

## THE BIBLE - IT COMPLICATES THINGS

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*[Note: This essay was first written in May 2008 and published again in 2018. I could not have imagined how much worse things would get in a year, let alone eleven years. There is a concerted effort by the current US administration to demonize the refugee and immigrant that is immoral, unchristian, and un-American. What I wrote before seems eerily prescient, still! As people of faith, we must pay attention!]*

Sometimes I am tempted to quit reading the Bible - it complicates things! Just when I think I know what it says, I read a passage again in a new translation or out of a new context, and discover something I had missed.

Lately, with the topic of immigration so much in the news, I decided to see what the Bible had to say about aliens. Wow! Did I get an ear full?! Our ancestors in the faith, notably Abraham and Isaac were aliens. Very early in scripture the law of the community made equity clear: "There shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you." [Exodus 12:49 and Leviticus 24:21] Business conduct was required to be honorable and attentive to the poor and the alien: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field ... You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien." [Leviticus 19:9-10] Those who are not just towards the alien are subject to divine disapproval: "Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice." [Deuteronomy 27:19] "I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against ... those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts." [Malachi 3:5] As for today's controversy about illegal aliens, the Bible says: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." [Leviticus 19:34] Ah, the Bible! It complicates things!

Digging a little deeper I wondered just what the biblical word alien meant. I couldn't find a distinction between legal and illegal aliens. At its root the word simply means: "One who lives along side of." More specifically it referred to one from another land who lived next door, that is, basically, a "neighbor." From very early a core understanding was that "the land belongs to God," and that "In God's sight all peoples are resident aliens." Therefore people must live in humility in relationship to each other. The status of those who came from other lands is that they were sacrosanct as guests, and, in view of their weak position in the land, they were to 'enjoy' divine protection. Oh, the Bible! It complicates things!

Some will argue that things are different now. I would like to agree, but then I read the Bible and discover that thousands of years ago a Pharaoh saw the aliens in his midst and said: "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, will join our enemies and fight against us." [Exodus 1:9-10] And so resident aliens who did most of the hard work were made into slaves. Oh, the Bible! It complicates things.

In our modern world we build walls - in Berlin and Israel and the American southwest. We celebrate when other people's walls come down, and busy ourselves building our own. Some will remember Robert Frost writing, in his poem "Mending Wall," that "Good fences make good neighbors." But we conveniently forget that in the same poem he also wrote: "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know What I was walling in or walling out, And to whom I was like to give offense. Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That wants it down."

There's something very wrong with demonizing the stranger and the alien and those who are different. In today's talk show environment it's very hard to have an intelligent dialogue when one side is screaming, and the other side can't put a word of truth in edgewise. I am outraged when a legal immigrant with a valid visa from Liberia who has been studying to be a United Methodist Pastor can be detained [in 2008] and sent to a detention center by 'Homeland Security' in the name of the law because he has been 'profiled.' I am not impressed with executive orders that extend the reach of the distrust. And I am appalled with proposed 'police state' style laws that would offer rewards to people for turning in the 'undocumented.' Frankly, I have been around long enough to wonder what the 'other agenda' is. And I am

suspicious of simple, self-righteous solutions to complicated issues in our world that go beyond whether a person happens to be an alien or not. So, much as I am tempted to stop, I know I need to keep reading the Bible - it complicates things!