ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 8, No. 4, December 2014
Pages: 692-705

"Now Those Who Were Scattered Went about Preaching the Word" (Acts 8:4)
MIGRATION, POVERTY AND MISSION IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Christoph Stenschke♦
University of South Africa, Pretoria

Abstract

After a brief survey of migration and poverty in the Bible, this article examines migration and poverty — be it voluntary or enforced — in the Book of Acts. Acts describes in Stephen's speech in surprising detail experiences of migration in Israel's past and its theological implications. Acts also describes that many early Christian missionaries served in places that were not their places of origin, voluntarily or by force: the disciples ended up in Jerusalem and eventually at the ends of the earth rather than returning to Galilee. Others had come to Jerusalem from elsewhere even before encountering the Gospel and ministered throughout the Eastern Mediterranean world as they became involved in mission. Early Christian mission is closely related to migration and dislocation, voluntary or by force, led by the Spirit and for the sake of the Gospel. Repeatedly other missionaries had to flee in order to avoid persecution. Despite the tragedy and suffering involved, there were also great opportunities which were readily seized: the Gospel moved forward. Much of early Christian mission

♦**Christoph Stenschke**, born in 1966 in Augsburg, Germany. Theological training at Freie Theologische Akademie, Gießen, Germany. PhD: University of Aberdeen, Scotland (1999). Ordained minister in the German Baptist Union, pastoral ministry in Stralsund in former East Germany (1998–2001). Since 2001 lecturer in New Testament Studies and dean of postgraduate studies at Biblisch-Theologische Akademie Forum Wiedenest, Bergneustadt, Germany. Since 2005 professor extraordinarius at the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria. Member of several academic societies. Regular contributions to different international academic journals. Email: stenschke@wiedenest.de

was accomplished by refugees. A final section reflects on the significance of this portrayal of early Christian mission for the church and its mission in the 21st century.

1. Introduction

The Bible tells of many instances of forced or voluntary migration[1] and of refugees and also mentions the material causes and/or consequences of such dislocations, although these are less prominent. Some of its main characters are migrants and refugees. Called by God, Abraham left his home in Ur of the Chaldeans and came to Canaan (Gen 11:31–12:6). From there a famine caused him to go to Egypt. Back in the land promised to him, he lived a semi-nomadic life. For a number of years, Jacob was on the run. Being sold off as a slave, Joseph comes back to Egypt and ends up saving the people of Egypt and his own family. Moses lives as a refugee in the land of Midian for decades. After centuries in forced labour in Egypt, the Israelites leave and migrate for forty years through the wilderness before they return to the country promised to their forefathers. Ruth, counted among the ancestors of David and of Jesus (Mt 1:5), migrates with her mother-in-law (who herself had left the land before due to famine[2]) to Israel. Later on in their history the people of Israel were dispersed and deported on several occasions, spent seventy years in exile and faced harsh circumstances on their return to the land. This exile led to a number of religious innovations such as the synagogue, which guaranteed the spiritual survival of Israel through the centuries even without temple and land. Her faith proved its validity and flexibility under a variety of circumstances. At times the material consequences were poverty and other disadvantages for some or all; at times these movements led to wealth and interesting careers, such as that of Daniel or Nehemiah.

At the beginning of the New Testament, John the Baptist leaves home (Lk 1:39, 80; 3:3), stays in the Judean wilderness and later on preaches and baptises on the banks of the river Jordan. Due to Roman decree, Jesus was born not at home in Nazareth, but elsewhere, in Bethlehem (Lk 2:1–7). Shortly thereafter his family had to flee to Egypt and stay for a while (Mt 2:13–15) and later on returned to

---

[1] In this essay, migration is used in the broadest sense as "descriptive of different forms of transience involving degrees of choice and comoulsion," so J.J. Hanciles, "Migration," in J. Corrie, ed., *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations,* Nottingham, Downers Grove: IVP, 2007, (225–227) 225.

[2] See also Gen 12:10; 42:1–38; 43:1–34; 46:1–47:12.

Nazareth in Galilee (as they could not stay in Judea due to the reign of Archaelaus). Later Jesus left his hometown to start his itinerant ministry in Galilee, all over Judea and eventually in Jerusalem. Following his call to discipleship, his disciples voluntarily left their families, homes and careers in Galilee to follow Jesus. They become the model of "migrant discipleship," following their wandering Lord who said: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head … Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God... No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9:57–62). At the same time they are under the promise that they would receive a hundred-fold what they left behind and inherit eternal life (Mt 19:29).

The Book of Acts (our focus below) contains several accounts of migration, of refugees, etc. Later in the New Testament, 1 Peter — the letter that deals with Christian suffering in most detail — speaks of Christians metaphorically as "aliens and exiles" (2:11) although they continued to live in their places of origin. Their loss of status and their alienation is compensated by becoming the people of God and a royal priesthood who proclaims the Gospel by word and exemplary behaviour.[3] Revelation, the book of a sweeping eschatological vision for the Church and the world, was written while its author was in exile on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9, similarly a number of Old Testament books such as Ezekiel, originate during the Exile or reflect this experience).

In these instances, as in today's world, migration and material status are closely linked: in some cases migration entails the loss of material wealth or of opportunities to gain it and leads to poverty. This is the case for many refugees. In other cases people migrate out of economic desperation with the hope of escaping from existing or impending poverty. In many cases their hopes are fulfilled, in other cases not.

This article focuses on voluntary and forced migration and its material consequences in Acts. Due to the focus of Acts, its emphasis is on Israel's past and on the consequences which these movements of people had for the Christian proclamation. Fully aware of the

[3]See C. Stenschke, "The Status and Calling of Strangers and Exiles: Mission According to First Peter," in R.G. Grams, I.H. Marshall, P.F. Penner, ed., *Bible and Mission: A Conversation between Biblical Studies and Missiology,* Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld, 2008, 180–219.

disruption, pain, sorrow, loneliness and social and material consequences which this migration entailed (but which Luke hardly mentions), this essay focuses on the opportunities which Luke describes. Far from doing justice to the complex phenomenon of migration,[4] it addresses one small aspect. It does not intend to draw a romantic picture of migration, refugees and poverty or idealise what happened. It argues that — despite and in all tragedy — these movements of early Christians, be they voluntary or enforced, opened new opportunities for the Gospel. The portrayal of Acts can encourage the Church today, be it Christians "on the move" themselves for whatever reason or the Church in places to which people migrate or both.

2. Migration and Poverty in Acts

Many people in the Book of Acts — Jews, Christians and a few Gentiles — appear in places where they were not born. The causes for this and its consequences vary significantly: some of them moved voluntarily, others followed their leaders or were placed by a higher authority; some had to leave as refugees because of persecution. I first provide a summary of such instances following the narrative of Acts. Then I shall summarise and reflect on the implications.

Acts 1 finds the larger group of about 120 Galilean disciples (1:15) in Jerusalem where the risen Lord commands them to stay and wait for the coming of the Spirit (1:4).[5] Jesus also announces that later on, they will be "on the move": not only in Jerusalem but also "all Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the world" (1:8). What happens later in the narrative is but the fulfilment of this commission and obedience to Christ.

The miracle of Pentecost in Jerusalem is experienced and attested by Jews from Jerusalem but also by Jews who had returned from all corners of the Jewish Diaspora and who now live in Jerusalem. Acts 2:9–11 lists fifteen regions or ethnic groups.[6] In this way, symbolically *all of Israel* is present to witness the coming of God's eschatological Spirit on Israel gathered and restored in the ministry of Jesus and the

[4]For a survey see Hanciles, "Migration."

[5]Jesus himself does not return to Nazareth or Bethlehem, but ascends to heaven (1:9–11).

[6]See C. Stenschke, "Globalisierung durch Gottes Geist nach Acta 2,1–13: Exegese – Theologie – Aktualisierung," in R. Hille, U. Neuenhausen, ed., *Gemeinde Jesu in einer globalisierten Welt: Gesellschaftliche, kirchliche und theologische Perspektiven*, TVG Monografien, Witten: SCM R. Brockhaus; Gießen: Brunnen, 2013, 143–166.

community of his disciples. The coming of the Spirit is understood as proof of the resurrection: the risen and exalted Jesus pours out the Spirit (2:32). The many people who came to faith that day will have included Diaspora Jews who lived in the city or had come as pilgrims for the Jewish feast of Pentecost. From the very beginning the Church contained people with a migrant background.[7]

As the group of 120 disciples and many of the recent converts had left their professions and means of living behind, the community could only live through the sharing of goods which is reported in Acts 2:44f and 4:32–5:11.[8] It was their response to poverty caused by migration. The particular circumstances of this congregation required financial assistance from other Christians later on (Acts 11:27–30; 24:17).

The fierce conflict in Acts 4f is due not only to the Apostolic miracles and proclamation but also to the fact that the *Galilean* Apostles (2:7) challenged the legitimacy of the Jewish leadership on their very own turf, the temple precincts of Jerusalem. They are perceived to be "out of place."[9]

Acts 6 indicates that the Christian community included widows and other Hellenistic Jews from a Diaspora Jewish background.[10] To solve the tensions which arose when these widows were not properly looked after, seven men with Greek names — who themselves had a Hellenistic background, including Stephen and Nicolaus, a proselyte from Antioch — were chosen for this ministry.

Perhaps surprisingly, a major concentration of the theme of migration, of refugees, of existence in different places and the spiritual challenges which this involved, appears in Stephen's speech of defence in Jerusalem. This theme makes an important contribution to his defence over against the false accusations[11] of having spoken

---

[7]Their universal perspective can also be seen in their praise of God as the Creator of heaven and earth (4:24).

[8]In this context, Luke introduces Barnabas from Cyprus who either lived in Jerusalem or had come for the feast to Jerusalem and stayed on after becoming a Christian.

[9]In his speech Gamaliel refers to two Jewish leaders of the past who gathered followers after them (5:36f). These movements came to nothing as they were of human origin (5:38).

[10]On the Hellenists in Acts see M. Zugmann, *"Hellenisten" in der Apostelgeschichte: Historische und exegetische Untersuchungen zu Apg 6,1; 9,29; 11,20*, WUNT II.264, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009.

[11]That these were false accusations and not an adequate summary of the theology and proclamation of Stephen and the larger group of Hellenists has rightly been emphasised by K. Haacker, *Stephanus: Verleumdet, verehrt, verkannt*, Biblische Gestalten 28, Leipzig: EVA, 2014.

against the temple and the Law (6:13f). In this summary of Israel's history, Stephen describes the fate of Israel's Patriarchs as migrants and God's dealing with Israel outside the land of promise.[12] Stephen starts with Abraham's migration from Mesopotamia to Haran and later to Canaan. Despite the divine promise and his exemplary obedience, "God did not give him any of it as a heritage, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him" (7:5). God said to him that "his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others [i.e. in Egypt], who would enslave them and mistreat them for four hundred years" (7:6). The history of Israel and God's covenants starts with landless migrants. However, God also announced his judgement over their oppressors and their eventual liberation.

God was with Joseph, when he was sold off by his brothers into Egypt (7:9). His presence is not limited to the land or the extended family at home: in Egypt, "God rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favour and to show wisdom when he stood before the Pharaoh." Initially this dislocation meant loss of status and poverty. Later the former migrant and slave Joseph was appointed ruler over Egypt and over all the royal household. Later Stephen accounts the famine in Egypt and Canaan and the move of Jacob and his descendants to Egypt were they increased and multiplied (14f).[13] Later, this migrant community first rejects God's salvation (7:25).

Stephen tells in surprising detail the fate and the biography of Moses (7:17–39) who started out as a slave child and miraculously became a member of the royal household. Later Moses flees and ends up as a resident alien in the land of Midian (7:29). Forty years later, he is called in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in yet another land, to deliver the people. Even there is "holy ground," sanctified by the presence of God, and the God of the fathers speaks to Moses (see also 7:38). God is fully aware of the fate of his migrant people and ready to act: "I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to

[12]The theme is later also dealt with by Paul in his sermon to the Diaspora Jews and God-fearers of the synagoge of Antioch in Pisidia, itself outside the land of Israel (13:14–52). In his summary of the history of Israel, Paul speaks of Israel's stay in Egypt (God made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt), the exodus and the wandering in the wilderness before God gave them the land as an inheritance (13:17–20).

[13]The one place that offered some continuity in all these migrations was the tomb which Abraham acquired in Shechem.

rescue them" (7:34). God's intervention leads to the exodus and forty years of wandering in the wilderness (7:36).[14] During this period, Israel received the living oracles of the law (7:38).

Stephen's speech indicates that the times away from the country (and the temple), and the times of migration were times of experiencing God (delivery, miracles and living oracles), but also of threatened loyalty to God: there were the rejection of Moses, God's appointed leader of the people, disobedience, and also the paradox desire to return to Egypt (7:39, the place of misery and of threat to their very existence, 7:19), the incident of the golden calf and further idolatry (40–43). Following the OT prophets, the period of the exile is understood as divine punishment for Israel's idolatry: "so I will remove you beyond Babylon" (7:43). Despite these charges, Stephen's account indicates that over centuries Israel experienced God and kept its identity outside of the land.

During the period of migration in the wilderness, the ancestors had the tent of testimony, made according to a divine pattern (7:44, apparently in contrast to "houses made with human hands" in v. 48; God is not limited to buildings of stone and certain places, he was with his people on the move). Acts 7:45 only briefly mentions that the coming of Israel meant the dispossession of the people who lived there previously. The fact of Solomon's house "built with human hands" is seen critically. It is understood as an effort to locate God in one place and thus to "domesticate" Him (7:45–50) and leads to the accusations of v. 51–53.[15] In contrast to all human buildings and efforts to limit God, Stephen gets to behold the glory of God in heaven (7:55). There he and Jesus are to be found. This vision and confession contributes to Stephen's martyrdom.

Stephen's account of the migration history of the Patriarchs, Moses and later on of the people of Israel emphasises that God's calling, provision, compassion and action on behalf of his people is not limited to one place or land. God, whose throne is in heaven and whose footstool is the earth (7:49) is the God of his wandering people who is with them in salvation and judgement. Despite his previous promise, He cannot be confined to the land of Israel or to the temple in Jerusalem. Israel's migrant past is neither glorified, nor is it

[14]God's presence was evident in the wonders and signs which Moses performed in Egypt, the Red Sea and in the wilderness (7:36).

[15]If it were not for these references to Israel's continued idolatry, the wilderness period would appear idealised.

suppressed or denied (a semi-nomadic group who ends up in slavery for centuries and first rejects God's saviour is not a flattering origin in ancient cultures where honour and shame are pivotal values!). While directed at the opponents of the Christian movement in Jerusalem and calling them to repentance, Stephen's speech also significantly contributes to the theological foundation of the impending Christian mission to the ends of the world: as in the past, God will be with those who venture forth to the ends of the earth. His presence and salvation cannot be limited to one people and place.

The persecution which arose after the death of Stephen scatters the Christians throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria (8:1f). The first move of the Gospel beyond the confines of Jerusalem was caused by persecution ("a severe persecution began against the church", 8:1, see also 8:3): "Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word" (8:4). The first Christian missionaries were refugees! Acts 8 describes in detail the ministry of the evangelist Philip in Samaria and to the Ethiopian Eunuch. Acts 8:5–25 is the only account in Acts where seemingly a whole city accepted the Gospel. God is at work in Samaria.[16] On the wilderness-road to Gaza, Philip meets, evangelises and baptises the Ethiopian (8:26–40).[17] God's salvific intention and action is not limited to Jerusalem or the people of Israel. Being forced to leave Jerusalem, becoming refugees and embarking on a migrant existence was not the end of the nascent Christian movement but the origin of world-wide mission. For the account of Acts, (forced) migration and mission went hand in hand.

Following his calling on the road to Damascus (where Saul migrated to persecute the Christians), Saul/Paul, once part of the religious establishment in Jerusalem, starts his long career as a migrant missionary.[18] At the beginning this meant Damascus, Jerusalem and Tarsus (Acts 9; see Paul's own account of his early missionary career in Gal 1f).

---

[16]On their way back to Jerusalem, Peter and John start their itinerant ministry of "proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans," Acts 8:25. See C. Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith*, WUNT II.108, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999, 145–147.

[17]At the end of the chapter, Philip finds himself in Azotus, the OT Philistine city of Ashdod. From there he wanders north to Caesarea, proclaiming the good news in all the towns. There Paul meets him in Acts 21:8–14. See F.S. Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A Study of Roles and Relations*, JSNT.SS 67, Sheffield: SAP, 1992.

[18]For a survey see J. Murphy O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life,* Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.

Similarly Peter ministers outside of Jerusalem, "going here and there among all the believers" (9:32) in Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea (9:32–10:48). Spectacular miracles happen outside of Jerusalem, including the coming of the Spirit on Gentiles just as it happened in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. A military placement brought Cornelius, centurion of the Italian Cohort in Caesarea, into close contact with Judaism and made the early encounter with Peter and his conversion possible. For him, this placement led to salvation (Acts 10).

With Acts 11:19, the account returns to those Hellenistic Christians who were scattered from Jerusalem (8:1–4). After the focus on Philipp in chapter 8, the focus is now on those who went to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Some of them who originally came from Cyprus and Cyrene in North Africa spoke in Antioch not only to Jews but also to Gentiles. Their journey had taken them first to Jerusalem and now to Syria. As with the Patriarchs and the wandering people of God in the wilderness, "the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord" (11:21). Barnabas, himself from Cyprus, was sent by the church in Jerusalem to Antioch and saw the grace of God at work. He spends a whole year there and travels to Tarsus, where Paul stayed (9:30) to bring him to Antioch. After a brief return to Jerusalem, Barnabas later returns to Antioch. Together with Paul he continues his missionary career from there. While the Hellenists initially were migrant-missionaries by force, these men later became migrant-missionaries by ecclesial appointment (Barnabas)[19] and / or by appointment of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1–3).

Following his miraculous escape from prison, Peter leaves Jerusalem to save his life (Acts 12:17). From then onward he only returns one more time to Jerusalem (15:7–11). From the little we know from other New Testament books, Peter migrated over long distances and periods.

From Acts 13 onward, Paul becomes the main protagonist of Luke's account. Due to divine commission (9:15; 13:2; 22:17–22: "far away to the Gentiles"), he combines periods of intensive travel with (at times) longer stays. It appears that wherever and whenever the circumstances allow, Paul stays sufficiently long in places until congregations are firmly established or other commitments call him elsewhere.[20]

---

[19]Later on Judas Barsabbas and Silas, themselves leaders and prophets are sent from Jerusalem to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas (15:22, 32–34).

[20]On Paul's mission see E.J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission II: Paul and the Early Church,* Downers Grove: IVP, 2004, and his *Paul, the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods,* Nottingham: IVP / Apollos, 2008.

Antioch became a place of refuge and ministry for the Hellenistic Jews of Jerusalem. Paul stayed there for longer periods and kept returning to the city and its Christian congregation (Acts 11:25–30; 12:25–13:4; 14:26–15:3,30–35; 18:22). Presumably his early support came from there. Paul stayed in *Corinth* "a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (18:11, "After staying there for a considerable time," 18:18). There Paul worked for his own support. After a brief initial visit (18:19–21), Paul returns to *Ephesus* for an extended period of ministry (19:1; "two years," 19:10; three years in Asia, 20:31). Luke's full portrayal of Paul's missionary activities, in particular his migrations and movements, cannot be described here in detail. Paul is the migrant-missionary par excellence in the New Testament.

Later Paul is imprisoned for two years in Caesarea, for about six months travels to Rome and stays there as a Roman prisoner for another two years. All this was not by accident, but in order to fulfil the calling which he received from the risen Lord. Luke does not deny or belittle the hardships and suffering which this migrant existence meant for Paul (see also Paul's own list of hardships in 2 Cor 11:23–33). From his calling onward it is clear "how much he must suffer for the sake of Christ's name" (Acts 9:16).

On these journeys and during longer stays, Paul was accompanied by a number of missionary colleagues and co-workers such as Barnabas, Silas and Timothy who shared in his migrant-missionary existence and the hardships it entailed.

For Paul and those with him, this ministry meant loss of status and material means. For some of these journeys and stays Paul was supported by other Christians (see Phil 4:10–20); in other cases he worked for his own maintenance (see Acts 18:3). In his charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:18–35, Paul declares that he worked with his own hands to support himself and his companions. In all this he had given an example that by such work he must support the weak. Paul's material belongings were limited. In addition to what he had with him while travelling, we only know of the cloak that Paul left with Carpus at Troas, and some books and parchments which he requested Timothy to bring along (2 Tim 4:13).[21] Yet the promise of

[21]On Paul's economic resources see C. R. Little, *Mission in the Way of Paul: Biblical Mission for the Church in the Twenty-First Century*, Studies in Biblical Literature 80 (New York, etc.: Peter Lang, 2005), 22–46. The money which Paul later intended to pay for the Nazirite sacrifices in Jerusalem (21:23–26) probably came from the

Jesus to his disciples will also have applied to Paul: "And everyone who has left houses and brothers and sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life" (Mt 19:29).

Two more passages need brief attention: According to *Acts 17:26*, God "made all nations from one ancestor to inhabit the whole earth and allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they should live." Schnabel rightly rejects a philosophical understanding of the verse and argues that a historical interpretation of v. 26c–d is more plausible:

> … the "fixed times" are the various epochs in the history of the nations, and the "boundaries of their lands" are the political boundaries between the places where people live — whether cities, regions, provinces, or continents. Paul argues that cities, countries, and empires rise and fall during the course of history, both in terms of their political power and in terms of their political boundaries. The God whom Paul proclaims is the Creator of the world and of the human race, and He is the Lord of the history of the human race.[22]

This emphasis does probably not imply that any form of migration, of leaving the "allotted boundaries," is contrary to divine intention.

There is one passage in Acts which indicates that the first Christians were not only affected by migration due to Jewish and Gentile persecution (such as the Hellenists, Peter and Paul) but also were affected by the politics of the day. In Corinth, Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla, who had recently come from Italy, because the Roman emperor Claudius ordered all Jews to leave Rome (18:1f). The decree affected all Jewish inhabitants, including the Jewish Christians. Perhaps for good reasons, Luke does not provide the reason for this order.[23] Due to this imperial decree, Paul meets this early Christian missionary couple par excellence in Corinth and works together with

---

collection which Paul gathered in his Gentile Christian communities for the saints in Jerusalem.

[22]*Acts*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 735.

[23]In his *Life of Claudius* 25, Roman historian Suetonius indicates that the expulsion of the Jews because they constantly made disturbances at the instigation "Chrestus". This is usually taken to refer to unrest caused within the Jewish community due to Christian missionary activities. Thus it was a Roman response to the Christian mission. See R. N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter*, Grand Rapids, Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2011, 69-75.

them in their common trade and in Christian ministry.[24] This also applies to other people who are back in Rome by the time Paul writes and whom Paul greets in Romans 16:3–15. According to Acts 18:19, the couple later stayed behind in Ephesus (cf. also 1 Cor 16:19). Romans 16:3 indicates that they had returned to Rome after the death of Claudius in the autumn of 54 CE. There they could testify to Paul's Gospel and ministry in the East and prepare his visit to Rome. 2 Timothy 4:19 suggests that they returned to Ephesus at a later point. With all the disadvantages and suffering it implied, this expulsion of the Jews from Rome furthered the cause and course of early Christianity.

On first sight, migration is not a major theme in Acts. Yet on closer scrutiny this estimate needs revision. Like few other NT books,[25] Acts deals with the phenomenon of the "wandering people of God" (to play on E. Käsemann's title) of both covenants:

Stephen's speech indicates that such existence was part and parcel of the patriarchs and people of Israel in the Old Testament. They were "on the move" during crucial periods of their existence. It almost seems that settling down (and eventually building the temple) is seen as problematic. During those periods they experienced God's presence, salvation and blessings in different places, even though their spiritual existence was also threatened. Their God, in contrast to the common ancient Near Eastern concept of national or local deities (cf. 1 Kings 20:23–28; 2 Kings 5:17), is not limited to particular places and buildings. This relativizes the temple in Jerusalem and the land of Israel and contributes to the theological foundation for the world-wide ministry of the Church.

For Abraham, God's call meant nomadic living in a land that was not his own. For Moses, God's appointed saviour, his flight to Midian meant loss of status and wealth.

Regarding the Christian church, Luke describes incidents of migration due to persecution, due to divine calling (be it the commission of the Twelve, of Paul and of Paul and Barnabas), due to a commission by the church or out of own concern and initiative. Often there is a combination of several factors. Like Israel, the early

---

[24]See C. Stenschke, "Married Women and the Spread of Early Christianity", *Neotestamentica* 43, 2009, 145–194.

[25]See 1 Cor 10:1–11; Hebr 3:5–4:13. The classic study of the latter passage and concept is E. Käsemann's *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

Christian migrant-missionaries experience that their God is with them away from Jerusalem and the land of Israel. He is not limited in anyway. There is no place where God is not with them. Even in the midst of a terrible storm somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea the angel of the Lord finds Paul and comforts him (Acts 27:23f). In Samaria, Caesarea, Antioch and beyond he attests their message with signs and wonders and opens hearts (16:14). While often contested and threatened, in many cases they and their message are received.

Luke only hints at the material consequences of these dislocations.[26] His focus is on the opportunities which migration, enforced or voluntary, provided for the Gospel. Where necessary, material needs are to be met by sharing goods locally (in Jerusalem) and translocally (the Christians of Antioch share with Jerusalem, 11:27–30).

3. Application

What are we to make of the portrayal of migration and poverty in Acts?[27] A few perspectives by an author from the global North have to suffice. The Church has every responsibility to support and minister to those who for various reasons migrate, be voluntarily or because they are forced to do so. This will entail, for example, provision of basic means, aids for integration (such as legal assistance and language courses) and pastoral care. The Church will also have to use its influence (where existent) on governments at various levels and the population in areas to which migrants come to avoid and counter xenophobia. Due to lack of resources and perhaps vision, this is where the Church often stops, however invaluable this involvement proves to be. How do we gain a broader vision?

---

[26]While Luke's Gospel has an emphasis on the proper use of material possessions (see B. E. Beck, *Christian Character in the Gospel of Luke*; London: Epworth, 1989, 28–54), the theme is less prominent in Acts; for a recent survey see C. M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character*, WUNT II. 275 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

[27]In asking this question we obviously skip over almost two millenia of church history, in which migrations of all sorts played a major role. For a survey of developments and challenges up to 1960 see J. J. Hanciles, "Migration", in W. A. Dyrness, V.- M. Kärkkäinen (eds.), *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic; Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 543–544 and A. F. Walls, "Mission and Migration: The Diaspora Factor in Christian History", *Journal of African Christian Thought* 5, 2002, 3–11; for surveys of today's issues see J. J. Hanciles, "Mission and Migration: Some Implications for the Twenty-first Century Church", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27, 2003, 146–153.

In the monastic tradition of the late ancient and early medieval era — also due to abuses and problems with wandering monks, etc. — the *stabilitas loci* came to be the preferred form of monastic life. Later on this form of life was supplemented by the mendicant orders such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinian Friars and Carmelites whose members (or at least some of them) were "on the road" to preach and to minister. In addition, the Church followed its missionary mandate in different ways. Perhaps it is time for the church to rediscover and develop this second form of Christian spiritual life and ministry in the 21st century in view of the many and worldwide migration processes that are taking place. What opportunities and new horizons does migration open up for the church today?

Like in the Book of Acts, *migration* still brings Christians into areas and countries which hitherto have been closed to the traditional apostolate of the Church. One example has to suffice. Thanks to many domestic and other workers from the Philippines and elsewhere there are more Christians than ever before in the wealthy countries of the Middle East. They should be encouraged and instructed to proclaim the word from place to place (Acts 8:4). One might add that migration also brings Christians from other continents (e.g. from Africa) to secular Europe. Up to now most migrant Christians have stayed together in their new environment in their own ethnic migrant communities and churches. In some cases the local churches have benefitted (two of the Catholic priests in my town in Germany come from India, one from Italy); in other cases these migrants started to share their faith — vibrant, at times — with the wider population.

In addition, today migration (for economical and/or political reasons) brings people from countries with little or no Christian witness to places where they can easily be reached by the ministry of the Church and the Gospel. Not only due to the recent influx of refugees from Syria, there are millions of non-Christians in Australia, Europe and North America today, who could be reached by the Church.

Both situations require of the Church vision, love, flexibility, determination and sensitivity in encouraging, praying and equipping its lay people to use these opportunities wisely and with faith in the God who never only had his people/the Church in mind, but intends that the whole world be saved.