

Displacement Through Time

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The nativity account in Matthew's Gospel features a familiar episode of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-23). What frequently escapes modern comprehension is the prevalence of forced displacement and social upheaval in Palestine during Jesus' lifetime.

As Jesus was growing up, Herod Antipas spearheaded an urbanisation program to tighten his administrative grip over his territory. He sponsored at least two major building projects in Galilee that we know of: first, the reconstruction and ornamentation of Sepphoris (about 6km from Nazareth) after it had been destroyed by the Romans when Jesus was an infant; and second, the establishment of Tiberias on the lakefront of the Sea of Galilee in 19CE. This city was named in honour of the emperor, alluding to the Roman imperial power which lay behind Antipas' own.

Galileans in the way of development were unavoidably caught up in the changes. As labour and raw materials had to be produced or extracted to build and sustain life in these burgeoning urban centres, additional taxes were imposed, and land from the surrounding countryside was seized or reallocated to make way for the changes. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus describes how in the founding of Tiberias, for instance, many Galileans, including the poor, were forcefully displaced from their lands while others were given land as gifts (Ant. 18.36-38).



Brick relief sculpture by Walter Ritchie, commons.wikimedia.org

Understanding this historical background holds significance beyond adding a little colour to our understanding of Jesus' upbringing. Not only does it offer us a fresh lens through which to comprehend the aspirations of the early Jesus movement¹, it also evokes unsettling parallels of displacement that have occurred through time. A devastating irony is that often violent displacements have occurred in the same region under the auspices of the modern state of Israel. But not dissimilar displacements have also occurred much closer to home.

For example, I recently learnt about an Aboriginal camp from the 1950s very close to where my workplace, Wollaston Theological College, now stands. The College was founded in 1957, which prompts questions about potential coexistence and the church's role (if any) in the camp's eventual removal.

The Whadjuk Noongar people had inhabited the surrounding lands for tens of thousands of years prior to British colonisation. They camped near the lakes which provided water and food, and they used the bushland which still surrounds Wollaston Theological College as a hunting ground and lookout area.

With the suburban expansion of Perth during the early 20th century, Noongar families excluded by law and through land dispossession, often camped on the fringes of town. A few such camps in nearby Claremont and then Swanbourne coexisted alongside European settlement well into the 1950s when their inhabitants were evicted to make room for further development as part of a government-initiated "beautification program"².

When the bulldozer rolled in to demolish the camps, the residents resisted by tying rusty barbed wire between the trees³. But they were scattered nonetheless, with some resilient families setting up camp in the scrub just down the hill from where Wollaston Theological College now stands. A fig tree, planted by one of its residents, still marks the spot.

A report on Aboriginal areas of significance from the 1980s discussed the background to the camp as follows:

Insecurity is the fringedweller's heritage; and despite both the ancient and long-term habitation of the area...there is no place for a fringe camp in the elite world of an expanding middle-class suburb. A day therefore dawned when the Aboriginal residents of Claremont were driven from their homes and forced to move on: a day remembered with little pleasure by the children of that period⁴.

Reading the Bible on unceded land prompts profound contemplation. As I reflect on the emergence of the early Jesus movement against the backdrop of Herodian urbanisation, I do so at a theological institution entwined with a complex colonial history and in a nation with a fractured relationship to its Indigenous peoples.

Still, these unsettling truths offer an opportunity for serious theological reflection. Both stories of displacement shed light on a much larger struggle for justice, a core tenet of the early Jesus movement as well as an important undertaking in our journey towards reconciliation today.

1 See further: James Crossley and Robert J. Myles, *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2023).

2 Sharon Delmege, "From Camp Life to Suburbia: Aboriginal Housing in Perth," *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 368–87.

3 Denise Cook, *That Was My Home: Voices from the Noongar Camps in Fremantle and the Western Suburbs* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2019), 156.

4 R. O'Connor, C. Bodney, and L. Little, *Preliminary Report on the Survey of Aboriginal Areas of Significance in the Perth Metropolitan and Murray River Regions*, 1985, 21–23.