A Refugee and Immigrant Literature Survey: Lived Experiences of the Global Refugee Crisis

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KEY WORDS

| Refugee Crisis | Forcibly Displaced Populations | Immigration | | Refugee and Immigrant Literature | Immigration and Migration | Language Learning |

ABSTRACT

The ongoing refugee crisis surpassed 100 million forcibly displaced people as of mid-2022. Narrative publications of the immigrant experience throughout history and continuing up to the present day, in various genres and forms of creative expression, reveal an ongoing dynamic and divine action plan through which a most special genre emerges, letters of faith imprinted on the most fragile parchment of all--the spiritual fabric of the human heart. On these heart-parchments, the Spirit of God drafts living messages of gospel hope and healing to members of the human family experiencing the worst possible tragedies and unimaginably catastrophic ordeals. Guided by a lived experience framework, this current article surveys recent publications across these representations of the immigrant experience, an attempt to understand and respond to the current refugee crisis from a biblical *ethos*.

> *Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be.*
>
> Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. viii

INTRODUCTION: AN ONGOING CRISIS

The ongoing refugee crisis[1] facing humanity in the early decades of this new millennium represents millions upon millions of individuals struggling to survive and recover from unimaginably tragic circumstances. At the end of 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimate stood at 89.3 million forcibly displaced people around the world. See Figure 1: UNHCR Refugee Estimates 2021[2] (UNHCR, 2021)

This was before the Ukraine crisis began in early 2022, which added 12 million Ukrainian refugees to the UNHCR 2021 estimates above, and before the escalation of military conflict in Sudan, resulting in significant numbers of internally displaced Sudanese as well as international refugees fleeing to neighboring Chad, Egypt and across the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia.[3] See Figure 2: UNHCR Refugee Estimates mid-2022[4] (UNHCR, 2022).

1 The crisis can actually be seen as multiple crises in a plural sense, a complex global challenge as nations grapple with the "Human Flow" (Weiwei 2017) of refugees

2 https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html

3 "Global Displacement Hits Another Record, Capping Decade-long Rising Trend" (2022, June 16). UNHCR.

4 https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/100-million-forcibly-displaced.html

From a general theistic perspective, how does one who believes in the existence of God even begin to understand or explain the scope of the ongoing refugee crisis/crises around the globe? In Judeo-Christian tradition, the book of Job is *the* foundational text for explaining the suffering of a righteous man. In contrast to an agnostic and quasi-secular denial of a demonic dimension to evil and a highly controversial "banality of evil" interpretation (Arendt, 1963), the concept that "good" people may sometimes get caught up unwittingly, apathetically and unwillingly in the perpetration of evil outcomes--without necessarily being evil themselves—the Bible records Job's misfortunes as resulting from a direct challenge to God's character by an evil and malevolent spiritual being who motivates and perpetrates evil schemes against a despised humanity, relatively powerless and mortal creatures living in fragile "houses of clay" (Morris, 2010; Job 4:19). In the midst of suffering, mere intellectual speculation[5] will not suffice, as Job lamented to his friends, "Miserable comforters are you all" (Job 16:2). More specifically today, with reference to the plight of refugees, why would God allow suffering and tragedy in the lives of so many millions of people who have become displaced for no apparent fault of their own, with no immediately apparent or rational explanation for their plight?

The purpose of the current article is not necessarily to provide a comprehensive answer to such questions, but to apply a lived experience selective methodology to guide readers toward carefully considered, recently published resources which represent a few steps in the right direction toward finding at least some of the answers, toward possibly becoming part of the solution(s), and toward realizing the sovereignty of an infinitely wise, holy and just God amid tragic suffering and displacement. Many of these resources may be of use to educators in general who--more likely than not--have already had the privilege of welcoming refugee English language learners (ELLs) into their classrooms. And if not yet, as Miriam Adeney (*Refugee Diaspora* 2018) eloquently explains, the love of God, and His moving and acting on behalf of the oppressed continues to result in life-changing experiences and previously unlikely intersections of human lives, and the resulting dramatic transformations of people (Oliveira 2020). Learning a new language and adapting to a new culture is frequently where it all begins for refugees in their new lives and transformative experiences.

LANGUAGE LEARNING, RELIGIOUS FAITH, AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

In general, foreign language learning has had important historical connections to cross-cultural experiences, including the immigrant experience, including religious faith experiences. For what might be called "language of the heart" reasons, people are more likely to respond to a message of faith which they can understand in their own language, and from within their own cultural framework.[6] So the history of cross-cultural experience and dialog has of necessity involved learning new languages, assimilating to new cultures, and establishing a basis for meaningful interaction.

5 i.e. Arendt's *vita contemplativa* vs. *vita activa* (1958, The Human Condition).

6 The "redemptive analogies" discussed by Don Richardson in classic missionary narratives such as *Peace Child* (1974) and *Eternity in their Hearts* (1981) illustrate the search for cultural keys to unlock understanding in a cultural setting which is seemingly antithetical to the gospel. The concept of "refuge" is one such redemptive analogy discussed by Richardson, a proscribed area off limits to acts of violence between warring tribes, a point of safety upon entry.

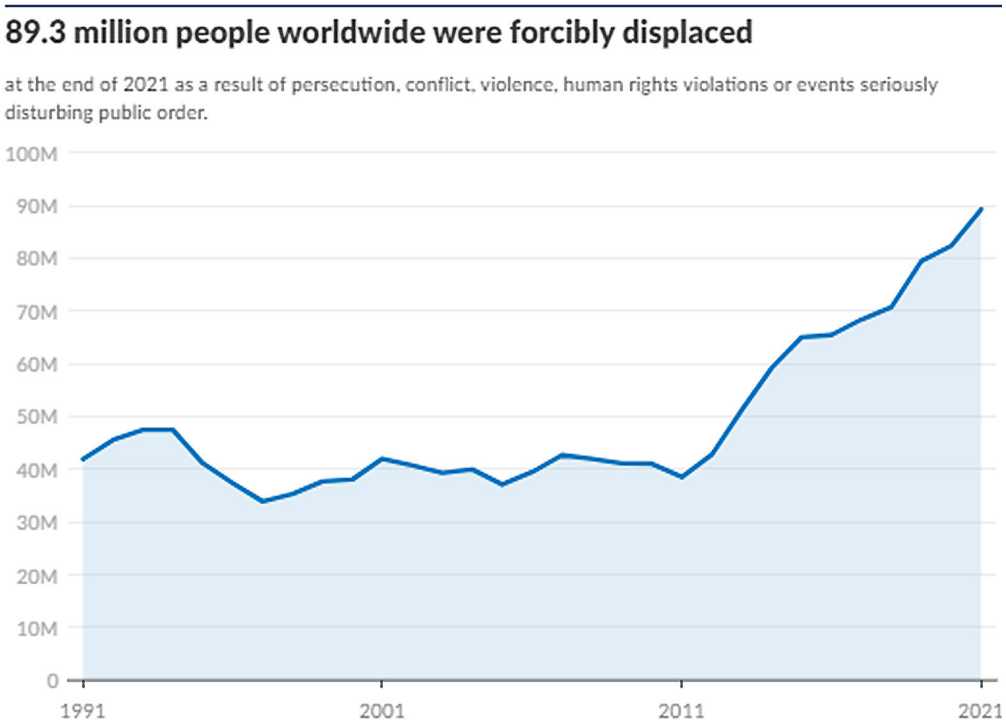

Figure 1: UNHCR Refugee Estimates 2021 (UNHCR, 2021).
https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html

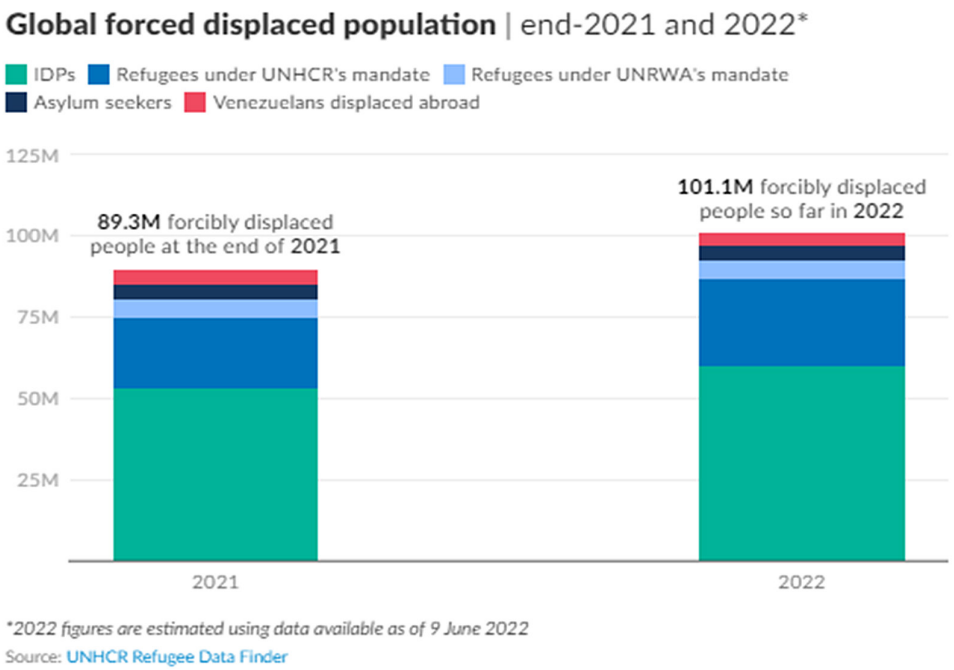

Figure 2: UNHCR Refugee Estimates mid-2022 (UNHCR, 2022)
https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/100-million-forcibly-displaced.html

As one refugee has explained from his own family's experience, the deep connections with one's mother tongue, or L1 speech community, are profound. While living in exile from Afghanistan after being forced to flee the threat of Taliban violence, Dr. Ahmad Karim's[7] family longed for contact with other Afghanis, and he rightly observes that "It's better to speak five words in a language that people know than to speak five thousand words in a language they don't know" (*Refugee Diaspora*, 2018, "Three times a refugee: journey of an Afghani doctor" 16).

Thus, due to this natural affinity with the mother tongue, and the profound connections to their speech communities, the seeds of religious faith germinate within individuals through hearing the gospel in words which their heart understands ("How are they to hear without someone preaching [in a language their heart understands]?" Romans 10:14, ESV). Further, the development of these seeds of faith into *authentic* as opposed to nominal or token, or even forced and/or coerced religious conversions, often involves learning languages to advanced proficiency levels, translation of ideas and texts, as well as deep forays into cultural and anthropological research, not to mention subsequent literacy education and orthography development.[8] And this development of understanding might be said to be the case for any serious student of the Bible (languages, texts, cultural contexts, interpretations, etc.), by no means limited solely to the sphere of cross-cultural missions and evangelism.

Since no language is learned in isolation, the sociocultural aspects of human communication are something all language users have learned to negotiate since their very first utterances. Without a speech community (a term originated by Gumperz, 1968) and the social interactions to support language use, the back-and-forth linguistic exchanges occurring on a daily basis could not take place. Similarly, the linguistic "homesickness" of those such as the Afghani doctor Dr. Ahmad Karim and his family, is an all too common challenge faced by refugees who have become separated from their speech communities; instead of connections with people to speak to in their own language(s), they are surrounded in their countries of refuge by a completely foreign culture[9] and language(s), utterances which are unintelligible, incomprehensible and meaningless without help from someone in a position to mediate—interpreters, teachers, bilingual assistants, and others to assist and advocate on their behalf.[10]

As the Ethiopian eunuch queried Philip nearly 2,000 years ago after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, "How can I [understand] unless someone guides me?" Trying to make sense of an unfamiliar biblical passage, this international voyager pondered a significant scriptural text[11] as he traveled in his chariot, returning from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. While reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, the Ethiopian eunuch must have wondered in his mind, "Who is this person being described by the prophet Isaiah? Someone who had been humiliated? Someone for whom justice had

7 A pseudonym.

8 As in the historical example of the Cyrillic alphabet, developed by early Christian missionaries Cyril and Methodius as part of their missionary work among the Slavic peoples. For a more recent continuance of such work, see the *Literacy and Evangelism International* website at https://www.literacyevangelism.org/

9 Unless they have found refuge in a country sharing aspects of their own language and culture.

10 See Jacobsen et al's "The Challenged Sense of Belonging Scale (CSBS)—a validation study in English, Arabic, and Farsi/Dari among refugees and asylum seekers in Germany." *Meas Instrum Soc Sci* 3, 3 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1186/s42409-021-00021-y

11 Possibly the first recorded case of texting while driving!

been denied? And most shockingly, someone whose very life had been taken from him?" (Isaiah 53).

Thankfully, God sent Philip to "share with him the good news about Jesus" who was the prophetical subject of the text being read. As is the case for many language learners reading an unfamiliar text, the Ethiopian pilgrim did not understand until scriptural context (i.e., "scaffolding" and meaningful interaction, Tedick, D., 2019) was provided en route from Jerusalem to Gaza on the return journey to Africa (Acts 8:31-40). A baptism followed shortly, an outward demonstration of the inward transformation which had occurred along that dry and dusty road through the desert. And the rest is history, church history that is, spanning every continent—including Antarctica[12]—and comprising living messages of the transformative power of the gospel: "Your lives are a letter . . . a letter from Christ, written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the Living God" (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

GOD'S PEOPLE: *IN TRANSIT* AND *EN ROUTE*

"Migration runs like a thread through the whole Bible narrative" observes Chris Wright in his essay on "A shared human condition" (*Refugee Diaspora*, 2018, 143; Wright, C. J., & Măcelaru, 2018). Written in exile, and/or recorded by God's people while they were on the move, Holy Scripture is permeated by the theme of displacement as in

- The original displacement of humanity from Eden (Genesis 3:23)
- The enslavement of Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 37:28) and subsequent move of Jacob's family to Goshen (Genesis 45:10)
- The wilderness wandering period of the Hebrews following the Exodus (Numbers 14:33)
- The experiences of Old Testament biblical characters such as Moses, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Nehemiah, and in the New Testament the disciples (Matthew 26:31, where Christ quotes Zechariah 13:7, "Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered")
- Christ's earthly incarnation and earthly sojourn (at his birth, during the flight to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath, and throughout his ministry as one having "no place to lay his head" as depicted in Matthew 8:20)
- The persecution of the early church, particularly Paul's voyage to Rome, his being shipwrecked *en route* on the island of Malta, where still to this present day an annual holiday every 10th of February, the Feast of St. Paul's Shipwreck, commemorates this close call (Acts 28)
- Satan's expulsion from heaven (Luke 10:18, Revelation 12:13), the dragon of Revelation and his warfare against the woman, the male child, and the "rest of her offspring", during which time the woman flees to the wilderness while the warfare continues against those who "have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 12:17), war notably being a primary cause of displacement throughout human history, allowed by a sovereign God, but during which protection and "nourishment" are mercifully available; and also present in this simultaneously historical and prophetical passage is a foreshadowing of judgement and wrath against perpetrators of violence such as Pharaoh (Romans 9:16-22), but mercy and deliverance for the oppressed through faith (Romans 9:23-30).

The state of being *in transit* from one place to another is an all-too-common human experience, yet this state also means God is not finished with us as individuals, or with

12 https://oceanwide-expeditions.com/blog/churches-in-antarctica

humanity as a whole.[13] Through faith and the righteousness of Christ, we as Christians are *in transit* and *en route* to somewhere better, to becoming a new creation, to experiencing the redemption and transformation at the heart of the divine plan. A plan which remains open to all, "Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). God's action plan is an "ultimate mystery of the ages . . . God hears our groans, and from his eternal center he is drawing all peoples and all dimensions of life together, smoothing the sharp edges, weaving a pattern out of the fragments . . . In Christ, everything in the cosmos is being knit together. This is the mystery at the heart of the universe" (Adeney 168). God is working in this world to make things right:

> God is a mover. He acts. He is at work in the world. Most gloriously he moved when the Word became flesh, took on the form of a human being, and humbled himself to the point of death—and then exploded right out of the tomb because God is God over death as well as life. Such a God is not still. No, he moves—because he loves (Miriam Adeney, 2018, 168-69)

Alongside displacement and migration, *love* is a theme which emerges strongly from the biblical refugee narratives. One of the earliest refugee accounts recorded in the experience of diaspora Jews is the remarkable multilingual narrative recorded by Daniel in both Hebrew and Aramaic, with Greek, Old Persian, Akkadian, and Ancient Egyptian lexical items also evident (Dizon, 2014; Humphreys 1973), textual reflections of the linguistic diversity of ancient Babylon to which useful captives of that time were transported after successful military conquests.

Transplanted by military force to Babylon, Daniel and his fellow captives were trained to become civil servants of the ancient Babylonian empire. They were taught the "learning and tongue of the Chaldeans" (Daniel 1:4), and as refugees in a foreign land, these prisoner-émigrés sat down by the now archetypal "rivers of Babylon", hanging their harps upon the willow trees in a deeply evocative and nostalgic refusal to sing in a strange land and as prisoner- *émigrés* wept at the memories of their home (Psalm 137).

A special place seems to exist in God's heart for those such as Daniel who have been removed from their homelands and transplanted elsewhere due to circumstances and forces beyond their control. Such can be inferred from the commands to love the foreigners, to extend hospitality to strangers in our midst (Leviticus 19:33-34; Hebrews 13:2)[14], and from parables such as the prodigal son (Luke 15). Significantly, of this refugee Daniel, the phrase "greatly loved" is used multiple times (Daniel 9:23, 10:11, & 10:19), underscoring the great love of God for the forcibly displaced, and demonstrating absolute empathy for their condition, and a determination to act on their behalf.

In this day and age, God's divine action plan, this great "mystery at the heart of the universe", has become less and less of a *mystery*, and more and more an *actuality*, as humanity comes to realize that in all of these refugee experiences, "God is with us" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23), sharing in our sorrows and grief (Isaiah 53:3), and lighting the path before us along the way (*en route*) to our heavenly home. As Adeney concludes in the final chapter of *Refugee Diaspora*, "There is indeed a safe place, and it is one that is available to every refugee"

13 For a Bible study guide available in numerous language translations, see the French Bible Society's "A Journey Through the Bible for Migrants" (Alliance Biblique Universelle, 2008).

14 See "Entertaining Angels: How One CCU Family Left Everything Behind to Care for Migrant Families." *Beyond, Fall* 2022, 31- 41. https://www.ccu.edu/_files/documents/beyond-magazine/beyond-fall-2022.pdf

("Conclusion: A Place Called Home", pp. 167-74). However, and of importance to the free will aspects of our humanity, the prodigal son did not find such safety until he decided to return home to his father. Ruth did not find such a safe place until deciding in faith to join herself to Naomi, "Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God" (Ruth 1:16). Yes, safety is available, eternal security above all other forms of refuge, but acts of faith and obedience are required to "enter that rest . . . [and] receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:11-14).

REFUGEES IN A STRANGE COUNTRY

Such safe places along the way are not necessarily physical locations. Rather, they also involve the state of mind, the ability to understand and be understood in communicating with others. Since the days of the Babylonian captivity when Hebrew youth were taught the "tongue of the Chaldeans" (Daniel 1:4), language learning and teaching has been necessary for reasons of transition and re-adjustment of the displaced. The profession of English language teaching with its particular connection to refugee education reaches back hundreds of years to the Huguenot "Refugiate in a strange country" who fled religious persecution in France to settle in England. These hundreds of thousands of Huguenot refugees, though speaking a language closely related to English, arrived in England during the Elizabethan era, the period of early modern English, the language of Shakespeare. A.P.R. Howatt cites one of the English language teachers and authors from this time period, Jacques Bellot (*Familiar Dialogues*, 1586), who poignantly describes the reasons underlying his work as a teacher of early modern English:

> [W]hat sorrow is for them that be refugiate [refugees] in a strange country, when they cannot understand the language of that place in which they be exiled, and when they cannot make them to be understood by speech to the inhabiters of that country wherein they be retired . . . I thought good to put into their hands certain short dialogues in French and English.
>
> (cited in Howatt, 1984, 16)[15]

In light of the biblical imperative to love our neighbors—including "foreign" neighbors—as if they were our own selves (Leviticus 19:31-34), language teaching is a foundational means to alleviate the "refugiate" sorrow described by Bellot, enabling that most basic of human need, namely the need to communicate, understand, and be understood.

Whatever one's religious persuasion, political views, or sociocultural and ideological mindset, the plight of refugees is one which affects us all as members of our extended human family. We cannot close our eyes to human suffering without violating some deep and integral aspects of our humanity, and without marring the divine imprint of our Maker within the very core of our being. We must help and empathize because of our common humanity, because they too have been created in the image of God. A calloused and clench-fisted response to our extended family siblings' needs would resemble Cain's insolent questioning of the Lord God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

We are indeed our "brother's keeper" as was evident from the beginning in the Lord God's response to Cain's guilty deflections of responsibility: "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" (Genesis 4).

15 A.P.R. Howatt was the current author's dissertation supervisor at the University of Edinburgh in the 1990s. Professor Howatt's understanding of the history of ELT, not to mention his own international ELT experience and scholarship, was greatly inspiring.

For Christians, the example which the Author of our faith himself demonstrated, in crossing from eternal realms to the temporal dimension on our behalf, represents the ultimate benchmark and model to aspire to and emulate. Living as a refugee (Matthew 2:13-15, 8:20, Luke 2:7) Himself during His earthly mission, Christ's life and teachings were documented from numerous angles and eyewitness accounts. For teachers today looking back in historical mode, the Son of God's divinely inspired pedagogy shone brightly amid dark times. Even darker times followed, yet the Judeo-Christian heritage today is one which recognizes the solemn obligation to welcome the strangers and foreigners in our midst.[16] An ethic of care requires not just utilitarian responses, but a Samaritan-like binding of wounds, transporting of the injured, and contributing from one's own resources toward the recovery of those lying alongside life's road in a helpless, ignored, and injured state.

If so inclined, how does one become part of the divine action plan with regard to understanding refugees and displaced peoples?

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THE DISPLACED: AN ONGOING GLOBAL CRISIS

Refugee narratives and representations of their lives are an excellent starting point to learn about the experiences of the displaced. Communicating with others regarding a traumatic experience is of therapeutic value. And communication helps individuals as well as communities to interpret experiences, and also to document as a warning to others, or as an inspiration to encourage those facing similar tragedy, and to advocate and educate on their behalf. Importantly, finding refuge, Adeney's "safe place . . . available to every refugee", is not just a physical quest, but a mental and psychological journey as well, and indeed an arduous spiritual trek, all of which encompass innumerable genres of human expression.

Historically, and continuing into the present day, the experiences of displaced peoples have been documented by the refugees themselves through their own accounts of displacement, deprivation, endurance, and perseverance. From external perspectives too, the modern refugee crisis has also been the focus of numerous recent works advocating for displaced populations and depicting the enormous scale and extremely complex nature of the global refugee crisis at the start of a new millennium. Such accounts offer unique and deeply personal perspectives across multiple genres (poetry, film documentary), mediums of expression (drawings, photography, sculpture), and publication types (digital, print).

Methodology: Lived Experience Accounts of the Displaced

For the purposes of this review, a basic "lived experience" selection criterion was applied in tandem with a recent publication criterion with a selection bias toward works released in the last decade since the Syrian war began in 2011, and toward works created by refugees themselves, or by individuals with an especially apparent deep level of familiarity with the refugee experience. The sheer volume of works published necessitates filtering and careful selection of representative publications for such a review. As such, this review is merely a starting point, a scratch on the surface of the overwhelming volume of worthy narratives which might just as well have been included, and which ought to

16 "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself" (Leviticus 19:34); "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35).

be considered by those who wish to delve even deeper into the body of refugee and immigrant literature.

Lived experience research, a form of qualitative phenomenological inquiry[17], has been used to discover and describe the lived experiences of populations across various fields of study including food policy and "people's lived experience of food environments" (Neve et al, 2021), mental health "[l]lived experience research as a resource for recovery" (Honey, A. et al, 2020), micro-phenomenological aspects of and methods for discovery (Petitmengin, C. et al, 2019), and also of relevance to the current review, in refugee studies (Charles, L., 2021; Haugen, S., 2019; Aldiabat, K. et al, 2021; Krisjánsdóttir, E., 2019; Eastmond, M., 2007).

Limitations and criticism do exist of such approaches, so while this is a secondary research review, similar lived experience limitations and caveats exist with reference to primary research, specifically

- Experiences of particular populations may not be representative of populations elsewhere, even populations from the same national and ethnic backgrounds (Charles, L. 2021)
- Reported experiences are subject to subsequent interpretation and modification (Nayeri 2019, 261; "Memories are always partly untrue" Nayeri 2020, 37; "Narratives are not transparent renditions of `truth' but reflect a dynamic interplay between life, experience and story" Eastmond, M., 2007)

With such limitations and caveats in mind, the premise should also be underlined and supported of accepting refugee narratives as being representative accounts, as did Charles (2021), caveats notwithstanding, in stating the view that the challenges of one particular population studied are likely to be similar to the challenges faced by other vulnerable populations with similar backgrounds.

Further, apparent exploitation and creative adaptation of stories has occurred, with films such as *The Good Lie* depicting much more than what might at first appear; the apparent usurious duplicity behind the scenes on the part of the film industry seems to have been settled out of court, but only after a legal challenge from the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan, Inc. to assert co-authorship of this narrative. Such an account brings into focus the role of interviewers and lived experience researchers, certainly another area requiring tact, empathy, and a forthright obtaining of consent and outlining of expectations when interacting with human subject research participants (Ryan, M., 2016).

The selected and previously published narratives for consideration, from across various genres and mediums of expression, are as follows under the sub-headings of art, film, poetry, journalistic reporting, biography, and living letters of faith.

Art

In 2019, "The Warmth of Other Suns" was the title of a museum exhibition in Washington, D.C. organized by the Phillips Collection. This exhibit featured migration themed works with a focus on the Mediterranean nexus of the refugee plight at that time. One review aptly headlined "The Museum is the Refugee's Home", delved into modern art as a "refugee camp where despair and inertia intermingle with evocations of home, family and the everyday" (Farago 2019). As an experiential medium of expression, art beckons visitors to the refugee camps to see for themselves the portrayed realities of what has been experienced—the tragedies, the dreams, the shipwrecked hopes.

An actual ship, Christoph Büchel's "Barca Nostra" featured at the 58th Biennale de

17 See https://www.microphenomenology.com

Venezia, bringing into perspective the scarred remains of a recovered shipwreck in which over 800 migrants had lost their lives, "one of the deadliest shipwrecks in the Mediterranean in living memory" (Povoledo 2019). "Our ship" or "Barca Nostra" in Italian, displays what is left of this vessel's battered hull, an evocative symbol as Büchel explained, the ship wreckage serving both as a memorial to tragedy and a monument to modern migration.

Shortlisted for several major awards as of 2022, George Butler's *Drawn Across Borders: True Stories of Human Migration* (2021) is an on-site rendered, contemplative portrayal of the displaced. The portraits in this book were drawn and painted over a ten-year time period in various refugee crisis zones in Europe, North Africa, Asia and the Middle East. And recently, with the support of organizations such as the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, Butler visited Ukraine in 2022, continuing to "draw at the fringes of atrocity" (O'Kelley 2022), "listening to people's stories" (MacDiarmid 2022), and publishing his latest work at georgebutler.org.

Digital exhibits such as Cambridge University's *Displaced Bodies and Hearts*[18] are also a "space" for artistic expression to thrive, depicting "destruction of live [sic], escape and separation, liminal lives, and living with the past . . . [central themes] to migration and forced displacement."

Such artwork allows viewers to glimpse the lived experiences of the displaced, and to thereby better understand, relate to, empathize with, advocate for, and support these fellow members of *barca nostra*, shipwrecked souls in need of comfort, warmth, and sustenance along their life voyage(s).

18 https://exhibition.respondmigration.com/about-us/

Film

Film transports viewers to the refugees' worlds of experience, bringing them alongside migrants on their journeys in stark detail. One notable such migrant travelogue is Hassan Fazili's *Midnight Traveller* (2019). The videographers used their smart phones to document the families' three-year journey from Afghanistan, which to Europe.

Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow* is a powerful portrayal of the refugee experience from the perspective of the rescuers, aid workers politicians and royals. The escalating crises in the several years since *Human Flow's* release make this an even more urgent and emphatic *must* see, *must* read. A photo of the author-artist from the book version depicts Weiwei employing a confrontational, urgent gesture. With both hands to his eyes, forefingers lifting upwards, thumbs downwards, Weiwei's gesture speaks for itself: "Can't you see what is happening? Open your eyes, world!"

Films such as these vividly portray the lived experiences of refugees as perhaps no other form of media can. To be practically on site as interviews occur, as endless lines of displaced people trek across the countryside, or as pouring rain drenches weary travelers to the bone, or as mourning family members weep at the loss of loved ones along the way—these realities conveyed are important in understanding the great need, particularly the "speed and scale of forced displacement [. . .] outpacing solutions for refugees."[19]

Poetry

Written poetry speaks across the artificial barriers which have been erected between human souls, the "tribal" boundaries delineating

19 "Global Displacement Hits Another Record, Capping Decade-long Rising Trend" (2022, June 16). UNHCR.

the space between mine/yours, us/them, friend/enemy. *Ink Knows No Borders: Poems of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience* (Vechionne & Raymond 2019) portrays the experience of refugees through a teenage and young adult lens illustrating their adaptation, learning, and resilience in the face of multiple challenges.

Fleeing one's home and finding oneself transplanted to a foreign land has been likened to the predicament of a date palm growing away from its indigenous habitat:

> A palm tree I beheld in Ar-RuṢāfa,
> Far in the West, far from the palm-tree land:
> I said: You, like myself, are far away, in a strange land;
> How long have I been far away from my people!
> You grew up in a land where you are a stranger,
> And like myself, are living in the farthest corner of the earth:
> May the morning clouds refresh you at this distance,
> And may abundant rains comfort you forever!
>
> '*Abd ar-Raḥman ad-Dāḫil*, Cordova.
> (Nykl, A.R. 1946, 18)

Echoing the above nostalgic yearnings of an exiled Ummayad prince for his home in Baghdad, the modern literature of the displaced documents the ongoing discourse of the "refugiate in a strange land" across time, their weeping by the archetypal rivers of Babylon, and hanging of their harps upon the willow trees in abject sorrow.

For literate cultures, inked words in written form preserve poetry for future audiences, and these printed words communicate to readers at a distance; Yet in pre-literate epochs and for pre-literate cultures, poetic language was imbued with a sense of the immediate. Powerful oral delivery techniques amplified the messages, the stories, the word images—and the connections between poets and their audiences became even more meaningful and profound. And it is in this spoken word sub-genre of poetry that the contrasts between *orality* and *literacy* become apparent. Since Walter Ong's "technologizing of the word" (Ong 1982), poets' words have taken flight into digital realms where social networking platforms both transmit and preserve oral poetry recitations.[20]

Organizations such as the International Refugee Poetry Network sponsor poetry workshops, helping refugees to find their voice and "tell their stories".[21] And these skillfully worded poem-stories should not be overlooked. Indeed, some of the deepest sentiments are conveyed in unique voices of this poetic sub-genre.

JJ Bola's "Refuge" echoes and reverberates across space and time: "Everything was foreign, unfamiliar, uninviting" and "we are all always reaching for a place that we can call home."[22] Or as Aryan Ashory puts it, "Our destination is a question mark. I just wish that no one's life should be a question mark!" For Aryan, poetry is therapeutic, "Writing poem it makes me to feel free and to empty my pains."[23] And the "barca nostra" theme emerges as a re-occurring one in Abe Nouk's spoken word poems: "Guess what, Dad, the year after you died, we were granted refugee status, so we flew here. [to

20 For example, the "instapoets" using Instagram to convey their poetry in what may be seen as a reversion to the immediacy evident before the digital age in the pre-literate and primarily oral cultures described by Ong.

21 https://www.refugeepoetry.org/

22 JJ Bola, "Refuge." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3dgPtyQ3PI

23 Aryan Ashory, "How this young Afghan refugee uses poetry to 'empty' her pain and feel hope." https://www.pbs.org/newshour/classroom/2021/10/daily-news-lesson-how-this-young-afghan-refugee-uses-poetry-to-empty-her-pain-and-feel-hope/

Australia] Can you believe it? I can't, because I'm waking up every morning thinking, 'That could've been us on those sinking boats!' " Nouk relates in a poetically envisioned exchange with his deceased father who still inspires this courageous young man.[24]

Understandably, the pedagogical value of poetry is recognized and used in general education contexts such as U.S. universities where international students craft "where I'm from poems" as a popular assignment using identity-based pedagogy to help students feel welcomed and connected on campus (Ivanova 2019). In specific refugee contexts, research on the use of spoken word poetry workshops demonstrates the significance of this sub-genre in students' social and educational integration (Burton & Van Viegen 2021).

As with related forms of artistic output, poetry can also be an effective medium for drawing attention to biases, prejudice and injustices. Brian Bilston's "Refugees" is shocking at first read, describing as it does the view that "They are not welcome here" and that we ought to "Build a wall to keep them out." As the poem concludes, "The world can be looked at another way" and it is only through a reverse reading from bottom to top that a new message emerges from this poem, quite a different perspective from an initial, straightforward reading.[25]

Rachel Mannix's spoken word poem, "We are a pilgrim people" similarly encourages another way to see ourselves, our fellow human beings, and our Heavenly Father, and it urges us as readers to share our hearts and homes—with each other, and by spiritual extension with God Himself. Rich in biblical allusion and spiritually imbued imagery, this beautiful spoken word poem depicts the divine action plan theme (Adeney 2018) re-emerging in a Living Word fashion, "We coalesce in flesh and blood/ To heal, refresh and seek the lost."[26] If home is where the heart is or longs to be, poems such as these are signposts pointing the way.

Journalistic Reporting

Valuable for an "insider" perspective, the news reporting engaged in by refugees themselves presents an inside look at what is actually happening behind the refugee camp fences and barricades.

Most media reporting is done from an "outsider" perspective, by journalists and reporters who may visit refugee camps, but who have never themselves been a refugee. In contrast, an insider perspective, with news stories drafted by refugees themselves, represents the authentic voices of the displaced—what they have seen, what they have endured, and what they hope to do with their lives and futures.

Stefania D'Ignoti summarizes some of the latest notable developments with regard to the recent phenomenon of "Newsrooms Inside Refugee Camps: Reporting by Migrants, for Migrants" (2022) and discusses the following journalistic endeavors:

- *Migratory Birds*, a refugee managed newspaper published from Greece[27]
- *Dispatches in Exile*, a journalistic training focused newsroom effort in Bosnia-Herzegovina[28]
- Migrantes 2.0, a special section published in Italian newspaper Il Solidale[29]

24 Abe Nouk, "To be a poet." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-ja-Mfpw60

25 Bilston, B. "Refugee." https://nationalpoetryday.co.uk/poem/refugees/

26 Mannix, R. "We are a pilgrim people." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5lNBN6Rtgw

27 See https://migratorybirds.gr/

28 See https://dispatchesinexile.com/

29 See https://www.ilsolidale.it/archivio.php?c=7

- Kanere, a news reporting platform in Kenya published by refugees at the Kakuma refugee camp[30]

Along similar lines to *Il Solidale's* printing of a special section for migrants, major news outlets have begun publishing special editions and sections, for example, the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* has responded to the Ukraine crisis with a special news edition for Ukrainians.[31] And in the Americas, *El Migrante* is a monthly newspaper published in a similar vein, providing vital information and advice to help immigrants on their journeys.[32]

These forms of journalistic reporting represent additional angles of lived experience from within, rather than viewed from outside—an "-emic" versus an "-etic" perspective,[33] and much more meaningful as is a native versus non-native language proficiency.

Biography

The biographical narratives authored by refugees tell of their quests for asylum, safety and survival (Kuklin 2020; Ashraf 2020; McDonald-Gibson 2016; Boursier 2019), their dreams (Villalobos 2019), their heartbreaking tragedies, (Kurdi 2018; Nguyen 2018), their educational experiences (Fishman 2021; Smith 2020), their gender-specific ordeals (Abouzeid 2020; Yousafzai 2019; von Welser 2017) and their complex, lifelong psychological ordeals. From members of the same families, siblings write complementary and also contrasting brother and sister (Nayeri 2020 "a true story" fictional account; Nayeri 2019) interpretations of their shared yet different experiences.

30 See https://kanere.org/

31 https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/02/28/special-newspaper-for-ukrainian-refugees-published-in-poland/

32 https://internews.org/elmigrante/

33 See https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/emic-and-etic

The themes are all too common threads in the woven word tapestries of this genre—displacement, suffering, violence, tragedy, identity, journeys, nostalgic yearning, lamentation, longing, dreaming, persevering, overcoming—each narrative uniquely voiced in diverse styles and techniques to create enduring images and symbols in literary form.

The simple desires for friendship and human connection emerge. Not wanting anyone's pity, but instead a basic recognition of shared humanity, is a common refrain: "I am your guest . . . we're so close. You can maybe hear my heart beating, scared. I have one, just like yours . . . like you, I was made carefully, by a God who loved what he saw. Like you, I want a friend" (Nayeri 2020, 12-16).

In this narrative discourse genre, scenarios from actual experiences come into view. Such as skeptical interviews by immigration officials. Memories of horrific violence. Descriptions of affiliations and friendships made along the way. Entrapment in Kafkaesque legal mazes. Swimming for hours to bypass fences and walls. Confinements in squalid conditions. Educational transitions, adaptations, and achievements. And in spite of it all, unvanquished hopes and dreams of a successful life in a new country, finally re-united with family, safe and secure in a place to call home.

Some make a successful journey. Many do not, and perish along the way, mostly unnoticed by a calloused global audience, except for occasions when tragic images prick the collective conscience of the world, such as what happened in 2015. *The Boy on the Beach* (Kurdi 2018) recounts the tragedy which befell the family of a young Syrian refugee whose death came to symbolize the refugee crisis at that time—the photographs of a drowned young child . . . conveying a message which words lack power to express.

Refugee narratives tell of emigration during tumultuous times, revolutions and political upheavals, larger forces squeezing the displaced at the borders and margins of existence. Living in camps and various countries as life inevitably continues, the difficulties are never-ending, and the psychological portraits painted are of refugees as well as their advocates, and the "truths" which must be fabricated and woven into backstories which have a better chance of their being believed and accepted by immigration officials: "Refugees will spend the rest of their lives battling to be believed. Not because they are liars but because they're forced to make their facts fit narrow conceptions of truth" (Nayeri 2019, 261), and also because "Memories are always partly untrue" (Nayeri 2020, 37).

Living Letters of Faith: Spiritual Drafts in Progress

This next category of "publication", living letters of faith, derives from 2 Corinthians 3:3 which depicts Christian believers as a "letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." Of all the various expressive forms of publication, these imprints of spiritual faith upon the hearts of living men and women are perhaps the most dramatic and life changing narratives yet considered. Who else but God alone can touch the fragile parchment of a living human heart, and use our human weaknesses to convey powerful messages of living hope? This most unique medium of composing pulsates with life itself amid great sorrows and tribulations of the refugee experience.

Yousef AlKhouri describes the paradox of missionaries expecting to comfort refugees in need, only to be "surprised to hear of the work of God's Spirit bringing hope, restoration, and redemption to them [the missionaries]" (*Refugee Diaspora* 161). "God is working through the church, the community of God's people, to bring about the redemptive work among refugees" (163), as AlKhouri has observed, through firsthand experience among refugee populations in the Middle East. Desperate conditions are turning into gospel opportunities for the Kingdom of Christ in completely unexpected ways: "escaping conflict zones . . . miracles that happened [following prayers] in the name of Isa [Jesus] . . . miracles had turned them toward the living God in new ways that would not have been possible back in their homeland" (165). As AlKhouri realizes, "God is sovereign over all human dispersion and is doing a new work among refugees everywhere" (166). Or as Afghani doctor Ahmad Karim found, "This longing [for contact with other exiled Afghanis] led our family not only to fellow Afghans but to the Lord Jesus Christ" (15). Like Weiwei's must see film "Human Flow", Sam George and Miriam Adeny's (eds.) *Refugee Diaspora* (2018) with its multi-author practitioner perspective, is a compelling must read for the firsthand accounts of how God is working today in the lives of refugees from all regions of the globe. Regional narratives and descriptions, practical ideas for responding to refugee crises, and theological/missiological reflections are important features of this thorough and practical text. For instance, there is an intriguing discussion of "appification" and the use of smartphones as a means of "Leveraging Modern Tools for Safe Passage" (pp. 127-132). The deep philosophical and theological implications emerging from separately authored strands are sure to encourage and enlighten, particularly the hopeful depictions of God Himself acting on behalf of the oppressed through the most

dynamic universal action plan ever formulated since before time even began (Romans 8:29).

Another practical and response-oriented book well worth reading to help understand the "endless catastrophe" of the refugee crisis is Jairo de Oliveira's *Changing Stories: Responding to the Refugee Crisis Based on Biblical Theory and Practice*.

Oliveira documents the working of God in modern times. The "changing stories" of countless refugee immigrants are testimony to the even more powerful and life-changing, transformative power of the gospel message: "The current forceful human displacement has been scattering people who used to live in isolation from the gospel. Consequently, in their exile, they now have access to the Holy Scriptures" (5). As experienced by AlKhouri, and as also described by Mehta (2019) in a secular sense, a reversal of expectations is frequently the norm when interacting with refugees:

> I am stunned by their kindness, generosity, and resilience in light of the great suffering they have experienced. Refugees are an example of daily overcoming. Day by day, they choose to fight for life, dream for a better future, and seek new beginnings. Consequently, we must not assume that when we serve refugees, we are the ones giving, teaching, and comforting. They have much to share. Besides being generous and friendly, they have plenty of lessons to teach us. As we commit to serve them, we must do it with open hearts because we will probably receive much more than we can expect or give. In one way or another, our lives will likely be transformed (12).

Turning evil intent into a good outcome is evidence of God's ongoing divine action plan (Adeney 168-69) in the lives of refugees and displaced persons today. A modern day parallel to the salvation and redemption narratives of biblical figures such as Joseph, Daniel, Ruth, Esther, and countless others.

Hearing the gospel of Christ might not have been possible in a closed, repressive socio-religious context, so the "Human Flow" out of such modern-day prison-states is not just a flight from physical dangers, but from spiritual repression and blindness. Conversely, afflictions of believers are depicted in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 as a means of being "comforted by God" Himself. Historical populations of Christian believers in the Middle East in Syria and Iraq have waned in the face of persecution (Kammou, W., "Iraq: What Happened to the Christians?", in George, S. and Adeney, M., 2018), and as Christ warned his followers, "In the world you will have tribulation; but take heart, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Similarly, Paul comforted believers in his day, while undergoing a series of relentless tribulations. Receiving help during such ordeals allows individuals to in turn help and encourage those facing similar afflictions (2 Corinthians 1:4). When the Apostle Paul and the ship's company landed on Malta, they were helped in their shipwrecked state, and though afflicted and nearly drowned, Paul left a lasting legacy of Christian evangelism on this Mediterranean isle.[34]

Oliveira analyzes the evangelism angle as well in Changing Stories, citing Human Rights Convention articles in support of the

34 While gathering firewood after the shipwreck, Paul is bitten by a venomous snake which—surprisingly to the local residents who knew this dangerous viper—had no effect on Paul. "He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm" (Acts 28). The appearance of the serpent in this narrative of Paul's lived experience is a powerful image and symbolic reminder of humanity's deadly foe (the serpent of Eden (Genesis 3), and Satan, the dragon of Revelation--one and the same--attacking the woman, the male child, i.e. Christ, and those having the testimony of Jesus) whose power and venom have been overcome by the gospel of Christ. The serpent dangles over the fire, shaken off harmlessly by Paul, as does today the dragon of Revelation (ch. 12) dangle over the eternal fires of judgement which await these rebellious and malevolent forces of evil.

position that human beings ought not ever be coerced in matters of faith, but that they also ought to have the freedom to consider and evaluate for themselves their religious choices, and to change/convert/follow whatever faith expression they may choose."

In response to the question "Can we share our faith with refugees?" Oliveira responds, citing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

> . . . we can surely say that evangelism is not against human rights. On the contrary, refugees have the human right of evaluating their faith expressions and even changing their religion if they so wish . . . Of course, in our interactions with refugees, we cannot be disrespectful, manipulative, or insensitive, but should always let them spontaneously choose if they want to hear the gospel and how they want to respond to it (9).

Oliveira's account is a story of our "shared humanity" and a "glimpse of God's bigger story" (10) containing remarkable portraits of those coming to faith from repressive religious backgrounds where once stifled basic religious freedoms and human rights have now found expression in transformed lives. There is also a missional research component in the form of qualitative research methodologies implemented, comparative analyses of ministry workers and refugee views, and implementation of best practices for churches and ministries working among forcibly displaced populations. Useful appendices are further value-added components, such as a cultural sensitivity document and a list of refugee support organizations. There are also end-of-chapter discussion questions, prayer points, and calls to action--highly practical, grass-roots level features for potential use in training and educational settings with a solid template for evaluating what ministries/churches are doing well, and areas needing improvement.

The intense labor involved in traditional mission field preparation and subsequent deployment contrasts sharply with the current opportunities for advancing the gospel and Christ's message of reconciliation through the movement of people to new countries, a "circumstance [which] allows us to reach the world and proclaim the good news to the people that God has purposefully brought from far and wide to become our new neighbors" (Oliveira, 110-113).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Called out of darkness and heading toward the light of a city and kingdom built by God,[35] Christians are on a journey from a temporary residence in this world to a permanent citizenship and home in heaven. Being pilgrims, wayfarers and wanderers ourselves, we ought to be all the more empathetic in responding to the needs of refugees and immigrants at our door.

The political policy debates surrounding immigration ought not to obscure the clear biblical mandate to meet the physical needs of those from completely different and even alien or "enemy" backgrounds; the challenge for Christians is to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:20-21; Matthew 5:43-48), and to cultivate a "harvest of righteousness . . . sown in peace". Such a mindset runs contrary to natural impulse, "earthly, unspiritual, demonic" wisdom set against the "wisdom from above" (James 3:13-18), the type of love which loves "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8-10).

Understanding the dynamic narratives

35 Isaiah 9:2, 1 Peter 2:9, Hebrews 11:10

and genres of the refugee experience is an invitation to become part of the ongoing story in a *vita activa* (Arendt, 1958, *The Human Condition*, ch. 5) and faith to works (James 2:17-18) progression from mere philosophical contemplation or "miserable comforters" (Job 16:2) mode to a thoughtfully engaged level of participation and service.

Active and Thoughtful Works and Lives of Faith

There are countless possibilities for becoming actively involved in helping to alleviate the "afflictions" of displaced populations and implementing the clear teachings of 2 Corinthians 1. In doing so, as Mehta (2019, 197) has observed, and as Christian missionaries themselves have experienced, the "rescue fleet" may be arriving, in need of aid certainly, but also bearing resources and capabilities of their own to benefit their hosts. Consider what Paul himself experienced, afflicted and shipwrecked in the Mediterranean; not as a refugee, but rather as a shipwrecked politico-religious prisoner bound for Rome, he was helped by his hosts, but he gave in return the precious knowledge and healing presence of the gospel. Believers in his footsteps today similarly have valuable "treasure in earthen vessels" to share with others even while being "troubled on every side . . . perplexed . . . persecuted . . . cast down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:7-9).

The non-exhaustive list of recent books and films and miscellaneous works surveyed in this current article are a relatively miniscule portion of the incredible volume of works which have been published—and which continue to be published—on the ongoing refugee crisis. Like an unfinished pilgrimage, the journeys continue on, the stories told along the way are not yet finished, the colorful individuals within each narrative are mere sketches of what they will eventually become. And the destination point is a culmination of circuitous pathways meandering and wending their way home.

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