

BIBLE STUDY 2: A place to live, a place to belong

Way in/ setting the scene

The command to “love the stranger” is repeated more than 30 times in the Bible. Along with the fatherless and widows, aliens were among the most vulnerable groups in Israel. They had no support and deprivation and exploitation were both real dangers. Importantly, the law went beyond merely negative injunctions to prevent exploitation; there were positive obligations on Israel to actively care for society’s most vulnerable.

The law gave Israel the framework for living as the people of God in the land and promoted right relationships with God, the land and with one another - citizen and resident alien alike. Property laws were rooted in the principle that the Israelites were stewards of the land which belonged to God. Rural land could be freely bought and sold but was redistributed in the year of Jubilee (every fiftieth year). ‘Gleaning laws’ allowed those without land to gather what they needed to live on. In addition, the tithe that was to be brought every third year provided means of support for the dependent or vulnerable members of society.

These laws deal with very practical considerations - such as having a secure place to live, being able to earn a living through work or having enough to live on (if dependent on assistance), having legal rights and an unbiased hearing - and, equally significantly finding a place to ‘belong’. Some immigrants lived within the Israelite households; others were more independent. All those sharing a sense of common purpose

were gathered into the community under the covenant which provided a strong sense of belonging.

Questions

1. In what ways are those foreigners resident among the people of Israel vulnerable or in need? Deuteronomy 14:28-29, Deuteronomy 24:14-22
2. What warnings are given to Israel about their conduct towards those residing among them? Leviticus 19:9-10, Numbers 15:29-30
3. On what basis do the Israelites and the foreigners have equality? Numbers 15:29-30, Deuteronomy 1:16-18, Deuteronomy 24:17-18
4. How is their sense of belonging created and ensured? Deuteronomy 29:10-13

Application

1. How might the principles behind these Old Testament laws be applied in our society today? (look back at the practical considerations listed above)
2. In what ways might we be guilty of not treating others as equals in our society or of exploiting them?
3. How can we assist people’s integration into the community here?

Taking it forward

If the group is not familiar with asylum issues it may be worth asking them to take some time to find out about the actual situation of people seeking asylum here.

For example, how much money do people claiming asylum here receive each week in government support? Which are the most common countries of origin for those coming to the UK as refugees? What are the current situations in those countries?