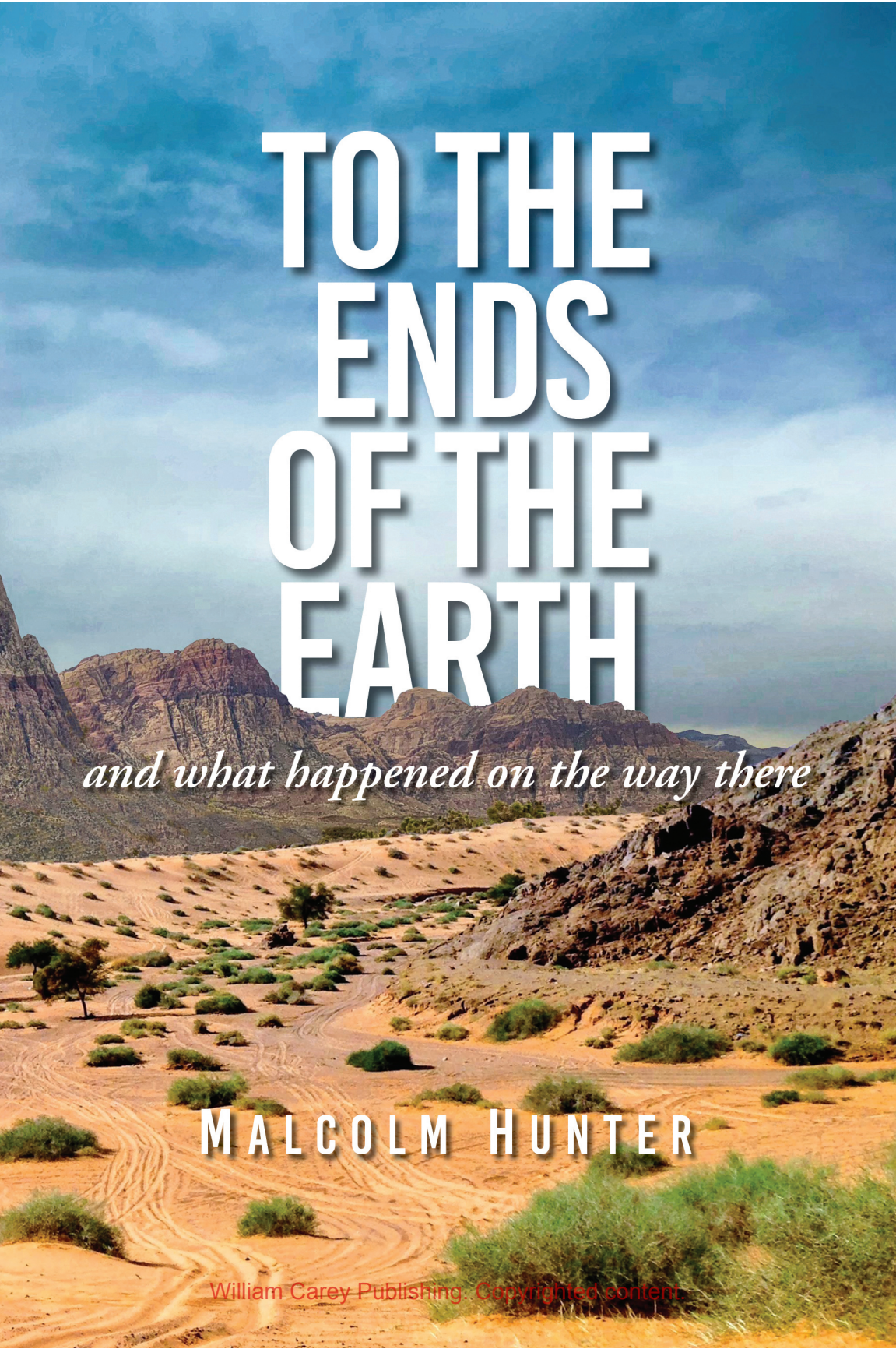


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To the Ends of the Earth: And What Happened on the Way There, 2nd ed.

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WHO IS THIS KRISTOSI?

The light was waning, and the clouds had just broken. Rain was already penetrating the grass thatch overhead. I stared up into the gloom as the first drops dampened my hair and streaked my bare arms. In local homes the oils from cooking fires would coat the underside of the grass roof, sealing it from rain, but we had no such security in the church hut where we were meeting; we'd get drenched tonight. Then again, everyone seemed too preoccupied to care.

I sat in a circle of about thirty pastors from the surrounding people groups. The atmosphere was dismal. They'd just told me of how Bodi raiders had slaughtered six churches—men, women, and children—in two years. The attackers seemed to know when and where the believers would meet, so they made a sport out of it: they'd set the grass hut on fire and wait until the hysterical congregants fled the building, finishing them with knives and spears as they ran through the doorway. The goal of their exploits was to steal cattle, but by killing everyone at the scene of the crime, the Bodi could avoid retaliation.

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The men around me led fifty or so churches in the hardest hit areas, where many Christian families were now spending nights out in the forest for fear of another attack. Grim and weary from the road, the pastors had gathered in this small, leaky shelter to tell their stories and ask for the mission's help. They were now desperate enough that they wanted to resettle their churches en masse. They knew of good, unoccupied land at a reasonable distance. If the Christians could move away, the Bodi might give up the chase and stop preying on their herds. To do this, though, they'd need outside resources.

It fell to me to tell them that this plan wouldn't work. They were farmers, the Bodi nomadic grazers. Even if the believers found arable land elsewhere, the Bodi would soon follow them. They were tireless marauders, constantly scouring the area for vulnerable herds.

Christians weren't the only victims of the onslaught. The Bodi people were renowned for their violence, dreaded by other inhabitants of the Omo Valley, Ethiopia's roadless, lawless southwest corner. Staggeringly, it was said they had killed at least fifteen hundred people the previous year.

Government intervention had failed miserably. Bodi territory of late had become a burial ground for police and soldiers deployed to subdue the area. The peacekeeping force brought superior firepower, but they didn't know the terrain, whereas the less sophisticated Bodi fighters had navigated the bush since childhood. They expertly ambushed the men in uniform, killing so many along the trails that the beleaguered survivors quickly abandoned the mission.

Although there was already an element of bloodlust in Bodi culture—glory for young men who could boast that they'd taken a life—it was the struggle for survival in the bush that had pressed them into such desperate acts. Like other nomadic pastoralists, they lived a precarious lifestyle, completely dependent on the numbers and health of their cattle. Drought and disease could ravage the herds alarmingly fast, and in recent years they'd been preyed on by tsetse flies and ticks native to the Omo Valley. Here at the margins of the map, far from the material blessings of settled urban living, cows were everything—livelihood, sustenance, holdings, currency, and dowry. Dowry was an especially painful expense, since a young man's family might have to pay as many as fifty cows to secure him a desirable bride, and raiding neighboring people groups was the quickest way to meet the demand. For this reason the older Bodi men urged their sons and grandsons to go raiding as often as possible. Either outcome

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was considered a win: If a young man came back successful, driving a train of stolen cattle ahead of him, his family might be able to afford a wedding. If he were killed in the action, they'd never have to worry about it. So the family fortune depends upon cattle and daughters, sons are a dead loss.

The toll that a harsh environment and untenable customs were taking on the Bodi had become everyone's problem. Their attacks were increasingly frequent and far reaching.

The elders had been talking for hours, and at some point the last of the daylight had vanished. The air was thick with night and rain. Somebody lit the two kerosene lamps hanging from the beams of the roof, but this did little to relieve the heaviness in the room. The dirty yellow glow merely deepened the shadows and lines on faces—some tense, some etched with exhaustion, others unreadable. We were still far from a solution.

The arrival of dinner a few hours after dark also failed to lift the mood. We shared a meal of boiled corn and beans, the fare of the poorest, and as usual there were no plates or eating utensils, just several large bowls into which we all dipped our hands at once to scoop up the mush. Thankfully, the one thing that wasn't in short supply that night was water; before and after the meal we filed outside into the rain to wash our hands, and we continued standing there, streaming, as our hosts spread dried cow skins over the floor of the hut for bedding.

Foot washing, a staple of rural hospitality, was offered before we slept, but only the three of us who'd brought sleeping bags enjoyed that luxury. The others settled in for the night with boots on, each man wrapped in his shamma, the traditional handwoven shawl.

Before we slept, the senior elder called out the names of four men to say the night prayers. I asked if they could also pray for God to reveal the solution to the Bodi problem; maybe he would give one of us a dream or insight before morning.

I'd wait until daylight to put forward my proposal.

The rain had stopped during the night. The heaviness had lifted, and the morning world seemed once more like a spacious place where things could stir and breathe. I opened my eyes to see a few men kneeling in silent prayer around the room, shammas covering their heads. In a few minutes we'd all roused

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ourselves, making a stiff exodus from the hut into the sunlight to perform the customary morning hygiene routine, brushing our teeth with forefingers or short pieces of stick.

Trying to recall the night, I couldn't remember the third and fourth prayers that were supposed to be said. Either the last two men or I had lost consciousness before that point. Sleep overtook me quickly, but it didn't last with so many snoring men in close quarters, most of whom made at least one blind excursion to the outdoors to relieve themselves, tripping over their bedfellows and eliciting grunts and groans in the process. In the early hours a rat began to nibble my hair, foraging for the salt that had accumulated after hot days on the trail. Having experienced this on a few other occasions, I didn't wake up fully. It was only when I felt the flick of its tongue against my scalp that I instinctively seized it, tossing it across the room. Alas, there was hardly a vacant square foot of floor. The rodent landed on the far side amid shouts of protest.

After the collective tooth brushing and spitting outside, we returned to the hut for coffee. It wasn't the high quality stuff from roasted beans but the poor man's substitute, boiled coffee leaves. We sipped the drink from old gourds, blackened and encrusted with the coffee residue of countless gatherings, and turned to our morning agenda.

"So, did any of you get a word from the Lord last night about what to do?" I asked the circle. A long silence rolled out before us. Evidently not.

"Isn't it true," I continued, "that your fathers—maybe some of you older men, too—used to go raiding for cattle and slaves?" Energetic agreement, nods all around. Yes, they used to go on raids. Several leaders recalled those times in surprising detail and launched into spirited retellings of their escapades, much to the interest of the younger men. Not long ago their people had engaged in full tribal warfare with neighboring groups.

Once that fact had been well established through anecdotal evidence, I moved on to the next question. "What changed you? Why don't you fight with your neighbors anymore?"

The responses were immediate: "The gospel." "Jesus did it."

We'd reached the summit of my inquiry. "Okay. If God changed you so that you no longer kill and raid, don't you think he could do the same for the Bodi?"

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Palpable reluctance to answer. The men had suddenly realized that our innocent trail through the past actually led to a threatening precipice. They were holding back, but there was only one way down from the ledge. I pressed for a response. "Raise your hand if you believe God can change the Bodi." Hands rose tentatively around the room. Yes, in some unspecified world it was a theological possibility. So long as the proposition remained theoretical, everyone agreed.

I voiced the inevitable conclusion. "Isn't it about time the Bodi had a chance to hear what Jesus has done for them?"

A mass murmur of assent, every voice anonymous among the others.

And now the plunge. It was the same proposal I'd made many times to church leaders across southwest Ethiopia. "The Bodi have never had a chance to hear the gospel. Let's go together and see what God can do for them!"

No reply. We were in freefall. Finally, after about a minute, one of the elders cleared his throat. "If you want to go to the Bodi, we'll pray for you." He hesitated, then finished the thought. "You white missionaries are different from us—you can get away with things we can't. If we tried to cross into Bodi territory, they'd kill us before we could even speak."

The elder made a valid point, which I had anticipated. These men would instantly be recognized as enemies. There was a slight chance that foreign workers would fare better.

When I'd prayed about this venture several months before, God had given me the idea of entering Bodi territory by helicopter. To make the trip overland would be suicidal; men would be guarding the borders, ready to kill intruders without hesitation. But to drop into the heart of Bodi country from the sky? It was insane, but at least we'd have the element of surprise. I had woken up this morning with a strong conviction that this was indeed the right course.

Acknowledging the elder's concern, I told the room what God had put on my heart. I would go, but not overland. God had provided the means for our unlikely endeavor in the form of two other white men, one a helicopter pilot and the other a linguist who spoke a highland language akin to the Bodi's. We would need both to succeed.

The mission was still, by any earthly standard, reckless. We knew that Bodi men carried guns at all times. God would have to open the way, and only he

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