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REFUGE

REIMAGINED

BIBLICAL KINSHIP  
IN GLOBAL POLITICS

## Asylum Seekers' "Essential Travel" and the Bible

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During COVID, what does “non-essential travel ban” mean for asylum seekers, for people who are on-the-move? Many of us are making careful decisions around trips, learning to ask of ourselves, “Is this essential travel?” International borders have all but closed, limiting the non-essential travel of citizens. And yet the same closures limit the *essential* travel of people fleeing civil-war and gang violence, extending their journeys without end.

This essential travel of asylum seekers is an ancient human reality. It is a part of the biblical world, for example. Imagine the circumstances of a family of three generations that has fled their own village because of war, in this case nearly a millennia before Christ—Old Testament times. Jonathan and Abital, their children, and Abital’s mother—all those from the family who miraculously survived the conflict—have struggled for miles along a hilly trail to find sanctuary. One circumstance is in their favor: the time when kings go to war is also the time of the spring harvest, and they have some hope at least of finding a little food to eat. After seeking work in a number of settlements along their path, they come at last to one where Abital and her mother are invited to help with the herds that roam within the village walls; there may be other work for them here as well. The father at the head of the family is, in time, invited to join with some laborers who are harvesting grain nearby. Perhaps the family finds shelter under a disused, ramshackle mud-brick roof, one of just seven buildings making up this settlement. Or perhaps (and what joy and relief this would have been!) one of the family households makes room under their *own* roof for the newcomers, and they crowd in.

Here is shelter, and food, a respite from violence—even the blessing of companionship. But is it as good as it seems? This family is desperate and has nowhere to turn. For the present, there are no other options and no one advocating for them. Will these outsiders receive their pay, their daily allotment of grain? And what happens in the future, after the harvest? Will they be homeless again, to endure the searing heat of the summer months without shelter?

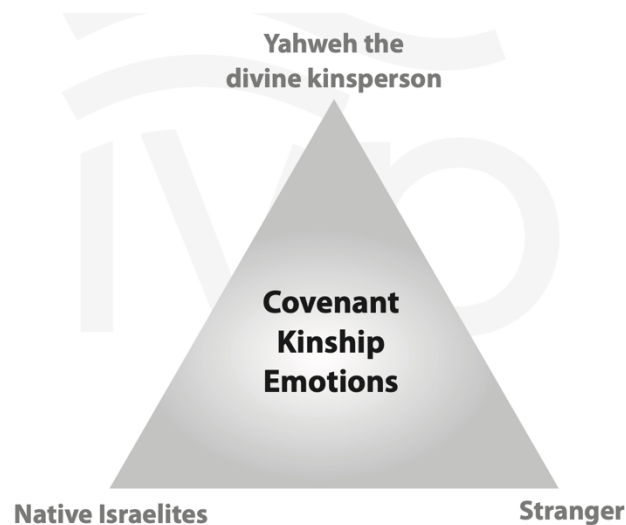
Jonathan and Abital are (imaginatively) from the world of Deuteronomy, the Old Testament world. Deuteronomy’s concern to protect the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow is well known (*e.g.*, Deut 24:19-22). However, it is the stranger, the refugee, who is at the heart of this book’s concern. The stranger appears twenty-two times in Deuteronomy, showing us that people-on-the-move were seeking a home in Deuteronomy’s world.

**God’s covenant with people-on-the-move**

The best-known biblical passage regarding the stranger in Scripture is probably Deuteronomy 10:18-19, which reads: “The Lord executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and *loves* the stranger, giving them food and clothing. *Love* the stranger, therefore, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (AT) Notice how the word *love* is used in this passage, regarding the strangers. Just a few verses earlier is an affirmation of God’s love for God’s people: “Yet Yahweh set the divine heart in *love* on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day” (Deut 10:15, AT). There is a deliberate association here among (1) God’s love for ancient Israel, (2) God’s love for the stranger, and (3) Israel’s love for the stranger.

This term *ahav*, “love,” is deeply significant for understanding Deuteronomy’s response to the stranger in three senses. First, the term was used in ancient Near Eastern terminology to express a covenant commitment between nations. Thus, God was making a covenant with the vulnerable stranger—a steadfast commitment of faithfulness! Second, the language of ancient Near Eastern covenant treaties is taken from the very language of kinship. It includes terms denoting love, brotherhood, fatherhood, family-feeling, and the like. To enter a covenant is to enter into a bond of family-like solidarity. The use of *love* in this passage thus suggests that the stranger is to be enfolded within the web of kin and covenant relations binding Israel to her divine Kinsperson, Yahweh. And third, *love*, in this context, even entails emotional connections between Yahweh, the stranger, and the Israelite (see Deut 10:15). The deep emotional attachments that weave together kinsfolk should entwine those who have been displaced together with God’s people.

We could represent these relationships of love in the form of a triangle (see figure).



So, God makes a *covenant* with the stranger. God makes a steadfast commitment of protection and love with displaced people—what a remarkable revelation of the character of God. What grace! What tenderness! And God calls the people of God to do the same. Is this how you

imagine God, as a God who makes a covenant with vulnerable immigrants? How might this change your imagination for Christian discipleship? Or even for the nation's posture toward people who are seeking asylum?

Let's return to our imagined family on the move. Jonathan, Abital, their children, and Abital's mother, have found work and lodging. What will be the outcome for this vulnerable family? If their hosts take God's word seriously, the future looks promising. Deuteronomy requires Israelites to take kinship responsibility for these people, enfolding them in loving solidarity. For, God loves these people with covenant solidarity. How can God's people do any less?

Reflecting on the ten-year anniversary of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan urged the international community to move "from dehumanization and toward a stronger sense of global kinship," according to which we accept that everyone on earth is "fully worthy of our interest, sympathy, and acceptance." Today, there are hopeful signs of a will to welcome. President-elect Biden has announced a new refugee intake ceiling of 125,000. In Canada, the Minister of Immigration Marco Mendicino has promised to resettle 65,000 people who are seeking asylum over the next three years.

These are much needed initiatives. And yet, in our book, *Refuge Reimagined: Biblical Kinship in Global Politics* (IVP, 2021), we show that the global reality of 79.5 million displaced people requires a more comprehensive response, nationally and globally. Today, we have an opportunity to reimagine ourselves—our neighborhoods, our nations, our global community. Let's reimagine our allegiances, those we take responsibility for, according to God's word. What a joy it will be, to reimagine refuge!