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Biblical Kinship, Refugees, and Immigration: A Review of Refuge Reimagined

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Abstract

"The authors recognize the challenges of developing a global plan to address the refugee crisis but see it as an attainable goal."

Posting about the book *Refuge Reimagined* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/biblical-kinship-refugees-and-immigration-a-review-of-refuge-reimagined/>

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Biblical Kinship, Refugees, and Immigration: A Review of *Refuge Reimagined*

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Title: *Refuge Reimagined: Biblical Kinship in Global Politics*

Author: Mark R. Glanville, Luke Glanville

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How far should the U.S. open its borders to the refugees streaming north from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras? Was Germany's acceptance of more than one million refugees in 2015 warranted? What about the 700,000 plus Rohingya refugees that have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh since 2017? We live in a world where questions about the global movement of people fleeing from persecution, violence, and genocide and looking for a better life are very relevant, particularly for those who identify as followers of Christ.

In their book, *Refuge Reimagined: Biblical Kinship in Global Politics*, Mark R. Glanville (a theologian), and Luke Glanville (international relations), engage the questions about refugees and immigration from a holistically Christian point of view. The result is a well-informed and very readable book that challenges common assumptions and encourages the Christian community to truly love their neighbors as themselves by advocating for fundamental changes in the system on community, national, and global scales. Part One of the book focusses on a Biblical view of strangers and kin, Part Two on the Church, Part Three on the nations, and Part Four on the world.

The Biblical concept of kinship serves as the foundation for this book. The authors begin by examining the concept of 'strangers' in Deuteronomy. Strangers are included within the triad of the vulnerable, as in 'the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow' (Deut 16:11, for example). Many Old Testament laws were designed to protect these portions of the population. But who, exactly, does 'the stranger' refer to? The authors make the case that,

the stranger in Deuteronomy is any vulnerable person from outside the core family: an outsider in relation to the clan and household within which he or she now dwells. Some of these strangers would have come from another nation, but others might have come merely

from the clan group over the hill, so to speak. However far they have come, these strangers have been separated from their land and their kin and no longer know the protection that family and patrimony (inherited land) provide... The Deuteronomic stranger is exposed to all manner of ill.¹

So, how are strangers, or refugees in today's world, to be treated? With suspicion? As 'less than' in some way? With pity? Or maybe as simply unlucky? The Glanville's believe that both the Old and New Testaments command them to be treated as kin—as part of the family. They say, 'Deuteronomy's social laws (such as treatment of hired laborers and provisions for gleaning) required Yahweh's people to act as kinsfolk to those who had been without the protection of kinship'². In the New Testament, Jesus' frequent interaction with those at the margins of society, the 'strangers' of his day, is telling. The authors also explain that when Jesus says, 'you will always have the poor among you' (Matthew 26:6-13), he is actually making a deliberate connection to Deuteronomy 15:11, which says 'For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore, I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land'. With this background in mind,

...rather than a resignation to the reality of poverty, Jesus' words anticipate that his disciples will always be acting as kin to the poor. This is to be a defining feature of Jesus' followers.³

At this point, the question of scale becomes important. We may be called to treat refugees as kin on a personal or family level, but what about at larger scales? The book goes on to address the implications of the kinship concept for the church, for nation states, and in the global setting. The authors make a convincing case that welcoming the stranger, the refugee, is central to the mission of the church. One of the numerous arguments they make in favor of this position is that many refugees are from the global South and East, which has become the axis of the Christian faith in recent years. So, God may very well be using Christian refugees to bolster a Western church weakened by consumerism, individualism, nationalism, and other problems. They go on to suggest that 'When Christians are tempted to see people on the move as the other, whom we should keep out, this is likely because we have become settled, become forgetful of our own identity as aliens called to serve others in weakness'⁴. In other words, we have forgotten our mission as God's people.

The way nations treat displaced people and refugees in their countries or on their borders is being hotly debated in many countries at this point in history. The Glanvilles suggest that a well-developed Christian perspective on this topic is sorely needed. It is common for politicians and citizens alike to support caring for strangers and refugees when it is convenient and has little cost to the home country. The idea is that governments need to care for their own

people first, typically by carefully controlling immigration and the number of strangers allowed to enter. The book challenges this belief, saying,

How does this accord with God’s desire and design for community? Simply put, it doesn’t. Scripture envisages the cultivation of communities marked by the joyful and relentless care of the weakest and the neediest—not only the poorest and most vulnerable within the community but also those displaced and dispossessed beyond it whom they are to welcome and enfold as kin. It is widely held that, in a complex and dangerous world, this model of community cannot be feasibly or justifiably applied at the level of the nation. But it can. And it should.⁵

How can this be accomplished? Is it realistic in any way? The authors proceed to share examples of situations in which relatively open borders have been successfully managed, but also discuss the challenges of this model.

A global perspective on refugees and kinship is addressed in the fourth part of the book. Some of the concepts explored are the influence of Christian realism, the fact that the countries least able to care for strangers end up doing the most caring (think of Bangladesh), less than half of one percent of the global refugee population was resettled in 2019, and that there is currently no global resettlement policy. The authors recognize the challenges of developing a global plan to address the refugee crisis but see it as an attainable goal. At the same time, they want to push governments and citizens to understand that in the big picture, welcoming refugees is an opportunity, not a problem.

Overall, this is an easy reading, much needed, thoughtful, well researched, and deeply Christian book. The ideas, concepts, and suggestions are well supported and deserving of healthy discussion by both Christian and secular audiences.

1. p. 29

2. p. 31-32

3. p. 92

4. p. 105

5. p. 124