



The Scriptures of the Desplazados



Christopher Hays

Christopher Hays is Profesor de Nuevo Testamento at Fundación Universitario Seminario Bíblico de Colombia. This article draws on the author's fuller discussion of internal displacement in Colombia, entitled "... porque también tú fuiste extranjero en Egipto": Ser una iglesia de justicia y misericordia frente las consecuencias económicas del desplazamiento', forthcoming in a volume edited by O García-Johnson and MA Benítez.

Forced Internal Displacement: Lamentation in Colombia and Beyond

The term 'internal displacement' sounds vaguely anti-septic, like a minor medical procedure; it certainly does not have the moral *frissons* of a word like 'refugee'. And yet internally displaced persons are indeed refugees within their own national borders, people driven from their homes and compelled to start anew in a strange place, without family or friends or money or work. 'Forced internal displacement' denotes the violent expulsion of peoples from one part of a nation to another, generally as the result of civil war. I live in Colombia, and in this country, as the result of generations of guerilla warfare and violence relating to the traffic of narcotics, internal displacement has become a humanitarian crisis of staggering proportions. Since 1998 alone, more than six million people, over 11 per cent of the nation's population, have fled their homes as the result of beatings, threats, murder, rape and the forcible recruitment of child soldiers.

But the crisis does not end once the internally displaced persons (IDPs), the *desplazados*, are out of range of the guerillas' rifles. The crisis grows and mutates, spreading tendrils into the other facets of the IDP's life. The most prominent problem to ensue is that of indigence, as *desplazados* lose on average more than half of their moveable assets (to say nothing of their land) upon fleeing their homes.¹ And insofar as most IDPs displace from rural environments (where they are farmers) to urban environments (where they cannot farm), they commonly find themselves incapable of earning a living. Thus, 86 per cent of such people live in *extreme* poverty.²

Beyond the economic tragedy of displacement, it has grave psychological and familial entailments. Sixty-seven per cent of IDPs report psychological struggles, and yet only 2 per cent of those who suffer receive any professional care.³ Thirty-five per cent of IDP households are led by single women,⁴ 39 per cent of whom have witnessed the murder of a husband or male child.⁵ Children are often pulled from school in order to help provide food for the family,⁶ and since parents work 12 or more hours a day, even those kids with a surviving mother or father are largely raised by the streets of cities like Medellín.

In short, the devastation of displacement lingers for years, indeed, for generations. And I hear echoes of the words of the prophet Jeremiah,

'All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength. Look, O Lord, and see how worthless I have become. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow ...' (Lam. 1.11–12, NRSV).

But the horrifying reality is that there is a sorrow like the sorrow of the Colombian IDP. Theirs is a story that is being retold all around the world. There are today 6 million IDPs in Syria, 3.3 million in Nigeria, nearly 3 million in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2 million in Iraq, 2.5 million in Sudan.⁷ And the phenomenon only promises to become more central in the coming decades, as the number of civil wars now dramatically overshadow the number of international wars.

What do the Scriptures say to the *desplazados*? How are the people of God to preach divine mercy in a setting such as this one, where one in ten of their neighbours have been expelled from their homes? What do the millions of *Christians* in Colombia who have lost their houses and family members find when they open the holy text?

They find that the Bible recounts their own story, and tells them what it means to be a migrant people in an age that is passing away. After all, the Bible is, in great measure, a story about migrants.

In the ensuing paragraphs, we will see first that the people of the Bible are, very often, forced migrants; being a migrant is a key image for what it means to live as God's people. Second, we will see how the New Testament orients our reflections, as figurative pilgrims and sojourners, on the love and care for those who are literal forced migrants.

God's migrant people

From its opening chapters, the Bible is the story of people forced from and longing for a home. Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden (Gen 3.24), Joseph is dragged to Egypt in chains (Gen 37.28), and the Israelites flee Egypt before an abusive dictator (Exod 14.5–9). When they have found a home in the Promised Land, they are again driven thence by foreign invaders (the Exile). The story of homecoming is long and arduous, as the return from exile proves slow, stuttering, deeply disappointing (Ezra–Nehemiah). Even the One who was promised to give them rest (Isa. 11.1–10; 14.3, 7; 32.17–18; Matt. 11.28–30) ended up being the One who promised they would again be driven into exile (Luke 21.20–24). The temple fell in 70 CE, and once again the people of God were expelled from their home, casting long sorrowful gazes over their shoulders as the city of David burned.

Yet in all this, God is not absent. In fact, from his early years in flesh, God chooses to be present with, to identify with, the forced migration of his people. Forewarned of Herod's plans to seek out and destroy their son, Jesus's parents swept up their toddler and fled to Egypt, just ahead of a wave of infanticide in Bethlehem (Matt. 2.13–18). In the Scriptures the displaced people find that Joseph and Mary—the mother who is especially central to the piety of Latin American Catholics—know the experience of fleeing with backwards glances and fear of pursuit, know the overwhelming and daunting necessity of starting anew in a strange place. So also, in meeting Jesus the refugee, displaced children find that they 'do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses' (Heb. 4.15, ESV). In brief, in the Scriptures the *desplazados* find that their displacement does not belie their belovedness as God's people; displacement is often the lot of God's beloved, even of his beloved Son.

Most of us who read this article will have fixed mailing addresses, upholstered furniture, flower beds, and local histories. That makes it harder to identify this story of

migration as our story. Still, for all the gratitude we should have for our homes, we cannot permit that the warm familiarity of our houses to obscure the fact that they are not forever to be our homes. Thus, 1 Peter

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addresses an audience of Gentile believers as 'sojourners and exiles' (1 Pet. 2.11, ESV), even though most scholars agree that the readers are not, politically speaking, foreigners. Likewise, Hebrews 11 holds up the patriarchs as models for believers insofar as, 'They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland' (Heb. 11.13–14, NRSV).

This theological conviction that we are not at home does not aim to malign the present blessedness many enjoy; it is rather to decenter that present blessedness. Such present blessedness can be distorted into a sort of suburban siren-call, dragging us off course in our odyssey homeward. Beyond the seductions of safety and comfort, the reality is that we are journeying, sojourning together, with a great many people who do not enjoy our present blessedness. Though they live in Medellín or in Damascus or in Abuja, those displaced and refugee believers are our siblings, and they remind us that we, too, are sojourners and exiles.

'The one who showed him mercy': Our neighbour, the forced migrant

Not only do the Scriptures reveal to the IDPs and to the rest of us that the story of forced displacement is very much the story of all the people of God, the Scriptures also oblige us to live as sojourners in order to help the sojourner.

The tale of the Good Samaritan resonates with the experience of the Colombian *desplazado* with particular poignancy. The story is of course of perennial interest for Christians concerned with humanitarian issues, insofar as it is Jesus' parabolic elaboration of what it means to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev. 19.18, invoked in Luke 10.27). But the specific contours of the parable seem to presage something of the story of the Colombian *desplazado*.

The man descending the road to Jericho is said to have been 'attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road' (Luke 10.30, NLT). The word translated 'bandits' (*lēstēs*), however, is the same word Matthew uses to describe the bandits between whom Jesus is crucified (Matt. 27.38, 44); it is the same word Jesus uses when he is arrested the garden, asking 'Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit?' (Luke 22.52). And in this context, it might better be translated 'guerillas'.⁹

NOTES

1. AM Ibáñez and A Moya, 'Do Conflicts Create Poverty Traps? Asset Losses and Recovery for Displaced Households in Colombia', in *The Economics of Crime: Lessons for and from Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 155.

2. AC Carillo, 'Internal Displacement in Colombia: Humanitarian, Economic and Social Consequences in Urban Settings and Current Challenges', *International Review of the Red Cross* 91, no. 875 (2009), p. 534.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 541.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 531.

5. J Arboleda & E Correa, 'Forced Internal Displacement', in *Colombia: The Economic Foundation of Peace* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2003), p. 834.

6. AM Ibáñez and A Moya, 'Vulnerability of Victims of Civil Conflicts: Empirical Evidence for the Displaced Population of Colombia', *World Development* 38, no. 4 (2009), p. 647.

7. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 'Global Overview 2014: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence', <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Media/201405-globalOverview-2014/13-201405-map-global-overview-en-01.png>.

Banditry was a common phenomenon in first-century Palestine. It owed in large part to those Jews who were disaffected with Roman imperial domination and thus chose to rebel (sometimes openly and sometimes through guerilla warfare) and foment insurrection against the Empire. Such groups were particularly

love command for *the foreigner sojourning amidst the people of Israel*:

'When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.' (Lev. 19.33–34, ESV)

Thus the parable of the Good Samaritan applies Leviticus 19:18 in a manner that clashed with contemporary rabbinic expectations but which nonetheless cohered very much with the vision of Leviticus 19.

"Which of these three do you think became a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? ..." The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same." (Luke 10.36–37, NET)

The Samaritan showed mercy to a man who was, by contemporary definition, not his neighbour,¹² thus turning him into a neighbour (*plēsion ... gegonenai tou empesontos eis tous lēstas*; Luke 10.36).¹³

Thus the parable of the Good Samaritan awakens us all — both those of us to whose neighbourhoods the forced migrants flock and those of us who will never meet a forced migrant — to the fact that the forced migrant, the refugee, he has become our neighbour, and indeed, that we are to become their neighbour.

Conclusion: You shall love the migrant, for you are a migrant

For some, the crisis of forced internal displacement is the sort of experience that falsifies religious claims to the existence of a loving God. But the pages of Scriptures affirm that forced migration is the story of God's people, past, present and future. We see that God's people have oftentimes been driven from their homes by sword and imminent danger. We also see that, God himself chose freely to leave his heavenly home and thereafter was forced to flee from Palestine to Egypt; he identifies with human sufferings.

Moreover, the Scripture affirms that we who are not forced migrants in the terrestrial sense are nonetheless foreigners and sojourners in the salvation-historical sense. Thus, the same God who commanded Israel to love the migrant — 'you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Lev. 19.34) — also commands us to become neighbours to those in need of mercy, for we too are strangers and foreigners in this world, seeking our homeland.

God commands us to become neighbours to those in need of mercy, for we too are strangers and foreigners in this world, seeking our homeland

susceptible to being coopted by militant forms of Messianism, and many people did seem to imagine that Jesus himself would be just such an insurrectionist (hence Jesus' slightly incredulous query in the Garden of Gethsemane; Luke 22.52). Such rebel insurrectionists would often support themselves through robbery and violence, as remains the case today in many guerilla-controlled environments.¹⁰ It is thus provocative, in a Colombian context, to see Good Samaritan as investing his time and money (Luke 10.34–35) in order to rescue a man from another Palestinian state who had suffered horrendous violence as the hand of guerillas.

At this point I should mention that I do not mean to imply that every first-century bandit was a guerilla, nor that Luke claimed that the fictive bandits were guerillas. This imaginative reconstruction, while historically plausible, can neither be confirmed or refuted, and doubtless is tangential to the Luke's narrative purposes. I am, rather, proposing an interpretive expansion of the parabolic scene, in a manner contiguous with our historical knowledge and with the semantic field of the word *lēstēs*, in order to highlight the similarities between the parable and the contemporary Colombian situation, and thus to intensify our awareness of our responsibility to our Colombian IDP neighbours.

In my own context in Colombia, I describe the Samaritan as a man from another Palestinian 'state' because the Samaritans, while technically part of the province of Judaea following the death of Herod the Great, considered themselves to be quite distinct from the Jewish people. Colombia, as a country with highly pronounced regional characteristics and prejudices,¹¹ can perhaps benefit from highlighting the regional otherness of the Samaritan, if only to underscore the fact that such regional otherness in no way undermines the fact that such a person remains one to be loved as oneself. And indeed, for those who live separated by oceans from Colombia or Syria or the Democratic Republic of the Congo — yet connected by flights and wire transfers and communications media — this does remind us that those attacked by guerillas are our neighbours.

When Jesus extends the relevance of Leviticus 19.18 to the Samaritan, someone from another Palestinian state, he is in fact following the lead of Leviticus 19 itself. Although most rabbis attempted to limit the description of 'neighbour' in Leviticus 19.18 to other Israelites, verses 33–34 of the same chapter specify the relevance of the

8. M Griffiths, *Rethinking International Relations Theory, Rethinking World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 78.

9. W Bauer et al. (eds.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (y of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 594.

10. See RA Horsley & JS Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs, New Voices in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985), p. 98.

11. GP García, *¿Cómo somos? Los Colombianos: Reflexiones sobre nuestra idiosincrasia y cultura* (Bogotá: Bhandar, 2002), pp. 83–6.

12. R. Neudecker, "And You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself — I Am the Lord" (Lev 19,18) in *Jewish Interpretation*, *Biblica* 73(1992): 499; PF Esler, 'Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict: The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Light of Social Identity Theory', *Biblical Interpretation* 8, no. 4 (2000), pp. 335–6.

13. Cf. CM Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character*, vol. 275 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 118–19.