

Faith on the Road
A Short Theology of Travel & Justice

Joerg Rieger

Downers Grove: IVP Academic, Revised edition 2015. 133pp. \$18.00 USD, paper.

Reviewed by John Thompson
Director of Doctor of Ministry Program
Assistant Professor of Missiology & Leadership
Oral Roberts University
Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Breathtaking vistas, interesting people, and beautiful cultures all contribute to the allure of travel. Tourism offers inspiring adventure, experiential learning, and rejuvenating restful escape. There seems to be something that beckons us to take to the road and to the air. The world is at our fingertips. Yet there is a contrary travel narrative experienced by millions that reflects more accurately the biblical theme of journey, namely that of the migrant, according to Joerg Rieger. In his book *Faith on the Road*, Rieger urges the reader to consider the migrant narrative and to recognize the variant power differentials at work in other travel narratives playing out in humanity today.

Joerg Rieger is Cal Turner Chancellor's Professor of Wesleyan Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. He espouses a theology that calls for economic justice, liberation from harmful power structures, and the extraction of any residual influences of empire tentacles. Rieger has invested more than twenty years writing and speaking on these topics. His thoughts on these three areas permeate *Faith on the Road: A Short Theology of Travel & Justice*.

Rieger contends that "Christianity is not primarily a matter of pews and buildings; Christianity is a matter of the road" (15). He writes five chapters to support his contention in this short but rich book. He frames the discussion in chapter one with an exploration of the numerous migrant journeys in the biblical narrative. In chapters two through four, he analyzes six forms of travel including tourism, migration, pilgrimage, vagabonding, short-term mission trips, and mission in reverse. Rieger evaluates each of these travel types with the rubrics of power and control to assess their transformational capacity on the traveler. The final chapter calls the reader to harness travel as an act of justice by embracing "the forms of travel that invite us to side with the alternative bottom-up powers" (123).

Faith on the Road explores how travel has the potential to shape our recognition of the need for justice around the globe as it extracts us out of our static environment. Through travel, we potentially can encounter the downtrodden and marginalized of the earth in a way that moves us toward issues of justice. Unfortunately, much of modern travel fails to genuinely connect people to issues of justice. Rieger discusses how travel in centuries past typically meant challenge, hardship and lack of power. Tourism today, however, reverses the roles of power and influence. The modern traveler often lives vicariously as a king or queen while on the road. Usually economic advantage enables pleasure travel. Consequently, tourism and even much of contemporary educational and short term "missions" travel retains its past colonial and empire

power differentials as travelers bring a purse that injects money into local economies wielding influence on local people and culture.

Rieger lays a solid foundation for his book in his identification and discussion of the journey motif as central in the narrative of scripture. Throughout the Bible we read of travelers whose journeys were filled with difficulty; yet we also read that it is on the road that faith is formed. Powerless migrants (Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the Israelites, the victims of the exile, to name a few) discover the preservation and providence of God. Biblical journeys are filled with tension, struggle *and* discovery. In the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles were often on the road, and they both ministered and experienced persecution on the road. Rieger argues that the Christian life is not to be a settled life but one that is on the move. We are invited to “follow” Jesus and our true home is not here. We are people of hope for what is to come. Rieger urges the reader to resist the pull of a settled life and to live as persons seeking justice. He sees travel as both a metaphor of the Christian life and an actual reality that we must embrace. “Location and constant relocation are central matters of the Christian life” (18).

Rieger desires that travelers return home with a changed perspective especially regarding the disenfranchised. He is deeply concerned for the displaced and he rightfully challenges readers to be people who combat injustice in the world. However, he seems to overlook the importance of *place* found in Scripture. The Old Testament concept of the Promised Land was not just a future hope; it was experienced by many generations. There is a divine gift of place that can and should be enjoyed. Of course, this should never be at the expense of those who are currently landless without place. In the New Testament, the importance of land finds its deepest expression in the concept of the Kingdom of God. That kingdom is not only a future reality; we live in the tension of the already, not yet. The kingdom is experience both now in part and in the future in full. Therefore, we can enjoy blessings from God in the present with thankfulness. In Rieger’s passion for economic justice for all people, he expresses a bias against capitalism that contributes to his minimizing the importance of place. Certainly capitalism needs a healthy, strong critique and requires regulation to protect against abuses. It would be helpful for Rieger, however, to avoid deriding capitalism without offering an alternative to help readers understand how he envisions economic justice.

Of course in the subtitle the reader is told that this book is “A Short Theology of Travel & Justice.” Consequently, the reader is not presented with a comprehensive theology of travel nor of justice. It does not address the myriad of ways travel can impact one’s theology and all the theological facets of justice. Because Rieger focuses on how travel could potentially shape a call to justice issues in the traveler, perhaps it should be subtitled “A Short Theology of Justice Gained through Travel.”

Congregations and church leaders today are hearing the clarion call of God to engage in issues of justice. *Faith on the Road* echoes that call and provides valuable insight in how various forms of travel can hinder or help people develop a vibrant theology of justice. Church leaders have an opportunity to equip and encourage individuals to engage in beneficial forms of travel as well as to shape corporate travel experiences that enable congregants to connect with the disenfranchised in ways that foster justice. Rieger fleshes out the hidden power differentials that can sabotage movement toward healthy forms of justice. The issues and insights in *Faith on the Road* are very

relevant for doctoral education of church leaders as we seek to equip doctors of the church in a mobile world riddled with injustice.

This book sheds valuable light on the prominence of the migrant in scripture and how our current experience of tourism can easily skew our reading of scripture filtering out valuable applications to our Christian life and modern world. Rieger approaches travel from the perspective of a professor. The voice of tourism speaks of what can and should be *enjoyed* in travel, but the voice and challenge of the professor concerns what can and should be *learned* from travel.