God on the Move: Jesus, the Traveller, Stranger, and Refuge in John 1:1-18

1. Introduction: People on the Move

"Have you ever wondered what it's like to be an immigrant living in a foreign land or a refugee fleeing from war, violence, or natural disaster?"[1] This is the question posed by VanThanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese American Catholic New Testament scholar in his book, *What Does the Bible Say about ...? Strangers, Migrants, and Refugees.* He answers his own question with this short remark: "Life as an immigrant is no joke!"[2] Reminiscing on the journey as one of many refugees—so-called the Vietnamese boat people—, he says, "We preferred to die together at sea in a flimsy boat, ... and taking our chances with nature, rather than to live facing death from hunger and deprived of faith and hope."[3] My own journey of living as a resident alien, temporarily or in a long-term, in different countries for the last two decades resonates, to some extent, with his remark: "Life as an immigrant is no joke!"[4] Considering the unprecedented global mass migration,[5] stories like his and mine represent a glimpse into a much broader human experience.

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that migration has always been an integral part of human existence. Thinking of the theme of this conference, *People on the Move: Caring for Immigrants and Refugees*, I cannot help but return to the Bible which tells the stories of God's people constantly on the move, and to some extent, their movement shaped their identity as God's people. Migration in the Bible takes us all the way back to the beginning: the exile of Adam and Eve, the sojourn of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and their descendants, the

[1] VanThanh Nguyen, *What Does the Bible Say about ...? Strangers, Migrants, and Refugees* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2021), 12.
[2] Nguyen, *What Does the Bible*, 15.
[3] Nguyen, *What Does the Bible*, 15.
[4] Nguyen, *What Does the Bible*, 15.
[5] Lausanne Movement, "People on the Move: Edited Excerpt from Lausanne Occasional Paper" in *State of the Great Commission: Report Prepared for Lausanne Global Congress Seoul-Incheon 2024, 182.* World Migration Report (WMR) estimates that there are 281 million migrants in the world in 2020.

painful journeys of Joseph as a victim of human trafficking, Moses as a fugitive, stranger, and wanderer, Rahab and Ruth, living as strangers among Israelites, an Israelite slave girl in 2 Kings who was most likely one of many war captives and, not to mention, the overarching stories of God's people in Egypt and in exile later.[6] In the New Testament, Christians find their identity as pilgrims and people on *the way*.[7] The biblical narrative ends with John, the seer in exile in Patmos. The lived experiences of those who were displaced and migrated to the places where they did not belong, due to natural disasters, political instability and oppression, wars, social-economic challenges, and other reasons, are interwoven into the multifaceted stories of the Bible.

Yet the stories never idealise the displaced or refugees only because of their circumstances. Rather, they depict them as ordinary human beings with flaws and sinfulness.[8] Adam and Eve's disobedience led them to exile, yet with God's protection. Abraham and Issac told lies for the sake of their own well-being, and thus at the expense of that of their wives. Jacob and Moses' exiles were caused by wrong choices they made. The exile of God's people in the Old Testament was interpreted as their failure to embody God's presence in their lives. While the causes of displacement and migration are multi-layered and complex, the call to love and care for those who are on the journey, living as strangers and refugees, is crystal clear throughout Scripture. "You shall also love the stranger" (Deut 10:19). This command is grounded, firstly in who God is, the God who loves the strangers (*ger*), providing them with food and clothing (v. 18) and secondly, in who God's people are, a people who once resided as strangers in Egypt (v. 19). The experience of living as strangers

[6] See M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 63-134; *The Bible and Borders: Hearing God's Word on Immigration* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020), 9-49 for the general overview of migration in the Bible.
[7] See Phil 3:20; 1 Peter 1:1; James 1:1. In Acts, the followers of Jesus were referred to as "the Way". (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).
[8] Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, 86-8. In addition, Carroll rightly points out the importance of not idealising the circumstances of the immigrants or refugees.

and refugees "demands a response of grace".[9] The biblical command is simple: "You shall love the strangers and aliens as yourself" (Lev 19:34), but the reality of global mass migration is anything but simple.

In this paper, I would like to redirect our attention from people on the move to God on the move, exploring the prologue of John's Gospel which depicts Jesus as the traveller, stranger, and refuge. While each Gospel begins uniquely and shapes the story of Jesus on the way as traveller, John in particular highlights the divine migration, from heaven to earth and back to heaven.[10] However, Jesus, the traveller, was not recognised or welcomed, and yet the prologue climaxes with the invitation which this unwelcomed travelling stranger offers (John 1:12-13). What might be the implications of this invitation for travellers, strangers, refugees, and Christ followers today? Before discussing John's prologue considering the topic, God on the Move, let us first have a brief overview of Jesus' lived experience as traveller, stranger, and refugee in Matthew and Luke.

2. Jesus, the Traveller, Stranger, and Refugee in Matthew and Luke

Both Matthew and Luke situate Jesus' birth in a context marked by travels, foreignness, and life as a refugee. Jesus was born, quite literally "on the road" without a place to be born (and later in life, nowhere to lay his head), while Mary and Joseph were travelling to Bethlehem due to the political environment according to Luke (2:1-7; 9:58; Matt 8:20).[11] Luke's genealogy of Jesus traces all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38), the first to be exiled, and it is followed by Jesus' time in the wilderness (4:1-13). More strikingly, Matthew's

[9] Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, 88.
[10] See Fernando Segovia, "The Journey(s) of the Word of God: A Reading of the Plot of the Fourth Gospel," in *The Fourth Gospel from a Literary Perspective*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Fernando Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 23–54; Francisco Lozada Jr, *John: An Introduction and Study Guide: History, Community, and Ideology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 74; Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley, "Descending from and Ascending into Heaven: A Postcolonial Analysis of Travel, Space and Power" in *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 7.
[11] Nguyen, "Current Trends of Migration in Asia," *God's People on the Move: Biblical and Global Perspectives on Migration and Mission* (eds. VanThanh Nguyen and John M. Prior; Eugene, OR: PickWick, 2014), 167.

genealogy of Jesus features three foreign women as his foremothers, namely Tamar,[12] Rahab, and Ruth (Matt 2:2-5). Shortly after Jesus was born, the political environment became so hostile that Jesus' family had to flee to Egypt overnight, seeking asylum there to escape the death threat from King Herod (Matt 2:13-15). We can only imagine what the journey was like for this young family, fleeing in the middle of the night for survival.[13] This might have been the experience of many other young families in and around Bethlehem under King Herod as he ordered the massing killing of the male infants (Matt 2:16-18). Once again, I can only imagine a large group of young families, fleeing from home by night, while seeking refuge in foreign soil. Jesus' family was one among many other night-walking young families, entrusting their survival to the mercy of others.[14]

Upon their return to Israel, his family once again migrated to the northern part of Israel, eventually settling in Galilee of the Gentiles (Matt 4:13-16). Thus, Matthew's account of Jesus' childhood is indeed "laced with migrant language".[15] On the one hand, Jesus' lived experience as a refugee in Matthew particularly alludes to that of God's people and their journey from Canaan to Egypt, back to Canaan, and to exile.[16] On the other hand, Jesus' life as "a perpetual migrant" invites his followers to journey with him, constantly relying on the

[12] Tamar's ethnicity is uncertain; however, Judah settled in Canaan and married a Canaanite woman, Shua, who bore him three sons. It seemed quite likely that Tamar was also from the region where Judah's family lived. See Gen 38:1-11.
[13] Dreams played the key role in terms of guiding the fate and uncertain journeys of Joseph and the young family. See Matt 2:13, 19, 22. Paul Hertig, "Jesus' Migrations and Liminal Withdrawals in Matthew", *God's People*, 46.
[14] Hertig, "Jesus' Migration", 48. Hertig also juxtaposes the journeys of Moses and Jesus in that Egypt was the place of oppression for Moses while it was the place of welcome and sanctuary for Jesus.
[15] Hertig, "Jesus' Migrations", 49.
[16] The ways in which Matthew shapes Jesus' childhood narratives are particularly telling in that the Gospel points to the fulfilment of prophecies from the Scripture. Jesus fled to Egypt and returned only to move again to Nazareth and finally to Capernaum, Galilee of the Gentiles. At the beginning of his ministry, he once again withdrew to the wilderness, undoing what Israelites had done. makes points of contacts to the prophecies from the Scripture. See Matthew 1:15, 18, 23; 4:1-11, 15-16; Nguyen, "Current Trends of Migration", 167; Hertig, "Jesus' Migrations", 47-8.

hospitality of strangers,[17] and encountering God along the way by being welcomed and welcoming others.

Similarly, the middle section of Luke's Gospel, so-called the Travel Narratives (9:51-19:44), depicts Jesus' ministry as *the journey* to Jerusalem. He teaches and eats with people—both rich and poor, powerful and marginalised, and the so-called religious and the sinners. Jesus and his travelling companions continually relied on the hospitality of the strangers along this journey. At the end of Luke's narrative, the risen Jesus once again met two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus where he was identified as a travelling stranger (*paroikos*) who later became the host at the table (24:13-18, 30).

In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus, the travelling migrant who was once a refugee, is continually found on the road as a guest in others' homes, a stranger in his own hometown, and yet invites those he meets on the journey to find home or refuge in him. Let us now move on to examine the prologue of John which juxtaposes divine migration to the world, unwelcomed dwelling, and invitation to offer life and home in his presence.

3. Jesus, the Traveller, Stranger, and Refugee Becoming Refuge in John's Prologue

The journey motif in the prologue has been noted by scholars.[18] For example, Francisco Lozada outlines the prologue as "the world above (1:1-2), the world below (1:3-17), and back to the world above (1:18)".[19] Similarly, Dube and Staley portray the Word's coming as "[T]he Word/Jesus descends from heaven into the world as an unknown and rejected traveller".[20] In fact, the Gospel of John draws the journey motif, yet somewhat differently from the Synoptics which trace Jesus' physical journey to Jerusalem, layered with theological significance. The overarching journey motif for John is shaped by Jesus' descent from above

[17] Hertig, "Jesus' Migrations", 60.
[18] See footnote 10.
[19] Lozada, *John*, 74.
[20] Dube and Staley, "Descending from", 6.

into the world and his return to the Father.[21] Hence it is no wonder that the prologue offers a hermeneutical framework or functions as an introduction to the whole Gospel of John.[22]

In addition, it is worth briefly commenting on the structure of the prologue for our discussion. Scholars have proposed two main ways of understanding its structure: One is a chiastic (or a mirror-like; A-B-C-B'-A') reading, and the other is a sequential (or linear) one.[23] I take a chiastic reading of the prologue as a whole and of the central verses discussed below.[24]

A. Coming of the Word as an unknown and unwelcomed traveller in 1:9-11

B. Welcoming of the unwelcomed traveller in 1:12-13

A'. Coming of the Word as an immigrant among us in 1:14.

Let us now turn to the middle section of the prologue (1:9-14), where the Word's journey is portrayed through the themes of coming, being unknown and unwelcomed, temporary residence, and ultimately, invitation and welcome at the centre.

3.1 Jesus, the Traveller, Stranger, and Unwelcomed Temporary Resident

The prologue unveils the identity of the Word, as God, as life, as the true light who is then revealed as the one who became flesh, and finally named Jesus Christ, God's only Son. At another level, it features the relationship between the Word, God, and the world. Most importantly for our discussion, it also portrays the movement of the Word from being with

[21] Besides the prologue, see John 3:13; 6:38, 51; 8:23; 13:3; 14:2-3; 16:28; 18:36; 19:11; 20:7.
[22] See Mark Edwards, *John* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 15; Peter M. Phillips, *The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: A Sequential Reading* (LNTS 294; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 5-6; Gsil R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Reading the Incarnate Words", *Jesus in Johannine Tradition* (eds. Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher; London: WJK, 2001), 28.
[23] See Derek Morton Hamilton Tovey, "The Narrative Structure and Flow of the Prologue to John's Gospel", *Johannine Christology* (eds. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts; Leiden: Brill, 2020), 155-6 for the discussion of these two proposals. In fact, Tovey takes a sequential reading of the prologue as he reads it as a narrative while I take a chiastic one as I see it structured poetically.
[24] For the chiastic structure of the prologue, see Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (London: SPCK, 1992), 66.

God to dwelling among people, tabernacling in the world. The central section of the prologue in particular highlights the travelling Word through the double use of the verb, 'coming' (*erchomai*) in verses 9 and 11. The true light, witnessed by the 'coming' (*erchomai*) of John (v. 7), enters the world, announcing divine arrival and human encounter (v. 9). The light is then personified as he in verse 10; however, he remains unrecognised as a stranger in the world he made. He is the travelling Word, unacknowledged and unknown (*ou egno).* The next verse repeats the coming of the Word once again, and this time his own people did not welcome or receive (ou *paralambanō*) him. Hence the identity of the true light, the Word, devolves from traveller, to stranger, and finally to one who is rejected.

This progression was already foreshadowed earlier in verse 5: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome (*katalambanō*) it". The meaning of *katelambanō* ranges from "act of aggression" to "understanding".[25] The context of the prologue allows for both readings, particularly in light of verses 10 and 11.[26] In verse 10, the light is not recognised or known (*ou egno*) which allows *katalambanō* to be read as 'understanding' or 'comprehending'. In verse 11, however, the idea of active rejection and thus unwelcoming is reflected, pointing more toward the reading of *katalambanō* as an 'act of aggression'. While the surprising response to this hostility awaits in verses 12 and 13, let us continue to follow the Word who became flesh and tabernacled in an unwelcoming world, considering the chiastic reading of the prologue.

Following the Word's journey to the world below, "what changes is the Word's appearance and location: he takes on flesh and lives in the world below (1:14a)".[27] The theological significance of this verse: "the Word became flesh" and "pitched a tent among

[25] Phillips, *The Prologue*, 172. See also Rodolfo Galvan Estrada III, *A Latino Reading of Race, Kinship, and the Empire: John's Prologue* (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 203.
[26] C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2nd ed; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 158. Barrett notes that John may have played with both meanings.
[27] Lozada, *John*, 80.

us" is paramount in terms of incarnation and the temple imagery; however, my interest lies in two particular aspects for our discussion: firstly, the bodily (*sarx*) presence of the Word as a traveller in a hostile world and secondly, the living status of this enfleshed Word as a temporary resident (*skenoō)*. As previously discussed, Jesus was born into a hostile world and lived as a refugee and migrant. Similarly, the first half of this single verse encapsulates Jesus' bodily presence in the world, identifying him with displaced, travelling strangers whose living conditions are marked by tents, encampments, and temporary dwellings. Of course, the verb, *skenoō,* which can be translated as tabernacling, pitching a tent, or simply dwelling or living clearly alludes to God's presence in the tabernacle, especially in Exodus 40.[28] Yet, the Word's enfleshment, when read within the context of a journey into a strange and hostile place, marked by temporary dwelling, gives the incarnation a human face—specifically, the face of one among the displaced. Let us now see how this unwelcomed traveller responds to the hostile world.

3.2 Jesus, the Refugee Becoming Refuge

We have now come to the centre of the prologue, verses 12 and 13, based on a proposed chiastic reading. The enclosing verses (vv. 9-11, 14) are packed with the themes of being unrecognised, unwelcomed, and the displaced condition of the travelling Word, the central section features an unexpected invitation which changes the tone of the prologue. The first verb that opens the section is 'welcome' or 'receive' (*lambanō*).[29] The rejected Word-in-flesh—by darkness, a hostile world, and his own—"becomes the most receptive of all people".[30] Estrada's Latino reading of the prologue—particularly focusing on racial dynamics

[28] The use of *skenoō* in verse 14 and the rest of the prologue strongly alludes to the imagery of the tabernacle with the recurring reference to grace and later Moses. See Laura Sweat Holmes and George Lyons, *John 1-12: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2020), 58-9; Barrett, *John*, 165-6.
[29] Also in verse 16.
[30] Estrada III, *A Latino Reading*, 232.

from the Word-in-flesh—offers two significant points for our discussion. Firstly, Jesus who finds no home among his own becomes home to anyone who welcomes (*lambanō*) him. 'Welcoming' or 'receiving' this displaced traveller becomes a key marker to become his family. Thus, "the rejected one becomes the one who redefines what it means to belong".[31]

Secondly, what is more striking is the Word-in-flesh's response to this unwelcome and rejection. Unlike the violent and oppressive response of the Empire to those who reject its coming and its authority, the Word who travels from above to a hostile world instead offers an invitation to join his family. It speaks of power to offer a place, home, and belonging, not the power to subjugate those who do not recognise or reject him. Here Estrada's words are worth citing at length:

> The prologue provides an alternative conquest narrative, telling the story of the arrival of the Logos to the world that can be read alongside imperial arrivals as manifested by Roman domination of the Mediterranean world (vv. 1-5, 9-11).[32]
>
> The Logos as a divine person comes to inhabit a new land without bringing death, destruction, violence, or slavery. It is the story of the Logos coming to the world in such a way that does not engender fear or forced submission.[33]

His words are particularly striking for those who receive and welcome the travelling Word-in-flesh. Much like the stranger-becoming-host on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, this displaced travelling stranger, Jesus, blurs the lines between host and guest.[34] This stranger becoming host and the refugee becoming refuge brings the gift of life, rather than fear or death. Moreover, this traveling Word-in-flesh's invitation can be unpacked in threefold: firstly, it is marked by the welcoming (*lambanō*) of displaced travelling sojourners for Jesus is found among them.[35] Secondly, it calls us to join him on the road as travellers, strangers,

[31] Estrada III, *A Latino Reading*, 232.
[32] Estrada III, *A Latino Reading*, 233.
[33] Estrada III, *A Latino Reading*, 220.
[34] See Ahn, Byung-Mu's challenge of the Western paradigm of host-guest schema, *Jesus of Galilee* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2004), 3, 125-6. He argues that the relationship between Jesus and MinJung (*oklos*; crowd) and Jesus should not be defined as subject-object, as giver-receiver, or as host-guest.
[35] Matt 25:31-46

and sojourners in the world so that we might discover ourselves among those on the margins. Lastly, it invites us to embrace the rejected Word's way of life who becomes the most hospitable host, creating space for those without a place.

Conclusion

I posed a question at the beginning of this paper: What might be the implications of Jesus/the Word's lived experience and bodily presence on earth for the real-life refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants who travel to unknown places? More importantly, what might the Word-in-flesh's invitation mean for settlers, residents, and Christ followers today? The prologue of John invites us, whoever we are, either literal migrants or spiritual ones, to welcome fellow travellers on the journey as hosts—and to be welcomed by strangers-becoming-hosts as guests. Our openness to being both hosts and guests opens up the possibility of seeing God—and of becoming mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers in God's household—by welcoming strangers and receiving the gifts they bring when we allow them to host us.[36]

For only then can we truly welcome our fellow travelling strangers to the land, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who long for a place to call home, see the glory of God, find "a new way of belonging, … of viewing one another", and experience the richness of life together.[37] Jesus, the traveller, calls us to join the journey on the road and live as strangers in the world as fellow travellers while following the Word-in-flesh's way of responding to a hostile world. I conclude with the thoughtful words of Daniel Carroll:

> The church must regain the vision of being a distinct community, a distinct community made up of ordinary individuals with a calling to be faithful to its Lord ... Christians and the church need to be a certain kind of people with a particular way of looking at and living within society.[38]

[36] Ahn, *Jesus of Galilee*, 125-7.
[37] Estrada III, *A Latino Reading*, 233.
[38] Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, 138-9. Carroll's thoughts are attributed to Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).