources. Those who receive help, conversely, are in need of those resources. Another adolescent in Spain, Djenabou, nevertheless stated emphatically that the ultimate source of the assistance that was offered to him “was God, because He does not need to descend on earth for me to know he exists. He used this old man to speak to me.” Although articulated in different terms, Djenabou’s perspective is that God is the ultimate host, while people act as guest-peers. This perspective provided the framework through which he interpreted God’s personal care for him, God’s sovereignty, and the tension between immanence and transcendence. This is an application of the “hermeneutic of stranger”: centering God as the host in order to interpret other happenings from that perspective.

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Botha, “A Theological Perspective on Migrants and Migration Focusing on the Southern African Development Community (SADC),” 109–10.

⁴⁴ See, for example Ruiz, “José in Egypt,” 99, 1–10.

⁴⁵ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 7.

2.3 Parables of Jesus and “help”

In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus explains that eternal judgment of his followers will be made on the basis of their willingness to meet the needs of others – food, drink, clothing, shelter, care during illness, and visiting in prison. Pohl notes how closely the experience of Jesus is linked to this list of others who needed aid,⁴⁶ while Langmead goes so far as to say that “only when serving” these needs of others are people engaged in worship of God.⁴⁷ Botha, employing the “hermeneutic of stranger,” interprets the meeting of these needs as an invitation to the recipient to join a community.⁴⁸ Perhaps Botha is considering a broader range of definitions of *synago* here; it is, in any case, a broadened understanding of the passage.

To better understand what this might look like on a large scale, we turn to Europe in the summer of 2015. In the initial movements of Syrian refugees there were so many people that formal systems of support were quickly overwhelmed. In their place, less formal offers of rooms and meals in personal homes were expressions of help. These stories were shared in the news around the world.⁴⁹ But the offers did not last long – the scale and duration of need surpassed goodwill. As migration policies increasingly closed the borders of European countries further from the Mediterranean, the definition of neighbor became less open as well.⁵⁰ Many of these calls to define “neighbor” more narrowly came from Christian groups and churches.⁵¹

The theologians who form our conversation partners in this article offer a wide range of approaches in their efforts to define the “neighbor.” Ross Langmead identifies the Good Samaritan as the biblical standard by which the neighbor must be understood: “one who is beaten up and abandoned on the side of the road, or perhaps left for years in a refugee camp or left to drown in the high seas in a leaky boat.”⁵² Given the breadth of this definition – including many millions, of vulnerable, displaced people – this is perhaps a difficult definition to operationalize. While it does open the definition of neighbor geographically, it implies a worthiness test: a person earns the title of neighbor by being in the most extreme circumstances. An entirely different approach is offered by Castillo Guerra, who proposes instead that the neighbor in Luke 25:1037 is not the one who receives aid, but the one who gives it. A neighbor is one who demonstrates “merciful responsiveness ... the one who goes out of his way, comes near, is moved not by pity but by responsiveness.”⁵³ Just as in the original parable, Castillo Guerra points out that the one who responds is the one who acts as neighbor. The focus of the parable is not the victim of violence, but the responsiveness of others.

Langmead and Castillo Guerra’s differing approaches reveal one more aspect of ongoing tension arising from the ambiguity of migration in the Bible: who is one’s neighbor? While it may feel natural to define one’s neighbor in terms of residence, it is equally possible to understand both the one who receives aid and the one who gives it as neighbor. Integrating the work of Langmead and Castillo Guerra, the concept of neighbor can be defined from either direction – or, better, from both. Demonstrating care for a neighbor as simultaneously the act of a neighbor is an example of the guest-peer approach previously discussed. Help or aid is offered not from a position of power, but from a position of equality.

As a matter of concern in practical theology, the continued resistance to migrants by individual Christians suggests that neither of these definitions of neighbor have received full acceptance in the broader

⁴⁶ Ibid., 7–8.

⁴⁷ Langmead, “Refugees as Guests and Hosts,” 175.

⁴⁸ Botha, “A Theological Perspective on Migrants and Migration Focusing on the Southern African Development Community (SADC),” 117.

⁴⁹ For example, see Ferris, *They Just Keep on Walking*.

⁵⁰ See “Migrant Crisis: Hungary’s Closed Border Leaves Many Stranded.” or “Hungary Closes Its Croatian Border To Migrants.” or “Closing Borders, Shifting Routes: Summary of Regional Migration Trends Middle East – May 2016.”

⁵¹ See Walker, “Orbán Deploys Christianity with a Twist to Tighten Grip in Hungary.” “German Catholic Church Calls for ‘Reduction in Number of Refugees’.” or Narkowicz, “‘Refugees Not Welcome Here’,” 357–73. For a counter-view see: Strickland, “Populism and the Fight for the Soul of German Churches.”

⁵² Langmead, “Refugees as Guests and Hosts,” 176.

⁵³ Castillo Guerra, “From the Faith and Life of a Migrant to a Theology of Migration and Intercultural Convivencia,” 21.

Christian imagination: not Carroll's challenge to respond to migration in light of the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25), nor Castillo Guerra's definition of being moved to action by mercy as it is offered by the Good Samaritan – and certainly not the idea that treating the stranger as neighbor means both giving and receiving care. It is far easier to restrict the neighbor to the proximal, or to read help as only meeting a physical need. Yet, while such interpretations may be true in a literal way, they miss out on the fullness of *xenos*. In the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13–35), we see Jesus take on all the roles of *xenos* in a single narrative; he moves from stranger to guest to host.⁵⁴ It is also true that the disciples with whom Jesus dines begin the meal as hosts, but when Jesus breaks the bread, they recognize him as host. It is a realigning of roles. Each of the meanings of *xenos* are not fixed identities but roles that we take on.

There is a notable fluidity here. The identity of the disciples as disciples was not dependent on their role as guest or host – in fact, their identity was not changed at all. In Langmead's interpretation of *xenos* all three definitions – stranger, guest, or host – are roles determined by context and by our own response.⁵⁵ While the Israelites' shared identity as strangers and the early church's as sojourners may be helpful for imagining oneself as a stranger, it is also important to recognize that people who begin as newcomers can become known – no longer a stranger but a neighbor, both guest and peer.

3 More than bread?

In light of the preceding it is not surprising that hospitality surfaces consistently in discussions of the Bible and migration. The roles of stranger, guest, and host fit naturally into a hospitality framework. In the Emmaus story, Jesus moves from stranger to guest to host, all in a single narrative. Perhaps this is a dynamic way of recognizing that every person we meet begins as a stranger but moves through other roles, until some become our friends. Having lived most of my life relocating, I experienced this repeatedly as a child, and became attuned to the way that the stranger–guest–host is a dynamic, shifting series of roles. Indeed, applying a “hermeneutic of stranger” is, perhaps, natural for one who knows that “stranger” is not a fixed identity but a role that can shift.

3.1 Community building hospitality

Returning to the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Pohl and Langmead offer some important insights in this regard. First, Jesus' own identification with marginalized people is the basis upon which ministry to the marginalized becomes direct ministry to Jesus. Further, Pohl notes the importance of offering “mundane acts of hospitality” to “those who seem to have little to offer.”⁵⁶ Langmead describes Christian hospitality as that moment when “the Jesus we serve through the poor and hungry (Mat. 25) becomes our host,”⁵⁷ God's “unexpected divine presence,” experienced in the moment of hospitality.⁵⁸ Perhaps unexpectedness lies in value judgements about the stranger or guest; Pohl observes that the marginalized *seems* to have little to offer. However, a close reading of Matthew 25 shows that the focus of Jesus was not on the marginalized in themselves; rather, the focus of the passage is on the demonstration of mercy. Just as in his application of the role of “neighbor” to the Samaritan, Jesus emphasizes the mercy that identifies those who follow him.

Mercy and generosity are necessary not only in hospitality, but also in building a strong community. Rooting his explanation in this parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25) Botha explains that the goal

⁵⁴ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 7.

⁵⁵ Langmead, “Refugees as Guests and Hosts,” 176–7.

⁵⁶ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 8.

⁵⁷ Langmead, “Refugees as Guests and Hosts,” 184.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

of hospitality or mercy is not satisfying a need; rather, the offering of hospitality aids in “the construction of sustainable caring communities.”⁵⁹ This moves the definition and practice of hospitality from meeting a temporary physical need toward an offer of an open-ended relationship. In the skeptical eyes of the man in the public space, Mark (the youth in Greece from above) saw no openness for further relationship. Yet some adolescents do find an invitation to a relational community, as did Marcos: “because the Bible say, anywhere two or more people meet he (sic) is in our midst.” He expresses here the idea that meeting together requires participation with people. He went on to explain that he met with his church group nearly every day – then challenged me to join them, saying, “even you could do it.” This church was a place to which he had once been invited as guest; now, he could also act as host and invite others.

Perhaps it is the combination of the acts of service in Matthew 25 with the concept of welcome in Israelite law that makes hospitality such fertile ground for migration theologians. In Matthew 25, service has immediate as well as future spiritual outcomes. Intertwining the idea of serving each other as guest-peers with building a strong community means that Christian hospitality both serves a need and acts as an invitation “into a community and into a new way of life.”⁶⁰

3.2 Open or vulnerable?

Hospitality that normalizes living in community with others/strangers, Botha acknowledges, means allowing oneself to be “vulnerable to change and transformation.”⁶¹ This makes room for all the roles in *xenos* to be simultaneously active. As Langmead explains, “When a congregation is offering hospitality well it is extending God’s hospitality in the way Jesus did and therefore is a holy place, a place of healing, of belonging, and of shared meals. As such it is a sign of the gracious realm of God.”⁶² The invitation to belong to a community happens when Christ becomes the host, and everyone else present becomes guest-peer. This makes hospitality an “occasion for the transformation of all involved.”⁶³ It is thus a step beyond distributing aid; it is a place where people can know and be known. Moving to Greece, Libby, 18, expressed the impact of the openness of a particular Christian community: “I would say before I moved I did not talk to anyone about my questions. I was always, like having them inside ... But, when I came here I started to realize it’s easy to ask, and that people are not judging you. And I found out how much it helps.” She recognized that openness to further relationship from the church community was an important component of her growing confidence in her faith. Her family had been strangers, but were welcomed as guests-peers.

Applying the *xenos* of Emmaus would mean going even a step further than what Libby described: it would mean intentionally moving into the role of guest, and allowing the stranger to act as the host. This is a kind of openness that is important in community building. At an international church in Greece which included only migrants, Penny, 16, observed that “we mention a lot of times we are a big family although that we’re from different countries. That’s what we say all the time.” The affirmation that to be part of the church community is to be independent of national origin is one way to reframe the stranger–host dynamic. Such a change can be difficult to achieve, however, if there is not a *lingua franca*. Among the international churches I visited in Greece and Spain, English was the common language. International churches tend to see themselves as “multicultural,” with several ethnic or national groups present; this seems to allow for greater fluidity in the role of stranger–guest–host, because a majority of churchgoers are from other places – and thus few can claim the traditional role of the resident host.

⁵⁹ Botha, “A Theological Perspective on Migrants and Migration Focusing on the Southern African Development Community (SADC),” 117.

⁶⁰ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 12.

⁶¹ Botha, “A Theological Perspective on Migrants and Migration Focusing on the Southern African Development Community (SADC),” 114.

⁶² Langmead, “Refugees as Guests and Hosts,” 182.

⁶³ Ibid., 184.

On the other hand, there is no consensus that this is the appropriate application of biblical models of hospitality. Carroll places limits on hospitality, emphasizing that being chosen by God meant that Abram's descendants, the people of God, were blessed "in order to be a blessing."⁶⁴ Such a definition of hospitality – being a "channel" for the "good gifts of creation"⁶⁵ – casts Christians as the perpetual hosts. If this is taken as exclusive, surmising that only the people of God can be a blessing to others, this can lead to a diminished expectation that anyone else may offer "good gifts." If this is taken to be the proper stance, then it becomes difficult to consider oneself as a guest. A reluctance to view oneself as the stranger or the guest also results in a resistance to the concept of the guest as peer (neighbor).

That said, holding steadfastly onto the role of host is not the only way to miss the mark. The opposite extreme is also possible, wherein migrants are identified with Christ only in suffering and need. However, this ignores that many migrants do not experience suffering and need in their journeys. Rather than presuming the power position in the former case, or idealizing suffering in the latter, the best course is somewhere in the middle. Castillo Guerra advocates for "a balanced image of migrants," acknowledging that "they do not cross borders to become guests but to achieve the goals of their migration project through active participation in the society of destination."⁶⁶ Active participation in society likewise means the opportunity to engage in all potential meanings of *xenos* – stranger, guest, and host.

In the Emmaus passage, Luke 24:13–35, the followers of Jesus act as host to the stranger-turned-guest until the breaking of the bread. Yet, even before they recognize him, Jesus is acting as host at the meal by breaking the bread. Applying this same pattern to Matthew 25, it is Jesus who acts as the host in the judgment, as the guest who receives hospitality, and as the stranger in need. In both passages, as Jesus shifts roles, his followers must also shift their roles to accommodate the change. This recommends not only an openness to shifting roles but also a willingness to take on the vulnerability that comes with such a shift.

An unwillingness to relinquish the role of host leads, unfortunately, to "the reduction of migrants to victims, which we find in some pastoral models based on a theology of hospitality."⁶⁷ Of course, hospitality – the role of the host – is necessary and even beneficial. We find, however, in Emmaus as well as in the sheep and the goats Jesus moves through the roles of stranger to guest to host and in doing so takes on the full range of *xenos*. He associates the image of stranger with his own image. Those who denied this full range of *xenos* in others, placed themselves (knowingly or not) in "asymmetrical power relations."⁶⁸

3.3 Metaphors grounded in experience

Just as the breaking of bread in the Emmaus story is both a literal event and a symbol for the Last Supper, the use of symbol and metaphor occurs throughout the Bible. Migration is likewise based in real events, yet it can serve as a metaphor as well. For Carroll, "migration is a key metaphor for understanding the Christian faith. All Christians are sojourners and strangers in the world." This can be understood as a way of describing the *spiritual* journey of those who chose to follow Christ. Rather than a physical journey, it is an existential one. The metaphor may also be understood in light of an apocalyptic or eschatological stance, as is evident in the New Testament letters, where the Christian's allegiance is due to the imminent new kingdom. Either way, Carroll considers that a metaphorical approach to migration can also enlighten current Christian practice, even if physical relocation is not part of a particular Christian's personal experience. The people of God in ancient Israel were instructed to remember the exodus and their identity as strangers on an annual basis; hundreds of years later, the early church also included those who had migrated, and the community as a whole was enjoined to remember this. As Pohl observes,

⁶⁴ Carroll, "Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission," 17.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Castillo Guerra, "From the Faith and Life of a Migrant to a Theology of Migration and Intercultural Convivencia," 118.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

the letters of the New Testament also suggest the continuing importance of alien (*sic*) status and hospitality. The early church was quite mobile; some believers were forced to migrate due to persecution; others traveled to new places to spread the gospel to the world. The expansion of the church depended on hospitality and on believers who were willing to make a place in their homes for strangers. Early Christian households made room for traveling teachers and persecuted Christians, as well as for shared meals and congregational worship.⁶⁹

For Pohl, the identity of the Christian as migrant is rooted in historical experience: even those who did not move themselves witnessed the physical movement of teachers and exiles. It is because the roles of stranger, guest, and host were grounded in real experience that migration was useful as metaphoric language.

4 (Re)marks

Christians are challenged to understand Jesus as the stranger as well as host (Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 24:13–35), and challenged to consider how a stranger can act as a neighbor, a peer (Luke 10:25–37). The most effective metaphors are grounded in real experiences. This is why the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37 is so effective. The scene in the throne room of Matthew 25:31–46 has a palpable weightiness. The image of the risen Christ breaking bread at an impromptu dinner in Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35) brings to life the roles of stranger, guest, and host. These are roles that can be embodied by the divine and the human alike. A robust understanding of *xenos* as stranger, guest, and host recognizes that every person can act in each of these roles.

None of these roles are presented as definitively Christian: not experience as host, not as guest, and not as stranger. Instead, Christians are challenged to respond to others with mercy (Luke 10:35–37; Matt 25:31–46). Applying a “hermeneutic of stranger” to the Bible reshapes our understanding – encouraging us, in the place of one-sided hospitality, to treat each other with mercy as guest-peers. Such a response demands vulnerability, personal risk, and personal openness toward the other. It requires a willingness to be identified alongside the other: as neighbor, as guest-peer, or as stranger. Such extreme openness allows for the possibility of growth beyond acts of mercy, toward relationship, even friendship. Identifying oneself as “stranger” makes possible the specific and intentional actions that invite the stranger to be guest or host in a mutual community.

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⁶⁹ Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 8. See also footnote 7.

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