

## Migration, New Testament, and the Indian Subcontinent<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The plight of migrants and refugees has recently entered people's consciousness through the headlines of war-torn Syria and stateless Rohingya of Myanmar. In India, the massive return of migrants to villages due to the COVID-19 lockdown exposed the vulnerability of India's internal migrants.<sup>2</sup> While this may seem new and shocking, migration, refugee crises, and movements of people are as old as humanity.

India's history and the history of the entire sub-continent is a history of migration.<sup>3</sup> The earliest archaeological records of the Harappan civilization and Aryan migration attest to a complex set of human movements.<sup>4</sup> The mythical heroes of *Mahabharata* (Pandavas) and *Ramayana* (Rama and Sita) endured lengthy exiles.<sup>5</sup> Mahavira, Gautama Buddha, Guru Nanak, and many unnamed Hindu gurus have traversed the sub-continent. Alexander the Great invaded India in the 4th century BCE while King Ashoka (c. 268-232 BCE) sent Buddhist missionaries around and beyond the sub-continent, some of whom reached Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See e.g. J. John, "COVID-19: Apparent Oddities in the Articulation of Rights of Migrant Workers," *NCC Review*, Vol. CXL, no. 04 (May 2020): 11-22; Gautam Mody, "We are Workers – We are Not for Sale: The Attack on the Working Class During the Coronavirus Lockdown," *NCC Review*, Vol. CXL, no. 04 (May 2020): 23-26.

<sup>3</sup>Chinmay Tumble, *India Moving: A History of Migration* (Cyber City: Penguin Books, 2018), esp. 1-39.

<sup>4</sup>Whether Aryan migration was particularly violent or invasive is not the point. For various theories, see Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 23-50; Tumble, *India Moving*, 1-19.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Tumble, *India Moving*, 8-10. See particularly *Mahabharata*, Book 3, *Vana Parva* and Book 4, *Virata Parva*; and *Ramayana*, Book 4, *Aranyakanda*.

<sup>6</sup>See Arrian, *Ind. 5*; *Anab. Alex.* VI. 6. #332; VII. 2. #375. See also R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the*

Colonial powers, from Mughals (1526-1857) to the British (1600s-1947), displaced numerous people, and the British left behind a tragic partition crisis whose effects are still felt today.<sup>7</sup>

More recent outmigration to Gulf countries, UK, and the USA (and beyond) is fueled by hopes of better job opportunities. It touches the middleclass Indian as much as the vulnerable migrant laborer. No less notable is the migration and refugee flow into India from the neighboring countries, most recently from Myanmar.<sup>8</sup> India's internally displaced peoples (IDP), whether due to religious and communal violence, poverty, ecological crises, or natural disasters, do not usually make the headlines. It is fair to state that migration is part of India's past, present, and future, and so much so that storytelling and myth have all been shaped by the realities of migration.

### Definitions and Methodology

Human migration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is difficult to define with precision. Svati Shah states that migration entails "movement, and the condition of having moved from one place to another . . . [which has] taken place within a complex matrix of decisions and of power and powerlessness."<sup>9</sup> Since Shah's focus is on the marginalized, her emphasis is on power disparity and vulnerability. Others highlight the spatial movement of people more generally, whether permanent or semi-permanent (or circular), and exclude activities such as leisure and holidays from the sphere of migration.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this essay is not to theorize about migration but to read the New Testament from the perspective of migration and human movements with special reference to South Asian contextual realities.<sup>11</sup>

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*Interpretations* (New York: Orbis, 1998), 112-115.

<sup>7</sup>For the tragedy of partition crisis, see e.g. Ranabir Samaddar, *The Postcolonial Age of Migration* (London: Routledge, 2020), 110-133; Tumble, *India Moving*, 163-199.

<sup>8</sup>Particularly from Nepal, Bangladesh, Tibet, and Myanmar. Myanmar's *coup d'état* (started February 1, 2021) has brought a flood of refugees to Mizoram and other states in North East India. See Tumble, *India Moving*, 33-37, 163-230.

<sup>9</sup>Svati Shah, *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work, and Migration in the City of Mumbai* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 31.

<sup>10</sup>See Tumble, *India Moving*, vii, 2, 33-34; Augustine Kanjamala, "Social Analysis of Migration in India," in *Migration and Mission in India*, ed. L. Stanilaus and Jose Joseph (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), 1; Bernard D'Sami, "Labour Migration in India: Issues and Concerns," in *Migration in Perspectives: Towards Theology of Migration from the Margins*, ed. Songram Basumatary (Chennai: Gurukul Publications, 2018), 3-10.

<sup>11</sup>For incorporation of migrants' experiences into the interpretation of Scripture, see Esa Autero, "Reading the Epistle of James with Socioeconomically Marginalized Immigrants in the Southern United States," 504-535, *Pneuma* 39 (2017).

As such it is sufficient to define migration broadly as the spatial movement of people from one place to another for an extended period of time regardless of motivation. This definition allows the examination of diverse experiences, motivations, and lengths of time, whether from religious and caste displacement, a quest for better economic opportunities, or other reasons. Nevertheless, as many migration scholars have pointed out, it is crucial to consider migration in light of past colonial perspective and current socio-political power dynamics.<sup>12</sup>

The theoretical perspective of this chapter focuses on reading the NT from the migration point of view. This combines migration, postcolonial, and borderland studies with biblical criticism and theological perspectives. Ethnographic and sociological data of migration patterns will help elaborate contemporary perspectives and concerns. While the NT texts are read primarily in their socio-historical context, perspectives from migration studies (ancient and current) enable interaction with specific NT themes and texts. Nevertheless, the hermeneutical circle is not a one-way street but highlights interaction and mutual fertilization of the horizons. Theologically, this discussion endeavors to stir Spirit-inspired imagination and blending of horizons in a way that is sympathetic to Indian Christian spirituality.<sup>13</sup> It is presupposed that the Holy Spirit is able to bridge interpretative gaps and overcome spatial, chronological, and socio-cultural boundaries.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the hermeneutical process is not only theoretical but also an attempt to speak to present-day realities about migration and displacement.

### Migration in the New Testament and in India

The Bible starts with the departure of Adam and Eve from the Garden (Gen 3:23) and ends with John's visionary encounters in exile (Rev 1:9). The story of God's people is one of movement and migration. Many scholars have noted this and there is an expanding scholarly

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<sup>12</sup>See especially Samaddar, *Postcolonial Age*, 23-42; Shah, *Street Corner Secrets*, 1-40.

<sup>13</sup>For Indian hermeneutics and worldview, see especially G. Ayyaneth. *Indian Poetics (Kāvya Śāstra) and Narratology towards the Appreciation of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 18-32.

<sup>14</sup>For the role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics, see B. J. Kristie Kumar, "An Indian Christian Appreciation of the Doctrine of Holy Spirit: A Search into the Religious Heritage of the Indian Christian," *Indian Journal of Theology* 30 (1981): 29-35; Esa Autero, "Acts of Apostles: An Asian Perspective," in *Asian Introduction to the New Testament*, ed. Johnson Thomaskutty (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 157-182.

literature on migration in the Bible. Indian scholars are also beginning to tackle the subject.<sup>15</sup>

Particularly the Old Testament contains numerous stories of migration. Abraham and the Patriarchs are constantly on the move: Joseph is trafficked to Egypt; Moses the migrant (to Egypt and Midian) leads God's people into the Promised Land; and Israel goes through two painful Exiles. While the NT offers less explicit materials on migration, many OT stories and themes are presupposed and expanded (cf. Acts 7; Heb 11). As such, the story of God's people in the Bible is reminiscent of the story of India and its many peoples on the move.

### **Synoptic Gospels – Jesus Crosses Borders and Boundaries**

The Synoptic Gospels offer numerous stories of migration. Particularly fruitful from the perspective of migration hermeneutics are the infancy narratives (Matt 1-2; Luke 1-2) and stories of Jesus crossing socio-cultural boundaries (e.g. Matt 8:1-13, 28-34; 9:9-12; Mark 6:30-8:26; Luke 10:25-42; 14:12-14; 19:1-10) and helping the vulnerable (e.g. Matt 8:1-4; 20:1-16; 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-38; 13:10-17). Space permits us to tackle only some of these.

Matthew starts Jesus' genealogy by listing the two great heroes of the Hebrew Bible—David and Abraham (Matt 1:1), who are worthy of being included into Messiah's ancestry. He divides the genealogy into three sections of fourteen generations, demarcating the Babylonian Exile as an important identity-forming factor (1:17). Matthew surprises his audience by adding five women into the genealogy. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary (1:3, 5-6, 16) are not only women but each is marginalized in some way (Canaanite, prostitute, Moabite, adulterer, pregnant virgin/lowly peasant).<sup>16</sup> Matthew includes these women in the Messiah's genealogy to indicate that in the new creation everyone is welcomed regardless of social status, ethnicity, or reputation. The

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<sup>15</sup>N. G. Prasuna, "Discerning the Signs of the Times," in *Migration in Perspectives: Towards Theology of Migration from the Margins*, ed. Songram Basumatary (Chennai: Gurukul Publications, 2018), 167-184, states that "theology has made no or very little impact in India on the complex situation of migration . . . migration is a profound theological theme in the Bible" (170). There are very few books/articles written by Indian biblical scholars that deal with migration. Some notable exceptions are found in this essay and/or books cited in the bibliography.

<sup>16</sup>Many commentators have also highlighted the sexual irregularity (or otherwise dubious reputation) of many of the women; however, this is sometimes exaggerated since only Rahab is a prostitute and she is considered a model of faith and works (Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25). See Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 79.

inclusion of women also highlights their dignity and anticipates the virginal conception of Jesus in Mary's womb.<sup>17</sup>

This inclusion of somewhat dubious Gentile women into the Messiah's royal genealogy brings a hope-filled perspective for vulnerable and exploited migrant women in India. Shah's ethnographic work highlights the exploitation of women who come to work in Mumbai as day laborers, most of whom are from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SCs and STs). They leave their villages out of desperation and end up as day laborers and/or sex workers on Mumbai's streets. Due to scarcity of day labor for women, access to work is often gained by providing sexual favors for the middlemen and contractors. Others end up in full-time prostitution. Many live a life of shame and are unable to disclose the true nature of their work to their relatives in home villages.<sup>18</sup> According to Shah, as one woman testifies, "No one gives work [here] for free", ". . . of one hundred women who come here, seventy are into *burā kam*" [= bad work].<sup>19</sup> Matthew's inclusion of the marginalized women into the Messiah's genealogy indicates that they too have dignity, are beloved by God, and are welcome into the Kingdom. There is also sufficient work for everyone in the kingdom to provide a dignified livelihood, including a compassionate Master who cares for the workers (Matt 20:1-16).<sup>20</sup>

For many Jews of biblical times, it was important to establish a proper lineage to ensure ethnic purity. This was especially the case with the priests (*C. Ap.* 1.30-33, 36; *Life* 6; 1 Esd 5:39-40; *b. Pesah.* 62b).<sup>21</sup> Roman Imperial propaganda also attempted to homogenize differences and bring all peoples of the world under their hegemony (Polybius, *Hist.* 1.1.5; *J.W.* 2.380).<sup>22</sup> This included creation of mythic past(s) and pure lineages (see e.g. Virgil, *Aen.* 1.278-79; Ovid, *Fast.* 4.857-58).<sup>23</sup> Matthew indicates that there is no need to white-wash or homogenize the Messiah's genealogy. At the same time, Matthew anticipates Jesus' ministry to "toll collectors and sinners" (9:9-11; 10:3; 11:19; 21:31-

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<sup>17</sup>Warren Carter, *Matthew and Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (New York: Orbis, 2000), 58-61.

<sup>18</sup>Shah, *Street Corner Secrets*, 114-119, 161-178.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 14-15, 85, 89. "Bad work" is obviously a reference to prostitution or some other form of providing sexual favors in exchange for gifts, work, or money.

<sup>20</sup>See Esa Autero, "Reading the Parable of Vineyard Workers (Matt 20:1-16) from the Perspective of India's Migrant Laborers," *JETS* 66.1 (2023): 71-91.

<sup>21</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 280-290; Keener, *Matthew*, 75-80.

<sup>22</sup>Gary Gilbert, "The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response," *JBL* 121 (2002): 497-529.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*; Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 20-31, 204-212.

32) and all who are marginalized from the perspective of the religious leaders and political elite. It also looks forward to the diversity that the Gentile mission will bring to the church (28:18-19).

In India, supporters of Hindutva ideology have attempted to create an artificial unity by rewriting history, downplaying ethnic diversity, justifying caste discrimination, and creating a sanscritized ideology.<sup>24</sup> Many tribal and minority histories have been erased or “purified” in this way.<sup>25</sup> This has not only led to harassment of foreign immigrants but also of India’s internal migrants. For example, a Hindu fundamentalist party Shiv Sen has attacked and instigated attacks against migrant laborers in Mumbai in recent years.<sup>26</sup> The ensuing polarization is also used as a political tool against migrants.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, caste discrimination and attempts to homogenize ethnic diversity have also crept into the Christian Church.<sup>28</sup> In this way, the Church has given into religio-cultural

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<sup>24</sup>Sancritization refers to the process by which those who were originally outside of Brahminical culture have been subjugated and assimilated into the Hindu ideology. See W. Johnson, *Oxford Dictionary of Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 289-290. See also, Joy Thomas, “Missiological Perspectives on Tribal Migration,” in *Migration and Mission in India*, eds. L. Stanislaus and Jose Joseph (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), 67-83; Rebecca Samuel Shah, “Saving the Soul of India: Christian Conversion and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism,” in *Christianity in India: Conversion, Community Development, and Religious Freedom*, eds. Joel Carpenter and Rebecca Samuel Shah (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 5-22; Dyron B. Daugherty and Jesusdas M. Athyal, *Understanding World Christianity: India* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 113-123; Sarbeswar Sahoo, *Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 59-66, 133-136, 143-157; Joshua Iyadurai, “Christian Conversion in India: Political Exploitation or Personal Transformation?” in *Christianity in India: Conversion, Community Development, and Religious Freedom*, eds. Joel Carpenter and Rebecca Samuel Shah (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 69-81. Iyadurai also discusses M.S Golwalkar’s and M. Gandhi’s views on conversion. Classic Hindu texts that are often seen to support caste discrimination include, among others, *Rig-Veda* 10.90.11-12; *Chandogya Upanishads* 5.10.7-8; *Manusmrti* 1.1-2; 1.87-91; 10.99-100; *Gita* 4.1, 13; 18.40-50; *Mahabharata* Book 1, *Shambaya Parva*, Section CXXXIV; *Brahma Sutra Bhasya* section 3 topic 9.

<sup>25</sup>Daugherty and Athyal, *Understanding*, 119-123; Eve Rebecca Parker, “Religious Hybridity in the Brothels of Mahamma: The Sacred Sex Worker and the Dalit Christ,” in *Many Yet One: Multiple Religious Belonging*, eds. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2016), 121-134.

<sup>26</sup>S. Irudaya Rajan, Viday Korra, and Rikil Chyrmmand, “Politics of Conflict and Migration,” in *Migration, Identity, and Conflict: India Migration Report 2011*, ed. S. Irudaya Rajan (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 102-103; Shah, *Street Corner Secrets*, 151.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 102-107.

<sup>28</sup>Daugherty and Athyal, *Understanding*, 121-123; James Massey, “Dalits: Indian Context,” in *One Volume Dalit Bible Commentary: New Testament*, ed. T. K. John (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2010), 11-12.

and political pressure. Fortunately, there are segments in the Church that resist this tendency both in the ideological and practical spheres.<sup>29</sup>

After the birth of Jesus, Matthew tells of the Magi who come from the East being led by the star first to Jerusalem and subsequently to Bethlehem (2:1-11). Herod the Great is terrified at the thought of the newly born “King of the Jews” (2:2-3) and attempts to trick the Magi (2:7-8). When Herod finds out that the Magi are not fooled, he launches a manhunt to destroy the infant Jesus (2:16). Yet, God in his sovereignty sends an angel to warn Joseph in a dream. As a result, the holy family escapes to Egypt (2:13-15), a traditional place of refuge for God’s people (1Kings 11:40; Jer 26:21; 2 Macc 5:8-9; *Ant.* 12.387).<sup>30</sup> This familiar Christmas story, often polished and sanitized in churches, is really about the collision of powers. Herod uses deception, flattery, intimidation, and brutal violence to secure his power base. He does not care about collateral damage (2:16) as his actions force the holy family to flee to Egypt.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, God foresaw the events and superintended the steps of the vulnerable migrant family fleeing for their lives.

For many migrants and refugees, it is comforting to know that Jesus starts out his life as a refugee who flees a paranoid ruler. One can almost feel the fear and uncertainty of Joseph and Mary during the flight (2:14-15) and even on their subsequent return to Nazareth (2:20-22). Though there may not be a specific “Herod figure” currently in South Asia,<sup>32</sup> numerous refugees and migrants live a liminal existence in refuge

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<sup>29</sup>Most notable example is the producers and authors of *One Volume Dalit Bible Commentary: New Testament*, ed. T. K. John (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2010).

<sup>30</sup>It is likely that Joseph and Mary had relatives or other social contacts in Egypt. For mobility in the Roman Empire, see Claudia Moatti, “Roman world, mobility,” in *Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, ed. Immanuel Ness (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 1-14, esp. 5-8. See also, Keener, *Matthew*, 105-106, 109; Carter, 83.

<sup>31</sup>Maier estimates that the journey would have taken about ten days—see Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at the Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church* (HarperCollins: New York, 1991), 73. Later Christian legends relate details of the holy family’s journey to Egypt (*Arabic Gospel of Infancy* 13; *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* 20). Some of these apocryphal details have also found their way into the Qur’an (Q), such as the story of a date palm under which Mary rests bends down so that she can enjoy the fruit (*The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* 20 / Q: 19.22-26). For further details, see Maier, *Fullness*, 72-76.

<sup>32</sup>Though undoubtedly some might argue that Myanmar’s notorious military leader Min Aung Hlaing would qualify for this position, not just because of the recent coup but also for instigating the Rohingya crisis in August 2017. Of course, Myanmar is technically part of Southeast Asia, not South Asia. For Rohingya crisis, see [Rohingya Refugee Crisis | UNICEF USA](#) (accessed October 18, 2021).

camps and border areas.<sup>33</sup> Refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh are currently in a particularly difficult situation.<sup>34</sup>

Stateless people are the most vulnerable migrants.<sup>35</sup> They are often treated as illegal migrants, deprived of citizenship as well as rights everywhere, tossed back and forth in the shadowy borderlands. For example, the Rohingya of Myanmar are refused nationality anywhere. They traverse the borderland area of Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India. India's Ministry of Home Affairs has decided to send Rohingya back if found in India—but the obvious question is: sent back to where? Both India and Bangladesh have been unwilling to tackle the issue.<sup>36</sup>

A similar problem of statelessness, though not much publicized, is found in Assam. It concerns the Bengali-speaking population who are descendants of the East Pakistan/Bangladesh partition crisis (1971).<sup>37</sup> A particularly rigorous vetting process was applied to them during the updating of the National Register of Citizens in 2019. Many were disowned by India though the people had no ties to any other country. As a result, these helpless and marginalized people have been in “a state of virtual detention” with no rights or access to legal aid.<sup>38</sup>

The predicament of the refugees and stateless people in the liminal borderlands may not seem like an outright murder akin to the infants in the nativity story (Matt 1-2). However, without rights or legal status they may vanish without trace and are often subject to inhumane treatment.<sup>39</sup> As such, Matthew's cry about Rachel weeping for her children who are no more (2:18; Jer 31:15) is an apt depiction of the experience of many refugees and stateless migrants on India's borderlands.<sup>40</sup>

The Gospel authors portray Jesus as Savior, liberator, and bringer of hope particularly for the poor and marginalized (Matt 8:16-17; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 14:12-14; 19:1-10). He traverses to the margins and liminal spaces (Mark 5:1-20; 7:24-37; 8:1-10), and breaks boundaries of

<sup>33</sup>Samaddar, *Postcolonial Age*, 172-190; Shahram Khosravi, *'Illegal' Traveler: An Auto-Ethnographic of Borders* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 8-96.

<sup>34</sup>Samaddar, *Postcolonial Age*, 178-190.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 167-190.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 172-173, 176-177.

<sup>37</sup>For the partition crisis of East Pakistan/Bangladesh, see Tumble, *India Moving*, 180-184.

<sup>38</sup>Samaddar, *Postcolonial Age*, 178-179. See also 2021 Annual Report.pdf (uscirf.gov), p. 22 (accessed November 22, 2021); New citizenship law in India 'fundamentally discriminatory': UN human rights office | UN News (2019) (accessed November 22, 2021).

<sup>39</sup>See Khosravi, *'Illegal' Traveler*, 35-45.

<sup>40</sup>It is also reminiscent of the bitter end of the Kurukshetra War in Mahabharata where the mothers weep the loss of their children (Mahabharata, Book 11, Stri Parva, Sections X, XV, XVIII-XXV).



prejudice and ethnicity (Mark 2:13-17; 7:1-30; Matt 8:1-13; Luke 13:10-17). Jesus' infant years etched into his soul an awareness of refugee experience. Later in adulthood, he chose a life of homeless *sadhu* as he roamed around Galilee and Judea (Matt 8:18-22; Luke 9:57-62). He challenged religious leaders to forego segregation of people based on ethnicity and ritual purity (Mark 7:1-23; Matt 8:1-10; 23:23; Luke 10:25-37). He modeled this on numerous occasions, of which one of the best known is his encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:4-42). She was an outcast woman, sexually suspect, practitioner of the wrong religion, and came from the wrong ethnic group. Yet Jesus embraced her, endowed her with dignity, and gave her hope.

In the Gospels, God's Kingdom is portrayed as a banquet where everyone is invited (Matt 8:11; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 14:12-14) and a family (Mark 3:31-35; Luke 15:11-32) that revolves around the person and teachings of Jesus. This radical vision of the Kingdom upset the spiritual and political powers of the time. As a result, Jesus was crushed, abused, and crucified. Somewhat like the victims of sexually abused migrant laborers,<sup>41</sup> Jesus experienced utter humiliation as he hung bloody and naked on the cross (Mark 15:16-37; John 19:16-37). Yet, his disciples discovered that God had raised Jesus from the dead (Matt 28:1-20; Luke 24:1-49; John 20:1-29; cf. 1 Cor 15:1-11) and commissioned them to spread his message throughout the world. They were to model a new way of life embodying Jesus' care for the vulnerable in a multi-ethnic and diverse community in the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:45-53; Acts 1:8; 10-11).

### Mission, Displacement, and Identity in Acts

Acts narrates the story of the Early Church and the mission of the apostles. Yet, it is also closely associated with migration, travel, and ethnic diversity. The narrative framework revolves around geographical movement from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).<sup>42</sup>

After Stephen's martyrdom, believers are forced out of Jerusalem (8:1-2; 11:19-20) and the gospel spreads beyond the boundaries of Israel. Philip brings the gospel to the despised Samaritans (Acts 8:4-25; cf. Luke 9:51-56; John 4:4, 9; Sir 50:25-26; *Ant.* 11.340). He is subsequently instructed by the Spirit to venture to a remote road to Gaza (Acts 8:26, 29), where he meets the Ethiopian man who is returning home from Jerusalem (8:27). Peter as the representative apostle is

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<sup>41</sup>See especially Shah, *Street Corner Secrets*.

<sup>42</sup>See Autero, "Acts of Apostles," 157-182.

commanded to preach the gospel in the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. He is reluctant to cross ethnic boundaries due to prejudice and fear of ritual contamination (10:14, 20, 28). The latter part of Acts focuses on Paul as he travels around the Roman Empire preaching the gospel and establishing churches among various peoples (Acts 13-28). All of these, and many others, highlight the movement of God's people as they seek to obey the commission of the risen Jesus to preach, teach, and establish churches.

Acts portrays mission and subsequent persecution of Christians as a major reason for their migration and displacement. The great persecution after the martyrdom of Stephen forced many out of Jerusalem (8:1-5; 9:1-2; 11:19-20). James is beheaded by Herod Agrippa I and Peter is miraculously delivered (12:1-19). Paul is forced to flee after his conversion (Acts 9:19-30; 2 Cor 11:32-33) while at other times he is expelled from an area because of his preaching activities.

Peter, John, James, and Paul were not the only apostles who were persecuted or displaced due to mission and persecution. According to tradition, the apostle Thomas arrived in Kochi, India in 52 CE.<sup>43</sup> Apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* tells a story of Thomas' call and his reluctance to accept it (*Acts of Thomas* 1-2). He was the first to bring the gospel to India and suffered martyrdom in 72 CE for refusing to worship goddess Kali (see also *Acts of Thomas* 167-168).<sup>44</sup>

One of the best-known Indian converts to Christianity is Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929).<sup>45</sup> He recounts his experience with Jesus Christ: "I saw [in a vision] the marks of blood on his hands . . . and knew that it was Yesu."<sup>46</sup> As a result of his decision to follow Jesus, he was cursed and disowned by his family. With no home or place to go, he

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<sup>43</sup>Leonard Fernando and G. Gispert-Sauch, *Christianity in India: Two Thousand Years of Faith* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), 59.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 59-62; Patrick Sookhdeo, *Hated without Reason: The Remarkable Story of Christian Persecution over the Centuries* (McLean, VA: Isaac Publishing, 2019), 119-122.

<sup>45</sup>For a brief overview, see Daugherty and Athyal, *Understanding*, 253-256; for longer treatments, see Kim Komer, *Wisdom of the Saddhu: Teachings of Sundar Singh* (Secunderabad: OM Books, 2000); Phyllis Thompson, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: A Biography of the Remarkable Indian Disciple of Jesus Christ* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 2005). For his theology, see Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1975), 92-109.

<sup>46</sup>Komer, *Wisdom*, 29.

chose a life of a wandering *sadhu* walking in the footsteps of Jesus and the apostles.<sup>47</sup>

Each year, numerous Christians throughout India become displaced due to persecution and communal violence.<sup>48</sup> In 2015, there were at least 365 major attacks on Christians and their institutions in India.<sup>49</sup> Undoubtedly, many others went unreported.<sup>50</sup> A great majority of these attacks are directly or indirectly linked to Hindu radicals. Hindutva justification for the violence is allegations of forced/fraudulent conversion.<sup>51</sup> Very often, the persecuted Christians come from the SCs/STs and are in a position of vulnerability. Perhaps the most notorious and well-known incident of persecution took place in Kandhamal (Orissa) in 2007-8 during which more than fifty people were killed, hundreds of houses were destroyed, and over 50,000 people were displaced.<sup>52</sup> The current situation in Manipur between predominantly Hindu *Meiteis* and Christian *Kukis* is equally worrying.

Unfortunately, local and state authorities are often unwilling to confront the problem. Sometimes the police are complicit or even endorse the activities of the radicals.<sup>53</sup> Christians are often viewed as

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<sup>47</sup>Komer, *Wisdom*, 32; Thompson, *Sadhu*, 18-43.

<sup>48</sup>See for example, Chad Bauman, *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), esp. 1-15; Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 122; John L. Allen 2015, *India showcases the maddening complexity of religious persecution* | Crux, [cruxnow.com](http://cruxnow.com)) (accessed 11/20/2021; Muslims also face persecution – see for example 2021 Annual Report.pdf, [uscirf.gov](http://uscirf.gov)) (accessed 11/21/2021); and New citizenship law in India ‘fundamentally discriminatory’: UN human rights office || UN News (2019) accessed 11/22/2021.

<sup>49</sup>Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 5 (citing [uscirf](http://uscirf.gov) 2016 report). See also 2021 Annual Report.pdf ([uscirf.gov](http://uscirf.gov)) accessed 11/21/2021 that highlights how COVID-19 has increased oppression of minorities. Bauman estimates that there are about 300-400 attacks on Christians currently (2015, in Bauman, 2); that is, about one each day. For experiences, see V. Ram and K. Higuera Smith, “Christian Response to Violence in India,” in *Christianity in India: Conversion, Community Development, and Religious Freedom*, Eds. Joel Carpenter and Rebecca Samuel Shah (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 198-227.

<sup>50</sup>See also my forthcoming article on *Reading the Bible with the Persecuted in Northern India*.

<sup>51</sup>Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 120-157, esp. 123, 128, 134-136; Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 122-130, 143-159. Indian constitution article 25 guarantees everyone a right to practice and propagate one’s faith. In apparent opposition to this, several states have implemented or proposed so called anti-conversion laws.

<sup>52</sup>Human Rights Law Network, *Genocide in Kandhamal: Ethnic Cleansing of Christians by Hindutva Rightwing Forces in Orissa*, 2008 in [Orissa\\_report\\_-\\_Human\\_Rights\\_Law\\_Network.pdf](http://idsn.org) (idsn.org) (accessed 11/20/2021). See also Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 1-2, 6, 23, 53-54. The numbers vary somewhat depending on the report.

<sup>53</sup>See e.g. *Genocide in Kandhamal*; Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 13-16.

traitors or un-Indian by Hindu nationalists.<sup>54</sup> They are sometimes labeled as *mlecchas* or “alien people” who do not belong to India.<sup>55</sup> Paul and Silas experienced similar treatment in Philippi (Acts 16:16-40). Despite being Roman citizens, they were beaten, imprisoned, and accused of advocating customs that Romans should not embrace (Acts 16:21-35).<sup>56</sup> Ironically, among Jews they were accused of being traitors of Jewish heritage (14:5; 15:1-2; 17:5-6; 18:12-17; 21:20-26). In Philippi, they were blamed with being Jewish but not Roman enough (16:20-21; cf. 17:7). Similar rejection and ethno-religious ambiguity weigh heavily on many Indian Christians and pose a challenge for identity formation and their inclusion into national unity.

Acts depicts various strategies that enabled believers to cope with displacement, alienation, and persecution. Believers maintained close connection with one another and cared for each other’s needs (4:23-37; 6:1-7; 9:39-43; 11:27-30; 27:3; 28:14-16). The unity of believers was strengthened by prayer and fellowship that reached beyond local congregations (4:23-36; 11:28-30; 24:11). Believers provided hospitality to travelling ministers and impoverished believers. Paul and Silas were welcomed by Lydia (16:14-15) and the newly converted jailor cared for their wounds (16:29-34). Jason (along with others) was bailed out of jail by fellow believers (17:9). Paul was cared for during his imprisonment and house arrest (16:29-34; 28:14-16, 30).<sup>57</sup> Persecution of Christians in India has various dimensions. Those who are part of the established Christian denominations are considerably less likely to experience it.<sup>58</sup> Thomas Christians, for example, resemble high caste Hindus in their status and practices.<sup>59</sup> The brunt of persecution falls on the Pentecostal and Pentecostal-ized Christians, especially those from SCs and STs.<sup>60</sup> Sahoo indicates that tribals (both non-Christian and Christian) are often denied welfare benefits, legal protection, and citizenship rights due to corruption and patron-client relationships. This forces many to migrate

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<sup>54</sup>Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 133-136. “Hindu nationalism . . . does not visualize Christians and Muslims as part of the Indian nation.” (135).

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 135. See also Johnson, *Oxford Dictionary*, 207.

<sup>56</sup>Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 3, 15:1-23:35* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), Kindle loc. 8848-11172; Eric D. Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations: The Function of Race and Ethnicity in Acts 16* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 149-180.

<sup>57</sup>For bailing Paul and Silas out of jail, see Keener, *Acts, Vol. 3*, kindle loc. 11740-11786.

<sup>58</sup>Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 5. The exception to this is the Kadhamal incident in 2007-2008 which included a number of Christians from Catholic and mainline denominations.

<sup>59</sup>Fernando and Gispert-Sauch, *Christianity*, 62-66, 198-199; Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 5; Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 6-7, 67.

<sup>60</sup>Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 6-7, 22-23, 43-48, 129-140; Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 5.

to cities in search of employment.<sup>61</sup> Beyond this, many tribals who convert to Christianity lose even the meager social welfare benefits that are available. In addition, they are often ridiculed, discriminated against, and/or ostracized by their family and fellow tribals for abandoning their ancestral traditions.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the emphasis on hardships and persecutions, Acts also depicts other types of movement and displacement among God's people. These were brought about by external circumstances and/or human volition. Perhaps the most obvious example is the numerous pilgrims on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. They came from around the then-known world to worship God. Some came from beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire, as far east as Elam, Parthia, and Mesopotamia (2:9-11). Though most were Jews, others were proselytes (2:11). Luke's concern is to indicate the breath of God's people, including the linguistic and cultural diversity from the outset.

According to Acts, the apostles are initially reluctant to take the gospel beyond the traditional Jewish homeland despite the command of Jesus (Acts 1:8; cf. Luke 24:47). As a result, Philip and other ordinary believers carry the newly found faith forward (8:4-5; 11:19-21). Luke places Stephen's speech (and martyrdom) strategically prior to this movement (7:1-53).<sup>63</sup> Placed here, the speech highlights the traditional identity of God's people as migrant people. God appears to Abraham in Mesopotamia who then migrates to the promised land where he lives as a stranger (7:2-8). Joseph was trafficked to Egypt (7:9-11) and Jacob subsequently moved there as a result of the famine (7:12-18). Moses grew up in Pharaoh's household but later became aware of his people and own identity. His zeal for justice led him to kill an Egyptian; as a result he fled to Midian where "he became a stranger/foreigner" (7:23-29). Finally, due to obstinance, God judged his people by taking them to exile in Babylonia (7:43).

Stephen's speech highlights God's presence among His people as they migrate. This recounting of history is neither accidental nor haphazard. It shows God's presence among His people in foreign lands and prepares Luke's audience for the movement of the gospel to the ends of the earth.<sup>64</sup> It demonstrates that God's mission moves forward whether

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<sup>61</sup>Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 126-127.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 75-86. See also Daugherty and Athyeal, *Understanding*, 102.

<sup>63</sup>Keener, *Acts*, Vol. 2, kindle loc. 10158-10226. See also Christopher M. Hays, "What is the Place of My Rest? Being Migrant People(s) of the God of All the Earth," *Open Theology* 7 (2021): 152-158; Meiken Antje Buchholz, "Considerations about the Theological Meaning of Migration in the Book of Acts," *EJT* 30, No.1 (2021): 93-105.

<sup>64</sup>Keener, *Acts*, Vol. 2, kindle loc. 10158-10226.

his people migrate purposefully or are dispersed due to persecution, famines, or political turmoil.

Luke also wants to highlight that though Jerusalem and its temple are important for the purpose of salvation history (Luke 1:8-22; 2:22-39; 24:47-49; Acts 1-8; 21-23), it is no longer the center of God's presence. Rather, God's kingdom embraces all nations. God may be encountered in a Samaritan town (8:4-8), on a dusty desert road to Gaza (8:26-40), or in a Gentile house (10:34-48) as much as in Jerusalem (2:1-4). After all, God has poured out his Spirit on all peoples. This perspective relativizes the notion of holy place/land in the Acts narrative and informs a present-day audience that Christ is present everywhere through his Spirit (cf. John 4:21-24). Therefore, there is little room for a strict interpretation of Christian Zionism or Hindutva ideology of India as Fatherland and Holy Land that excludes non-Hindus from recognition in the Indian nation.<sup>65</sup> God is with his people whether they stay at home or migrate to other lands.

Acts also features a number of movements that appear less extraordinary, many of which find counterpart in the stories of today's migrants. Paul meets Lydia, a businesswoman, in Philippi (16:14). Luke writes that she is from Thyatira though she resides in Philippi.<sup>66</sup> Apparently, she had migrated to Philippi to enhance her business.<sup>67</sup> God had providentially brought her to Philippi where she heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Aquila and Prisca were forced out of Rome as a result of political turmoil during the reign of Claudius (18:1-4).<sup>68</sup> Though the exact date of the incident is debated, the occasion seems to refer to the riots between Jews and Jewish-Christians (Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4; Dio Cass. 60.6.6b).<sup>69</sup> Paul meets the couple in Corinth (18:1-2) and travels with

<sup>65</sup>Cf. Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 134-135; Iyadurai, 78-81. "Golwakar wanted non-Hindus to either to glorify Hinduism or leave." (81).

<sup>66</sup>Some scholars think that Lydia was an African living in Diaspora. See Joseph Enuwosa and Friday Udoisang, "Africa and Africans in the Acts of Apostles," in *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective*, ed. David Tuesday Adamo (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 130-131.

<sup>67</sup>Luke does not tell whether she was a temporary or permanent migrant. Lydia's socioeconomic status is also debated. See Keener, *Acts*, Vol. 3, kindle loc. 8279-8483; Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations*, 133-137.

<sup>68</sup>This most likely means that they were not Roman citizens. See Keener, *Acts*, Vol. 3, kindle loc. 15110-15146.

<sup>69</sup>See details in *ibid.*, kindle loc. 14806-15104. According to Keener, Roman leaders often expelled foreigners who posed a threat to their Roman heritage or their political interests (kindle loc. 14821).

them to Ephesus (18:19; 1 Cor 16:19). The couple ministers again in Rome (Rom 16:3) and later returns to Ephesus (2 Tim 4:19).

Other incidents that involve migration include Paul's move to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, the famous rabbi (22:3); people displaced by famines (7:11-15; 11:27-29); and litigations that forced Paul to appeal to the emperor (25:10-14). Luke even recounts a storm that ends in a shipwreck and a prolonged stay in Malta (28:11). These movements demonstrate God's sovereign hand over his people and how he orchestrates people's lives through migration, whether voluntary or forced. God's providence extends even to nations in general (14:16-17; 17:26-28).

As was mentioned in the introduction, many Indians move to foreign lands. North America has been particularly popular among migrating Indian Christians since the 1960s.<sup>70</sup> Not everyone who migrates is poor or vulnerable.<sup>71</sup> Numerous professionals and students are looking for competitive markets and international opportunities.<sup>72</sup> Some decide to reside permanently abroad whereas others return to India. Regardless of the socioeconomic standing, many send remittances back home.<sup>73</sup>

Though the majority of labor migrants are men, an increasing number of women also migrate due to work and/or studies. Within India, a majority of women migrate due to marriage arrangements or as part of the family.<sup>74</sup> Others look for jobs and careers not available at home.<sup>75</sup> Especially for professional women, migrating gives them more social and economic freedom.<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, others fall victims to sexual exploitation, human trafficking, surrogacy, or are mistreated as domestic

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<sup>70</sup>Daugherty and Athyal, *Understanding*, 150.

<sup>71</sup>R.B. Bhagat, "Internal Migration in India: Are the Underclass More Mobile?" in *Migration, Identity, and Conflict: India Migration Report 2011*, ed. S. Irudaya Rajan (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 30-32; G. Remya Prabha, "Migration and Female Employment in India: Macro Evidence from NSSO Data," in *Migration, Identity, and Conflict: India Migration Report 2011*, ed. S. Irudaya Rajan (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 252-276; Sunil Mani, "High-skilled Migration from India: An Analysis of Its Economic Implications," in *Migration, Identity, and Conflict: India Migration Report 2011*, ed. S. Irudaya Rajan (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 415-439.

<sup>72</sup>Mani, "High-skilled Migration," 415-439.

<sup>73</sup>India is the largest remittance receiving country in the world in absolute terms. See *Ibid.*, 430-435; according to migration data portal, India received total of 83 billion USD in remittances in 2020. See <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/remittances> (accessed 12/16/2021) for 2020 statistics.

<sup>74</sup>Bhagat, "Internal Migration," 36, 38-41; Prabha, "Migration and Female," 252-276.

<sup>75</sup>Sreelekha Nair, "Multiple Identities and Migratory Dynamics of Nurses," in *Migration, Identity, and Conflict: India Migration Report 2011*, ed. S. Irudaya Rajan (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 277-297.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*

servants.<sup>77</sup> Further, according to Daughrity and Athyal, Indian diaspora communities tend to self-segregate and retain their old linguistic and caste associations. They hold on to patriarchy and other discriminatory patterns even if the younger generation is questioning these and trying to break out of many less-desirable patterns and traditions.<sup>78</sup>

Luke-Acts mentions a number of women who assert their strength and dignity as God's people. Mary's prophetic song declares a reversal of commonly asserted values based on status, wealth, gender, and power (Luke 1:46-56). Her role as a prophetic teacher in and through this passage is noteworthy. Pentecostal empowerment is meant for women as much as for men (Acts 2:16-21). Lydia, a prominent migrant businesswoman who heads her household (16:15),<sup>79</sup> and Priscilla who teaches the prominent apostle Apollos, are examples of Spirit-empowered women who may be looked upon as examples even today.

### Migration and Identity

One of the most pressing issues for migrants is the loss of identity. This applies particularly to those who live abroad though out of state migrants also feel the impact.<sup>80</sup> As migrants leave behind their community, familiar culture, customs, and language they often feel confused and overwhelmed.<sup>81</sup> Old and familiar ways of relating to the world around them no longer apply. There is a sense of losing one's worth and self-identity.<sup>82</sup> In such a state of disruption, migrants need to forge a new identity as they come into contact with a new culture. This

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<sup>77</sup>W. S. Annie, "Migration in Gender Perspective," in *Migration in Perspectives: Towards Theology of Migration from the Margins*, ed. Songram Basumatary (Chennai: Gurugul Publications, 2018), 122-125; Neetha N., "Closely Woven: Domestic Work and Internal Migration of Women in India," in *Migration, Identity, and Conflict: India Migration Report 2011*, ed. S. Irudaya Rajan (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 298-318.

<sup>78</sup>Daughrity and Athyal, *Understanding*, 154-156.

<sup>79</sup>Acts tells us that Lydia was baptized along with "her household" (ὁ οἶκος αὐτῆς).

<sup>80</sup>This is particularly the case with migrants from North East States of India. See Walotemjen, "Migration from North East Indian Perspective," in *Migration in Perspectives: Towards Theology of Migration from the Margins*, ed. Songram Basumatary (Chennai: Gurugul Publications, 2018), 135-147; Rajan, Korra, and Chyrmmand, "Politics," 102-107; Jianthaolung Gonmei, "Racism and Discrimination Against the North-East Indian in the Midst of COVID-19 Pandemic – A Response," *NCC Review*, Vol. CXL, No. 04 (May 2020): 32-40.

<sup>81</sup>Prasuna, "Discerning the Signs," 167-168; Hays, "What," 158-166.

<sup>82</sup>J. Daniel Kirubaraj, "Migration: Exploring a 'We Communion Theology,'" in *Migration in Perspectives: Towards Theology of Migration from the Margins*, ed. Songram Basumatary (Chennai: Gurugul Publications, 2018), 157.



includes integrating aspects of the old and new culture into a sense of new self and community.

Sometimes newly arrived immigrants isolate themselves and try to retain their old identity regardless of cost.<sup>83</sup> At other times, they uncritically assimilate into the host culture. Neither is a desirable course of action.<sup>84</sup> To complicate the situation further, Dalits and tribals in particular, have been oppressed for generations. Their identity has been crushed and fragmented. Consequently, they are just beginning to re-discover and reconstruct their long-lost identity, whether they migrate or stay in their traditional places of origin.<sup>85</sup> James Massey has noted that the Pentecostal power of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-13) that comes on all people regardless of status, class, or caste is particularly important for Dalit Christians. The Spirit reception highlights their empowerment and has potential to lead to liberation as God's people yield to his guidance.<sup>86</sup>

Luke's ethnic and cultural sensitivity is seen in the way he includes ethnic and cultural markers in the Acts narrative. In addition to the Pentecost narrative (2:6-11), he mentions numerous other geographical locations and ethnic identities. The Ethiopian man (8:27) and Simon the Niger (13:1-2) would have been recognized as persons of dark-skinned complexion by Luke's audience.<sup>87</sup> The Ethiopian was also a man of high status, from the "ends of the earth" (cf. 1:8), beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire.<sup>88</sup>

Luke also adds numerous seemingly irrelevant descriptors to peoples' names. He mentions Lucian of Cyrene from North Africa (13:1-2),<sup>89</sup> Lydia from Thyatira (16:14), Sopater from Berea, Gaius from Derbe,

<sup>83</sup>Daughrity and Athyal, *Understanding*, 154-156.

<sup>84</sup>Prasuna, "Discerning the Signs," 172-176.

<sup>85</sup>Thomas, "Missiological Perspectives," 67-83; S. Lourdasamy, "Migrant-Dalits and Mission: A Diagnosis of People's Perspective," in *Migration and Mission in India*, eds. L. Stanislaus and Jose Joseph (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), 84-94; Anthony Jeevaraj, "Immigrants or Inhabitants: A Search for Identity from the Margins," in *Migration in Perspectives: Towards Theology of Migration from the Margins*, ed. Songram Basumatary (Chennai: Gurugul Publications, 2018), 107-120; Parker, "Religious Hybridity," 121-134.

<sup>86</sup>James Massey, "Acts of the Apostles," in *One Volume Dalit Bible Commentary: New Testament*, ed. T. K. John (New Delhi: Center for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2010), 314, 317.

<sup>87</sup>See especially Enuwosa and Udoisang, "Africa," 117-130; Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations*, 5-6, 9-10.

<sup>88</sup>Keener, *Acts*, Vol. 2, kindle loc. 14707-15142. For skin complexion, see esp. kindle loc. 15304 (Petron, *Sat.* 102; Lucian, *Indict.* 6; *Patr.* 4; Jer 13:23; *Sib. Or.* 3.322; Diod. Sic. 3.8.2); Greeks and Romans did exhibit ethnocentrism, but it was not primarily based on skin color (kindle loc. 15363-15395); of the high status of the Ethiopian man, see kindle loc. 15395-15572.

<sup>89</sup>Keener, *Acts*, Vol. 2, kindle loc. 24318-24396. Some ancient authors at times

Mnason of Cyprus (20:4; 21:16; cf. 19:29; Rom 16:23, and Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia (20:4; 21:29), to name a few.<sup>90</sup> These markers are not accidental or arbitrary. They highlight the breadth of cultural, ethnic, and geographical diversity. As such Paul's theology of being "one in Christ" (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11; Eph 2:14) does not erase various identities. Luke and Paul both denounce ethnic and cultural superiority/hierarchies but affirm the cultural and ethnic diversity in the body of Christ. Culture and ethnicity are important to God and as such should not be minimized, negated, or disregarded.

The majority of Indian Christians belong to lower castes, tribal groups, and Dalits. Despite their inclusion into the Christian Church, many still feel discriminated against.<sup>91</sup> Indian theologians from the North-East India (NEI) have further noted the racial discrimination, harassment, and unequal treatment of NEI peoples.<sup>92</sup> They are often "mismatched as Chinese" and called "chinkies" due to their "non-Indian" appearance and customs.<sup>93</sup> As migrants they are subject to prejudice and discriminatory treatment and have recently become scapegoats due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>94</sup>

Luke mentions that Timothy had a Jewish(-Christian) mother and Greek father (Acts 16:1). Timothy's mixed ethnic and religious heritage is noted even if Luke does not develop the point further.<sup>95</sup> The details are mentioned precisely because Timothy's "fractured ethnic identity" is important.<sup>96</sup> His "mixed" heritage signaled the collapse of exclusive ethnic categories.<sup>97</sup> As the New Testament clearly indicates, God's people include individuals from all nations and ethnicities, even those whose ancestry is not "pure" or easily defined. Therefore, the notion of hybridity as highlighted by postcolonial scholars is a good conceptual

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compared, connected, and/or confused Indian(s) with Ethiopia(ns) (Arrian, *Ind.* 1.2; 6.8; Ctesias, *Ind.* 18-19; Strabo, *Georg.* 15.14-15, 24-25; Josephus, *Ant.* 11.33, 186, 216, 272; Esth 1:1; 8:9) though Luke's audience would probably not have made that connection (Keener, *Acts*, Vol. 2, kindle loc. 15338-15346).

<sup>90</sup>Keener, *Acts*, Vol. 3, kindle loc. 20581-20674; 24048-24100. Keener suggests that the geographical indicators in 20:4 are particularly important to demonstrate representation of different churches in Paul's collection to the poor in Jerusalem (24:17; Rom 15:25-28; 2 Cor 8-9).

<sup>91</sup>Daugherty and Athyal, *Understanding*, 119-123; Massey, "Acts of the Apostles," 323-343.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

<sup>93</sup>Walotemjen, "Migration," 135-147; Gonmei, "Racism and Discrimination," 32-40.

<sup>94</sup>Gonmei, "Racism and Discrimination," 32-40.

<sup>95</sup>See especially Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations*, 63-118.

<sup>96</sup>This is particularly important due to its placement in the narrative right after the apostolic decree in Acts 15.

<sup>97</sup>Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations*, 63-64, 113-118.

framework for thinking of multiple and overlapping identities<sup>98</sup> grounded in Christ and Scripture.

Though Luke mentions numerous cultures and ethnic identities working together in God's mission, he never claims that it is easy. The first major dispute in Acts involves two culturally and linguistically different Jewish groups (6:1-8). Luke indicates that the Jew-Gentile rift caused a major problem that required God's intervention and an official decision (10-11; 15:1-29). Despite this, cultural and ethnic differences continued to be an issue even after the Apostolic council had formally settled the matter (21:17-26). Though Luke describes the process through which Gentiles became fully accepted members of the church, the ensuing decision did not erase the Jew-Gentile distinction or make the church a homogenous group. On the contrary, it affirmed ethnic differences and laid out guidelines on how to retain the unity of the early church and maintain fellowship between distinct groups.

In light of such issues embedded in the Christian experience and the global Church today, God's people need to pay careful attention to racial equality, ethnic diversity, and identity formation of God's people. Pastors, priests, and Christian leaders function as "entrepreneurs of identity" whether they are consciously aware of it or not.<sup>99</sup> Migrants are particularly in need of a welcoming community that will not only embrace them but affirm them and help them negotiate a new (hybrid) identity that is rooted in Scripture and relevant to contextual realities.

## Conclusion

The New Testament contains numerous stories of migration, the crossing of borders, displacement, and ethnic diversity. Perhaps the most surprising biblical statement is that God became a vulnerable migrant. He fully identified not just with humanity in general, but with being a refugee and a migrant in particular (Matt 2:7-23; Luke 2:4-24). Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884) described Christ as "[t]he journeying God."<sup>100</sup> Christ is the one who comes to those "of the far country," denying himself and "becoming transparent to God."<sup>101</sup> He humbled himself to give life to migrants and refugees. He is the Cosmic Migrant who travels from

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<sup>98</sup>See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5-9, 38-39, 127-133, 157, 219-223.

<sup>99</sup>Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Introduction to A Hermeneutics of Identity," *BSAC* 168, 669 (2011): 387.

<sup>100</sup>Sen is the first Indian theologian to "expound the meaning of Trinity in relation to . . . Brahman as *Saccidananda*." Boyd, *Introduction*, 34.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

eternity to save humanity and transforms the entire creation (John 1:1-4, 9-14; Col 1:15-20; 2:9-10; Rom 8:18-24). He chose to empty himself and took on a particularity of (Jewish) human race (John 1:14; Phil 2:5-11; Col 2:9).

In and through his cosmic migration, Christ does not remain distant and aloof but fully identifies with the human condition as a stranger and refugee (cf. Matt 2:7-23). Christ is even seen in and through them (Matt 25:31-46). Consequently, it is the responsibility of God's people to embrace and welcome migrants, and to live in solidarity advocating for their wellbeing at every point of their migration experience. This is particularly acute as migrants are searching for a community to which they can belong and are reformulating their fragmented identities. They should be welcomed into God's people as neighbors and co-migrants. After all, all of God's people ought to see themselves as pilgrims and temporary residents, "foreigners and exiles" (1 Pet 1:1; 2:11) on their way toward their heavenly homeland (Heb 11:13-16; 10:32-35; 13:14; Rev 21-22).

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