

Postcolonial Reading of Matthew 2:13–23 in the Context of Migration and Xenophobia

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Abstract— This study is a postcolonial interpretation of Matthew 2:13–23 in relation to the problems of migration in the world in general, and Nigeria in particular. The study holds that the account of the flight of infant Jesus with his parents to Egypt could not only be interpreted as a fulfillment story relating to salvation history but could also be read in a socio-political context, particularly in terms of existential threat, forced migration, and divine solidarity with the vulnerable. The article adopts a conceptual and analytical approaches, relying on relevant literature on postcolonial politics, migration, xenophobia and the Nigerian migration experience. It makes the point that Matthew's story of the infancy reveals existential threat and violence against the vulnerable by rulers who misuse and abuse power. It also questions the actions of various nations, states and communities that criminalise and mistreat migrants, but do not take into consideration the political, economic and social factors for migration. The study maintains that the Nigerian Japa syndrome, for example, tells the story of a people whose life is characterised by existential crises, struggles and the desperate quest for survival, dignity of labour, enhanced livelihood. The study proposes hospitality model in rethinking migration policies to ensure justice, protection, and shared humanity.

Keywords: Matthew 2:13–23; postcolonial; Migration; Japa; Nigeria; Xenophobia.

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INTRODUCTION

Migration is one of the most obvious indications of inequality in the contemporary world. The reasons why people migrate include war, poverty, occupational dissatisfaction, insecurity, lack of good governance, environmental distress, and the fundamental quest for survival. However, migrants are frequently met with fear, suspicion, racism, exclusion, and political hostility. Thus, migration is associated with issues of identity, dignity, belonging, and socioeconomic power in today's world. This reality can be observed in Europe, in South Africa, in North America, and in other places where foreigners are portrayed as job thieves, welfare recipients, cultural and economic saboteurs, and national security threats (Chekenya, 2024; Esses & Hamilton, 2021; Genova, 2018; Misago & Landau, 2022).

This condition is part of a more general migration crisis in Nigeria which is now known as Japa. This term, which means escape or flee in Yoruba, has become a social metaphor for the widespread desire of Nigerians, particularly young people and skilled workers, to leave the country. Research attributes factors such as job dissatisfaction, job insecurity, economic pressures, poor working conditions, weak institutions, and global employment prospects to the Japa phenomenon (Adegoke, 2023; Lawal et al., 2022; Liu, 2024; Okunade & Awosusi, 2023). Japa is not merely a matter of chance; it is a social statement about the people's discontent with their nation's socio-political and economic realities.

The migration problem in Africa and the world generally reflects two major dimensions of reality, which are socio-political and economic on one hand and humanistic-ethical on the other. Viewed from a socio-political and economic perspective, different dimensions of crises are rife in societies where the masses are oppressed and deprived (Omosor, 2013), and migration is an inevitable consequence. From the humanistic-ethical point of view, the mistreatment of aliens, which has recently manifested in xenophobic attacks on Nigerians by South Africans, owes its roots, to a large extent, to the collapse of African cultural values such as Ubuntu and Ujamaa (Omosor, 2020) and the severance of the cord that holds humanity as one.

Matthew 2:13–23 is applicable to this context. Joseph, Mary, and their newly born child, Jesus, were on the run to Egypt when Herod attempted to kill Jesus. The story places the Messiah in a context of threat, exile, and divine intervention. This text has been interpreted through lenses that focus on migration, refugees, and postcolonial and political aspects (Allen, 2024; Anderson, 2018; Aspray, 2023; Dube, 2019; Kalundang, 2026; Stargel, 2021). The purpose of this study is to situate Matthew 2:13–23 in the context of the Japa syndrome in Nigeria and global xenophobia.

The thesis of the study is that there is a socio-political factor underlying the flight of Joseph's family in Matthew 2:13–23, expressing the reality that migration is often the result of socio-economic and political violence, and also that vulnerable migrants often

rely on divine help, resistance, and hope. From a postcolonial perspective, the study calls on host communities to rethink their migration and diplomatic policies and to view migrants not as threats but as bearers of dignity.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This article relies on conceptual and theoretical approaches informed by a postcolonial perspective. Postcolonial hermeneutics is useful as it questions empire, power, domination, identity, and the marginalisation of colonised or displaced people. It interrogates what biblical discourses reveal about political violence, cultural hierarchy, border control, and social exclusion (Dewi, 2018; Joy, 2024; Kahl, 2024; Mamahit, 2021). The study appropriates migration theory and xenophobia studies. De Haas's (2021) aspirations-capabilities framework is helpful in understanding why people migrate when they not only want to but also have the resources to do so. This is significant for the Japa phenomenon in Nigeria, as many Nigerian migrants are not simply the poorest citizens but include students, professionals, doctors, nurses, and middle-class youths who have potential and resources but feel limited by the prevailing difficult local situation (Ajoseh et al., 2024; Liu, 2024; Wariri et al., 2024).

Modern borders are not neutral, as is further illustrated through postcolonial migration scholarship. Often, they recreate colonial milieux, racial suspicion, and differential mobility (Achieme, 2021; Collins, 2022; Parmar, 2020; Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2021). This article, then, reads Matthew 2:13–23 as a text that reveals the creation of refugees by oppressive powers and how some societies treat vulnerable aliens.

MATTHEW 2:13–23: A TEXT OF MIGRATION FROM A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Matthew 2:13–23 begins with danger. In a dream, Joseph is warned that Herod is going to kill the child and that he must take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. This is not a form of tourism, missionary travel, or voluntary adventure. It is coerced movement due to political violence. A child is targeted because Herod is afraid that another king might claim the throne. State terror is thus what generates the family's migration.

A political reading of this passage is significant. As Anderson (2018) and Aspray (2023) demonstrate, the notion of Jesus becoming a refugee carries profound theological significance. It implies that Christian reflection on migration should begin not with the comfort of settled citizens but with the vulnerability of the displaced Christ. Dube (2019) also interprets the Matthean Jesus from the perspective of Egyptian Jews who were immigrants, arguing that Matthew's Sondergut is highly readable from a migration perspective. Allen (2024) revisits the child in Matthew 2:13–23 in light of migration and identity, suggesting that the child's identity is developed in a landscape of displacement and danger.

The killing of the innocents makes the text more explicitly political. Herod's violence is not random but is, rather, the violence of a ruler who will guard his power through the destruction of defenceless bodies. The massacre has a large reception history, as demonstrated by both Carter (2023) and Cho (2022), for it reveals the tragic price of imperial insecurity. Stargel (2021) further interprets the flight to Egypt as a reflection story influenced by the exodus memory. In this way, Matthew portrays Jesus as a person whose life is lived under the dark clouds of empire, forced movement, and divine rescue.

Thus, a postcolonial reading of the text does not spiritualise the passage in such a manner that its political essence is undermined. It is a text of fulfilment, but it is also a text of domination. It is a prophetic narrative, but it is also a narrative about a family who tries to stay alive. It is about divine guidance, but also about suffering that is produced by human rulers. In this context, Kalundang (2026) rightly places Matthew 2:13–23 in the modern context of displacement, which is anywhere tyranny creates refugees.

POSTCOLONIAL HERMENEUTICS OF THE MIGRATION OF CHRIST

Postcolonial hermeneutics invites readers to attend to those whom dominant systems marginalise. It does not accept readings that accommodate empire or erase the pain of subaltern peoples. In Matthew 2, the focus is not so much on Herod's palace as on a threatened child and a family on the run. The family of Bethlehem becomes a migrant family. This transformation is of theological importance.

Joy (2024) demonstrates that questions of power and colonial structures must be addressed when decolonising New Testament texts. Kahl (2024) introduces the concept of postcolonial biblical hermeneutics, which serves as a means of engaging with scripture in the context of colonial memory and domination. Dewi (2018) demonstrates the power of postcolonial hermeneutics to address socio-religious issues, and Frey et al. (2025) highlight the importance of contextual approaches in biblical exegesis. These studies combine to provide a reading of Matthew 2 that links ancient imperial violence with present-day migration injustice.

In this reading, narrow nationalistic religion is also being challenged. If displacement is part of Jesus' childhood, then the identity of Christians cannot be divorced from concern for displaced persons. Gowler (2019) relates the teaching of Jesus to love for the alien, and Casteel (2021) addresses practical concerns of migration and the Bible. God's people are migrant people, as Hays (2021) argues, and the refugee crisis is a shared human condition, as Wright and Măcelaru (2018) contend. Such views make it difficult for Christian communities to rationalise xenophobia.

Thus, in Matthew 2, one might speak of a migrant Christology. Not only is Christ Lord over migrants, but Christ is revealed in migrant vulnerability. Migration is not

romanticised. Egypt is a place of interim safety, but the motive for leaving is violence. This is significant for the Japa experience in Nigeria: migration can be an opportunity, but it can also be a symptom of fear, frustration, and failing systems.

XENOPHOBIA AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The xenophobic mentality is driven by fear, as is evident globally. Migrants are referred to as invaders, criminals, disease carriers, economic burdens, or threats to culture. These narratives turn real people into social problems. Research has found that situations of crisis, including pandemics, border insecurity, economic uncertainty, and nationalism, can increase xenophobia (Esses & Hamilton, 2021; Silva et al., 2022; Üstün, 2025). It is particularly significant that xenophobia is expressed with a racial dimension. Europe's "migrant crisis" is also a racial crisis, claims Genova (2018). Isakjee et al. (2020) discuss liberal violence and racial borders in the European Union, and Achiume (2021) expands on the concept of digital racial borders. Parmar (2020) argues that borders reflect racial hierarchies. These studies reveal that migration control is not only administrative but racialised and political.

Xenophobia also manifests in institutional forms. Stevens et al. (2024) document discriminatory and xenophobic practices in European health systems affecting child refugees and undocumented migrants. Pattillo et al. (2023) explore racism towards racialised migrants in European health services, and Harerimana et al. (2025) examine medical xenophobia and healthcare exclusion of refugees and migrants in Africa. As these studies demonstrate, xenophobia can translate from public sentiment into the delivery of services, access to healthcare, and state practice.

South Africa provides a prominent African example of xenophobia against African migrants. Misago and Landau (2022) describe xenophobia and violence as spatiotemporal exclusion. Chekenya (2024) and Opara (2022) examine xenophobic attacks on migrants in South Africa and the uncertain identity of West African migrants in the country respectively. Alugbin and Osisanwo (2025) demonstrate the ideological construction of xenophobia in Nigerian and South African newspapers. The significance of these works is that Nigerian migrants can be victims of xenophobia both in the West and within Africa. In Matthew 2, Herod's fear causes violence. Exclusion through fear of migrants is a common phenomenon of modern societies. The link is clear: when power is threatened, it attacks those who appear weak. Matthew's narrative can thus contribute to exposing the immorality of xenophobia.

THE JAPA SYNDROME IN NIGERIA: A QUEST FOR SURVIVAL

The Japa phenomenon in Nigeria is a consequence of thwarted multifaceted aspirations. Okunade and Awosusi (2023) present an empirical analysis of migration from Nigeria to the United Kingdom, indicating that Japa is related to both structural

and personal motivations. Adegoke (2023) demonstrates how social media influences the out-migration trend, particularly through disseminating stories, tips, and images of success overseas. Liu (2024) describes Japa for middle-class Nigerian youths as "African survival migration." This is important, as it redefines Japa not as laziness or disloyalty but as a quest for liveable futures.

Two key components of this process are push and pull factors. Nwokolobia et al. (2024) identify some of the factors responsible for irregular migration and Japa in Nigeria, and Lawal et al. (2022) link health workers' brain drain to the COVID-19 pandemic and overall health system pressures. Wariri et al. (2024) offer a retrospective cohort study of doctors and dentists in Nigeria, and Ajoese et al. (2024) analyse public discourses on the legislation of medical retention. These studies indicate that Japa has a grave impact on national development, particularly in healthcare.

The Japa debate involves a complex moral tension. On one hand, people are entitled to safety, dignity, and opportunity. On the other hand, high-quality skilled out-migration undermines fragile institutions. The problem of this tension must not be resolved through blaming migrants. Here, the aspirations-capabilities framework of De Haas (2021) is helpful: migration occurs when people have both increased aspirations and increased capabilities. The more critical question, then, is not "why are Nigerians leaving?" but "why has it become so difficult for Nigerians to stay?"

Matthew 2 sheds light on this moral question. By staying in Bethlehem, Joseph would demonstrate loyalty but would place the child at mortal risk. By fleeing, life is preserved. Likewise, many Nigerians who Japa are not abdicating responsibility; they are reacting to conditions in which they are subjected to professional, economic, and psychological threats that make it impossible to fulfil their responsibilities. Flight is not condemned in the theology of Matthew 2. It illustrates how flight can be a wise, necessary, and divinely guided response to existential danger.

THE FLIGHT–EMPIRE–XENOPHOBIA–HOSPITALITY MODEL

This study advances a Flight–Empire–Xenophobia–Hospitality model for understanding Matthew 2:13–23 and global migration, with a focus on the Japa experience in Nigeria. The model comprises four interrelated components.

The first component is that empire produces flight. Herod's violence in Matthew 2 compels the Holy Family to take flight. Today, conditions of weak governance, insecurity, economic exclusion, racial capitalism, and colonial migration structures generate mobility (Collins, 2022; Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2021). Japa is an outcome of home failure and overseas opportunity for Nigeria.

The second component is that flight carries agency. Migrants are not passive victims. Joseph acts decisively to protect the child. Nigerian migrants also make choices through education, social networks, digital platforms, and professional avenues to

pursue a better life (Adegoke, 2023; Liu, 2024). This agency cannot be denied, but neither can the pain that gives rise to it.

The third component is that fear is easily translated into xenophobia by host societies. Migrants are met with suspicion, racialisation, and exclusion. This is evident in the border regimes practised globally, discrimination in the healthcare sector, racist practices on social media, and xenophobic violence in South Africa (Harerimana et al., 2025; Misago & Landau, 2022; Triandafyllidou & Monteiro, 2024). Herod's fear of the child represents a politics of fear that perceives migrants as threats.

The fourth component is that biblical faith requires hospitality and justice. Hospitality is not sentimental kindness but a political and theological practice that protects vulnerable strangers. Escobar (2018) provides a New Testament understanding of the refugee, and Gowler (2019) focuses on Jesus' love for the alien. Aspray (2023) demonstrates that there are direct theological implications to the notion of Jesus as a refugee. In Matthew 2, communities are called to protect, not persecute, migrants.

The model integrates the postcolonial interpretation of Matthew 2 with xenophobia studies and the Nigerian *Japa* discourse. It demonstrates that migration theology needs to engage in structural critique of systems that make forced migration a rampant phenomenon. The following tables clarify the conceptual contribution of the study.

Table 1 - The Flight–Empire–Xenophobia–Hospitality Model

Model component	Biblical basis in Matthew 2:13–23	Postcolonial interpretation	Contemporary migration/<i>Japa</i> connection	Key scholarly support
Empire produces flight	Herod seeks to destroy the child, forcing Joseph, Mary and Jesus to flee to Egypt.	Empire protects itself by treating vulnerable bodies as political threats. Flight becomes a response to violence, domination and insecurity.	<i>Japa</i> emerges from weak governance, insecurity, economic exclusion, poor working conditions and global inequalities that push Nigerians to seek survival elsewhere.	Collins (2022); Sadiq and Tsourapas (2021); Okunade and Awosusi (2023)
Flight	Joseph	Migrants are not	Nigerian migrants	Adegoke (2023);

carries agency	responds quickly to divine warning and protects the child through migration.	passive victims; they make strategic choices within constrained conditions.	use education, professional networks, social media, digital information and migration routes to pursue better futures.	Liu (2024); De Haas (2021)
Fear becomes xenophobia	Herod's fear of a rival king leads to violence against innocent children.	Fear is politicised by those in power and redirected against vulnerable outsiders.	Migrants are often treated as threats to jobs, culture, health systems, national security and social order.	Harerimana et al. (2025); Misago and Landau (2022); Triandafyllidou and Monteiro (2024)
Hospitality requires justice	Egypt functions as a temporary place of refuge for the Holy Family.	Hospitality is not mere sympathy; it is a political and theological duty to protect endangered strangers.	Churches, states and host communities should protect migrants, resist xenophobia and address the structures that force migration.	Escobar (2018); Gowler (2019); Aspray (2023)
Migration theology requires structural critique	The text shows that forced mobility is caused by violent power, not by personal failure.	Biblical interpretation must expose systems that produce displacement and exclusion.	<i>Japa</i> should be read as a critique of Nigerian governance and global migration inequality, not merely as individual ambition.	Kahl (2024); Joy (2024); Kalundang (2026)

Table 1 presents the central structure of the Flight–Empire–Xenophobia–Hospitality model. It shows how Matthew 2:13–23 can be read beyond a purely devotional meaning and understood as a political and theological text on migration. The table links Herod's violent empire with contemporary structures that push people into migration,

especially Nigeria's *Japa* experience. It also highlights migrant agency, host-society fear, xenophobia and the ethical demand for hospitality. The table's main contribution is that it connects biblical interpretation, postcolonial critique and migration studies into one framework for understanding forced movement and justice-oriented Christian response.

Table 2 - Analytical Link between Matthew 2:13–23 and Nigerian *Japa* Migration

Analytical issue	Matthew 2:13–23	Nigerian <i>Japa</i> context	Theological/social implication
Cause of movement	The Holy Family flees because Herod threatens the child's life.	Nigerians migrate because of insecurity, unemployment, weak institutions, poor professional conditions and loss of confidence in the future.	Migration should be understood as a response to danger and blocked possibilities, not simply as betrayal or lack of patriotism.
Nature of the migrant	Jesus is presented as a vulnerable child whose life is preserved through displacement.	<i>Japa</i> migrants include students, doctors, nurses, professionals and young people seeking dignity and stability.	Migrants should not be reduced to statistics or stereotypes; they are human beings with dignity, fear, hope and agency.
Role of power	Herod represents violent political authority that sacrifices the weak to preserve power.	Poor governance, economic exclusion and global labour inequalities shape Nigerian out-migration.	Migration discourse must move beyond blaming migrants and examine the systems that make departure attractive or necessary.
Experience of host society	Egypt becomes a place of temporary safety.	Nigerian migrants may find opportunity abroad but may also face racism, exclusion, deskilling and xenophobia.	A safe destination must be more than geographical arrival; it must include dignity, rights and belonging.
Moral demand	The narrative invites readers to see divine presence in the	<i>Japa</i> challenges churches, governments and host societies to respond ethically to	Christian ethics must reject xenophobia and support justice-oriented hospitality.

displaced child. migration.

Table 2 explains the relationship between Matthew 2:13–23 and Nigerian *Japa* migration. It shows that both contexts involve movement caused by danger, insecurity and blocked possibilities. In Matthew, the Holy Family flees because Herod threatens the child's life. In Nigeria, many people migrate because of weak governance, unemployment, poor working conditions and uncertainty about the future. The table also shows that migration should not be reduced to disloyalty or economic ambition. Rather, migrants should be seen as people seeking survival, dignity and belonging. The table therefore strengthens the article's theological and social argument.

Table 3 - Propositions Derived from the Flight–Empire–Xenophobia–Hospitality Model

Proposition	Statement	Explanation	Suggested application for future research
P1: Empire–Flight Proposition	Conditions of domination, violence and failed governance increase the likelihood of forced or survival migration.	Herod's violence produces the flight of the Holy Family; similarly, structural failures produce <i>Japa</i> migration.	Future studies can examine how insecurity, unemployment and institutional distrust influence Nigerian migration intentions.
P2: Agency-in-Flight Proposition	Migrants exercise agency even when migration is shaped by constraint.	Joseph actively protects the child; <i>Japa</i> migrants actively plan, network and use educational or professional pathways.	Future studies can explore how social media, family networks and professional bodies shape <i>Japa</i> decisions.
P3: Fear–Xenophobia Proposition	Host societies often convert fear of migrants into exclusion, racialisation and violence.	Herod's fear of the child mirrors modern political fear of migrants as threats.	Future studies can compare Nigerian migrant experiences of xenophobia in Africa, Europe and North America.
P4: Hospitality–	Ethical hospitality must include	Egypt's role as refuge shows the	Future studies can assess how churches

Justice Proposition	protection, dignity and structural justice.	importance of safe reception for endangered migrants.	and faith-based organisations respond to Nigerian migrants and refugees.
P5: Structural-Critique Proposition	Migration theology must move beyond charity and address the systems that produce displacement.	Matthew 2 exposes the political cause of flight, not only the suffering of the displaced family.	Future studies can develop public theology frameworks for migration justice, anti-xenophobia and national reform.

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DISCUSSION

The postcolonial interpretation of Matthew 2:13–23 contributes to scholarship in three significant ways. First, it moves the infancy narrative from private devotion to public theology. The journey to Egypt is not only about the fulfilment of God's plan; it is about the politics of survival under a violent regime. As Egwuanikwu (2026) argues, the passage depicts forced migration. This reading aligns with Repschinski's (2019) concern about Matthew's attitude towards Roman political power and extends it into the ethics of migration.

Second, the article constitutes an attack on xenophobic Christianity. A faith community that venerates a displaced child cannot consistently disaffirm displaced persons. This is not to suggest that migration governance is straightforward. Rather, it teaches that governance must be according to justice, not hatred. Works by Casteel (2021), Hays (2021), and Wright and Măcelaru (2018) provide support for this overall biblical ethic of migrant solidarity.

Third, the article positions *Japa* as both critique and hope. It is critique because Nigerian systems are failing to retain citizens and professionals. It is hope because migrants still dream of life beyond conditions of frustration. However, this optimism is tempered by the reality that migrants can be deskilled, face racism, loneliness, and

exclusion in new societies. The migrant from Nigeria can thus be simultaneously an agent of aspiration and a victim of global xenophobia.

Implications

Theologically, churches ought to preach the Matthew 2:13–23 passage as a migration text. The holy family's flight needs to be linked to the plight of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and Japa migrants in sermons, Bible studies, and public theology. This will contribute to the fight against religious nationalism and facilitate migrant-friendly discipleship.

From a social perspective, host societies must not accept migration-related discourses that criminalise migrants. Xenophobia must be understood not merely as personal prejudice but as a moral and structural problem. Anti-xenophobic policies for institutions such as hospitals, schools, border agencies, and media organisations must be implemented to uphold the dignity of migrants.

For Nigeria, Japa must serve as a governance warning. Any policy that fails to tackle insecurity, poor working conditions, lack of employment opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and professional frustration while seeking to curb migration will remain inadequate. Retention shall be based upon justice, opportunity, and trust rather than coercion.

For scholarship, the proposed model can serve as a platform for further empirical and theological research. Researchers could examine how Nigerian Christian migrants understand Matthew 2, investigate the attitudes of churches towards Japa, or assess the impact of xenophobia on Nigerian migrants in destination countries.

CONCLUSION

Matthew 2:13–23 is a significant text in a world of forced mobility, border anxiety, xenophobia, and the Nigerian Japa phenomenon. Through postcolonial hermeneutics, it becomes evident how the child Jesus enters history as a threatened and displaced body. Herod symbolises the terror of authority, Joseph symbolises the agency to protect, Egypt symbolises a temporary haven, and the return of the family symbolises hope for the end of danger.

This study has suggested that Japa is neither an unpatriotic act nor a purely economic phenomenon. It is a complex migratory reaction to thwarted hopes and curtailed prospects. Meanwhile, the xenophobia evident across the world demonstrates that physical arrival does not necessarily confer belonging. People who have migrated can find themselves leaving one margin of insecurity only to encounter another margin of exclusion.

Theologically, Matthew 2 invites readers to stand with migrants, for the Christian story itself is a story of flight. Politically, it constitutes a call to societies to reject fear-

induced hostility and exclusion directed against migrants. Ethically, the study urges Nigeria and host countries to create conditions that address the despair that drives migration and to cease punishing migrants for seeking a better life elsewhere.

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