

## Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children: Shaping a Church Response

Tim Davy and Mark Walley

*The phenomenon of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) has featured prominently, at times, in press coverage and political debate around the current refugee crisis in Europe.<sup>1</sup> When engaged, the national mood seems to have ranged from deep pity to suspicion and hostility. But how should the UK church respond and how might the Bible play a part in shaping that response? The article gives a brief overview of the scale and nature of the situation in Europe regarding unaccompanied children, explores several biblical passages that could contribute to a church response that is both theologically informed and practically expressed, and concludes with some ways forward for churches.*

### Background

*What is the scale of the issue?* Nobody knows exact figures. We do know, however, that 170,000 unaccompanied children claimed asylum in Europe in 2015 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> It is unclear, though, how many more children have arrived and either chosen not to claim asylum or have been prevented from doing so. Most (but not all) are older, teenaged boys. Generally younger children and girls either won't leave their country of origin or will claim asylum (or go missing) in the first country they arrive in. Alarming, in early 2016 Europol made a conservative estimate that at least 10,000 unaccompanied children had gone missing since arriving in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

*Why are they making the journey?* The overwhelming reason is that there are so many countries involved in long-term conflicts or oppressive governments where children, especially older, male, teenagers are treated as a potential enemy, not a protected individual. Syria, for example, has been involved in a bloody, multi-faceted civil war for several years. ISIS in the Middle East and the Taliban in Afghanistan have been either killing or forcibly recruiting men to their causes and women to be their slaves. The Eritrean government enforces an indefinite compulsory national service that is more akin to slavery than serving in the military.<sup>4</sup>

*Why Europe?* There are four main reasons. First, Europe is close enough to these conflicts to make the journey possible. Secondly, due to the proximity of conflicts near Europe, the previously policed borders are now more porous. The instability in Libya is a good example of this. Thirdly, they are coming to Europe because their friends have made the journey successfully. They know it is possible, and through internet enabled smartphones they can access live information about the route they are taking from people who have made the journey before. Lastly, life in Europe offers hope. A large number of unaccompanied children have family in the country they are hoping to get to. Through globalization they know Europe through films, TV, and social media. They know that Europe offers more hope for a stable and secure life than their country of origin.

*What are they experiencing?* Unaccompanied children are understood to be amongst the most vulnerable to exploitation. A House of Lords report noted a range of problems, the trauma of which can have long-term effects.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, UNICEF states:

Children and women making the journey are forced to live in the shadows, unprotected, reliant on smugglers and preyed upon by traffickers...The primary hazards encountered include sexual violence,

extortion and abduction. Nearly half the women and children interviewed had experienced sexual abuse during migration – often multiple times and in multiple locations.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout Europe, the key issue being faced by these children is ‘when and where will I be safe?’ All want their journey to come to an end and want to be somewhere safe long-term where they can settle.

### **A church response?**

Such statistics and statements can feel overwhelming, even numbing. Combined with the relative remoteness of the situation, the plight of unaccompanied children can feel like an issue we can pick up and put down, unlike for our brothers and sisters on the Continent who have had to work out their response to the broader refugee crisis in the midst of thousands of people arriving in, or passing through, their towns and villages.

Perhaps the greater danger facing the UK church is letting this sense of disconnect shape our sense of the urgency of the task, rather than being driven by godly compassion and theological commitment. We must soberly examine ourselves to ask if our island mentality has become a form of ‘island idolatry’.

Moving forward, how might the Bible shape our response to the issues above? Perhaps an overall starting point is that themes of displacement and vulnerability are woven into the fabric of the biblical story to such an extent that they appear as fairly typical modes of existence for people in the Bible.<sup>7</sup> We consider it a sobering thought that unaccompanied children have more in common with biblical characters in terms of life experience than our own children. Moreover, the biblical story is, of course, the church’s story.

There are different ways of framing this but we have chosen to highlight four biblical passages that resonate with unaccompanied child issues, and might point us forward to action.

### **A command of love (Deut. 10:17-19)**

The call to show love and justice towards the marginalised is here depicted as a response both to God’s own character but also to Israel’s own ‘outsider’ experience in Egypt. Caring for the marginalised and vulnerable is a reflection of who God is and what he is committed to. If that was not sufficient motivation for Israel, their memory should also fuel their compassion and solidarity. They knew as a people what it was like to receive hospitality and they knew what it was like to be subject to hostility. Now that they were about to be given a land of their own and were about to become potential ‘hosts’, they must carry out their God-reflecting responsibilities towards the outsider and the vulnerable.<sup>8</sup>

### **A song of complaint (Psalm 10)**

In this lesser known Psalm, the author expresses his distress when looking around the world and seeing God’s seeming inactivity on behalf of the vulnerable. It is a complaint on behalf of those suffering at the hands of the wicked and, for those who would prefer to look away, acts as a call to insistent attentiveness to the plight of the exploited. It seems particularly apposite when considering the exploitation of children caught up in the refugee crisis. Consider, for example, vv. 7-11 with its description of the exploitative practices of the wicked who breathe out lies and threats, lie in wait for their helpless victims, and exert their power over those with no way out. No wonder the psalmist cries out for God to arise and show that he does indeed reign (v. 12).

As illustrated above, accounts coming out of the refugee crisis can leave us overwhelmed and unable to process the exploitative evil being committed. Psalm 10 gives us a language for beginning this processing and advocacy work on behalf of these children.

### **A story of hope (2 Kings 5:1-14)**

This story features Naaman, a great and accomplished Syrian general who is cured of a skin disease through an encounter with the prophet Elisha. While most of the narrative focused on the (at times faulty and imprudent) attitudes and actions of adults, the entire episode hangs on the words of a ‘trafficked’ child. This nameless young girl has been taken captive from her home in Israel by Syrian raiding parties and set to work for Naaman’s wife. Knowing of his skin disease, the girl expresses a wish to her mistress that Naaman could be ‘with’ Israel’s prophet, who would surely heal him of his disease. As the story unfolds, her word is taken seriously and this leads to

Naaman encountering Elisha, being healed and having some kind of 'conversion' experience to faith in Yahweh – and this all because of the word of a powerless little girl who is forgotten as the narrative progresses. She is a nameless spoil of war, caught up in events far beyond her control: plundered from home and family, enslaved in an alien, enemy land. Who knows what has happened to her and many others like her?

Esther Menn reflects on the story powerfully: 'In the big world into which the conflict between Israel and Syria has forced her as an enslaved captive of war, the child is introduced simply as "little", as if that is the one thing that matters, her smallness in the midst of everything mighty, powerful, and gross'.<sup>9</sup> She later points to the story as pointing 'to the vulnerability of children of all ages, who are caught up in the violence and upset of communal or national conflicts.'<sup>10</sup>

The story is sobering both in the way that it depicts with almost brutally concise matter-of-factness the dire circumstances of the girl, yet at the same time exemplifies how God finds ways of bringing about his purposes through people in the most unpromising of circumstances. This is perhaps best illustrated in our final text.

### **The unignorable early life of Jesus (Matt. 2:13-15)**

Occurring only in Matthew's Gospel, these three verses would be easy to pass over in the midst of the broader narrative of Jesus' infancy. Without wanting to appear flippant in any way, it seems clear that Jesus' early life has more parallels with a child of a refugee family fleeing ISIS than with most children born in the UK. In historical and global terms, Jesus' early life is much closer to the norm of humanity than our own; indeed, closer than we would like to admit.

This concise narrative leaves a variety of unanswered questions surrounding the family's destination and experience in Egypt. Is it possible, for example, that Jesus' earliest memories were of the hardship and hospitality they encountered during their flight to a foreign land? This experience of Jesus seems important and has profound implications for the Church's disposition towards and approach to refugee issues. Krish Kandiah's poignant and provocative assertion is worth quoting at length:

Jesus was a refugee. The Son of God was an asylum-seeker. The Prince of Peace went on the run from a brutal and merciless regime, crossing borders to find sanctuary. How can those of us who call ourselves Christians, who claim to belong to a Christian country, not welcome those who follow in Jesus' footsteps as a refugee?... We prefer a civilised Jesus, a respectable establishment type who will comfort us, protect us and promise that all our dreams will come true. The real Jesus is a threat to our ambitions. Are we more like Herod than we'd like to admit? If there is no room for the outcast, vulnerable, poverty-stricken refugee Jesus in our lives, then we have to get rid of the other outcast, vulnerable, poverty-stricken refugees he associates with: collateral damage in our bid to protect a ruling position we are unwilling to budge from.<sup>11</sup>

We worship a God who came not in riches, glory, comfort or majesty but was born in the midst of scandal, military and political oppression, and a death sentence. God met the pain of the world head on by entering into it as a helpless baby, dependent on two young parents who had to flee for their lives to another country. Embedded into this story, our story, the God whom we serve became a helpless, adopted refugee. But this, of course, leads to hope as well. Out of these unpromising beginnings God unleashed the transforming power of the gospel.

These brief biblical reflections provoke a range of questions that UK churches might consider. These include:

- To what extent is our disposition towards the vulnerable and displaced 'other' shaped by God's character and calling, by gratitude, generosity, and solidarity?
- How can we use the biblical language of complaint to lament on behalf of these children, and move from lament to action?
- Will we be attentive to those passages of the Bible that speak of the vulnerability and suffering of displaced children?
- Will we 'see' the refugee Jesus? Will we be attentive to the ways in which God brings hope and brings about his purposes through overwhelming and desperate circumstances?

## Conclusion: a way forward for UK churches

How can UK churches respond to the plight of unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Europe and, more specifically, in the UK? First, we can work to cultivate a culture of informed attentiveness to their circumstances and needs. This cultivation should be borne out of compassion, gratitude, and theological conviction that reflects who God is and what he is committed to. Secondly, we can lament and advocate on behalf of these children to God, to each other, and to wider society.

Thirdly, we can look to create capacity that will seek to reverse the brokenness, marginalisation and desperation they experienced. Mobilising and supporting foster parents and educational mentors are just two practical examples of this.

### For further reading:

- Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2008).
- Krish Kandiah, *God is Stranger: What Happens When God Turns Up* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2017).
- UNICEF, 'A Deadly Journey for Children: The Central Mediterranean Migration Route' (February 2017). Available at [https://www.unicef.org/publications/index\\_94905.html](https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_94905.html)
- UNICEF, 'A Child is a Child: Protecting Children on the Move from Violence, Abuse and Exploitation' (May 2017). Available at [https://www.unicef.org/publications/index\\_95956.html](https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_95956.html)
  
- Websites:
- For Refugees <http://www.forrefugees.uk>
- Home for Good <https://www.homeforgood.org.uk/what-we-do/responding-refugee-crisis>
- Refugee Support Network <http://www.refugeesupportnetwork.org>
- UNHCR website <http://www.unhcr.org>
- Redcliffe College <https://fosteringadoptionandthechurch.redcliffe.ac.uk/uasc-project/>

**Dr Tim Davy** is Research Fellow and Lecturer in Biblical Studies & Mission at Redcliffe College, Gloucester. He also leads Redcliffe's research project, 'Meeting the Needs of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in Gloucestershire: Enhancing the Response of the Local Church', which is funded by the Diocese of Gloucester Development Fund. **Mark Walley** runs Home for Good's unaccompanied minors project alongside establishing its political advocacy work. In autumn 2017 he begins ordination training in the Church of England.

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- <sup>1</sup> The UK Government defines an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child as, 'a child who is applying for asylum in their own right and is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who in law or by custom has responsibility to do so'. Department of Education, 'Care of unaccompanied and trafficked children: Statutory guidance for local authorities on the care of unaccompanied asylum seeking and trafficked children', July 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-of-unaccompanied-and-trafficked-children>, accessed 2 January 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF\\_A\\_child\\_is\\_a\\_child\\_May\\_2017\\_EN.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_A_child_is_a_child_May_2017_EN.pdf), 12.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/30/fears-for-missing-child-refugees> - accessed 2 January 2017.
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.economist.com/blogs/baobab/2014/03/national-service-eritrea>, accessed 2 January 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> House of Lords European Union Committee, 'Children in crisis: unaccompanied migrant children in the EU', 10-11.
- <sup>6</sup> UNICEF, 'A Deadly Journey for Children The Central Mediterranean Migration Route', February 2017, 5, <https://www.unicef.de/blob/135970/6178f12582223da6980ee1974a772c14/a-deadl-journey-for-children---unicef-report-data.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> See the new book by Krish Kandiah, *God is Stranger: What Happens When God Turns Up* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2017), which highlights this very well.
- <sup>8</sup> Peter Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1976), 206-207.
- <sup>9</sup> Esther Menn, 'Child Characters in Biblical Narratives', in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2008), 343.
- <sup>10</sup> Menn, 'Child Characters', 351
- <sup>11</sup> Kandiah, *God is Stranger*, 231.