# 12

# This Story Is Our Story Because We Were Strangers

## The Relevance of Exodus 22:21 and Leviticus 19:33–34 in Refugee Awareness Work

*Elizabeta Jevtic-Somlai and Robin Peterson*

The marginalized and disadvantaged reside in the shadows of societies' comforts. In the bustle of our daily routine, these strangers remain unseen, hidden from our view, and are oftentimes forgotten. But not to God. He establishes early on in his dealings with the children of Israel that those whom society shuns are ever present in his view. God often chooses personalized imagery and narrative through his prophets to vividly teach his people how these strangers, in actuality, are a reflection of his very own people and need to be treated as such. Introducing the laws that will govern the children of Israel following their exodus from Egypt, God cautions his people on multiple occasions to "neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him" because, as he consistently instills in his people, they too "were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21). With this short statement, he reiterates Israel's own story of slavery in order to stress the need for his people to empathize with the stranger. The power

of weaving their own story into an eternal principle of charity lies in an endeavor to engage their "mind, emotions, spirit, [*and*] body"[1] to effect a change of attitude[2] and with it, potentially, a course of action favorable to God. In other words, he nudges them not only to remember their own story but to use it to embrace the stranger since the story of a stranger they may encounter tomorrow was their own story yesterday. In Leviticus, this weaving is even more prominent as God elaborates that "the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:34). In his attempt to curb human propensities, God provides both the children of Israel and Latter-day Saints today with several important messages.

His first vital message is a type of preemptive deconstruction of the notion of an "us" versus "them," thereby providing an opportunity for creating interconnectedness based on the simple understanding of what it feels like to have been there. God suggests that while wounds—enslavement in a foreign land and the accompanying brutality—do heal, the scars that they leave are there to remind us to empathize with those who are fighting battles of their own. Second, God asks Israel to love the stranger as they would love themselves. The notion of loving "as thyself" evokes the idea of looking into a mirror, seeing a reflection—full of blemishes, imperfections, and insecurities—and embracing it with wholehearted appreciation. As a result, allowing oneself to be loved despite one's imperfections also grants one the right and opportunity to embrace and love other human beings, while fully realizing that they are just as imperfect. This imagery invites one to mirror God's love for an individual by providing respite from duress and haven from sociopolitical and juridical insecurities because, in God's eyes, the reflections both of oneself and of a stranger are equal.[3] Third, this reflection is meant not purely for self-justification and self-preservation but as a precursor to the exercise of kindness,[4] an eternal principle with eternal consequence, which ultimately leads to holiness. As such, God's final point to the

children of Israel is that embracing one's own imperfections and granting other human beings the right to be imperfect opens a gate toward greater understanding, appreciation, love, and acceptance of the people around us, no matter their race, nationality, religion, skin color, or any other determinators that tend to divide us as people. The decree to love strangers is about seeing the divine potential within others and within ourselves, viewing them and us as children of God, and perceiving all of us as offspring from eternal parents. The act of loving the stranger is about removing the blindfolds of mortality and remembering one another as God does so that our actions are driven by kindness, restraint, and greater tolerance.

The images evoked in the Leviticus verses, which are messages and meanings repeated throughout scripture, are both beautiful and complex. The fact that God uses that particular story of slavery and exodus to impress upon the minds of the children of Israel the gravity of the code attached to the story makes it particularly powerful. Daniel Taylor suggests that the use of a particular story is a vital characteristic of conveying a message or teaching a lesson because "propositions depend on the stories out of which they arise for their power and meaning and practical application. The story provides the existential foundation on which the proposition rests. If no story, then [there is] no significance for the proposition."[5]

In other words, stories imprint propositions on our mind in a memorable way. While first presented in the Old Testament as a code to the children of Israel,[6] the decree to take care of the stranger is still acutely applicable today. It has found its echo across many cultures and religions, including in the early Church and during the restoration of the gospel. And while the code mentions those who are enslaved, homeless, poor, or marginalized based on physical, mental, emotional, racial, ideological, geographical, educational, or other less obvious denominators, we will focus specifically on the code's objective to protect one of the most sidelined groups in our society today—the refugees. We elaborate on the relationship between the stranger in the Old Testament and the refugee, thereby making the case that

the laws presented in the Old Testament's Pentateuch are also applicable today and would benefit the modern-day refugee.

## The Refugee

Based on the definition of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees at the Geneva Convention of 1951 and its subsequent modification in the Protocol of 1967, a refugee is someone who,

> as a result of events [that have occurred] . . . and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [or her] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself [or herself] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [or her] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.[7]

One of two elements must be present to classify people as refugees—namely, (1) for reasons beyond their control, the individuals were forced (or made) to leave their homes and livelihoods to survive or (2) the individuals fear returning home because they do not enjoy the protection of their own countries or peoples. In summary then, these people leave everything behind not only out of necessity but also out of a well-founded fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones; by default, they find themselves in a particularly vulnerable state. In Myrto Theocharous's essay "Refugee Asylum: Deuteronomy's 'Disobedient' Law," he compares the characteristics found in Deuteronomy 23 to those in the definition of a refugee. In this chapter, Moses lays out specifications as to who may enter the congregation in the Israelite camp in order to keep it clean and holy before the Lord. While the chapter as a whole is strictly clear as to who is considered clean and worthy of being in the congregation, the

tone differs in verses 15 and 16 because they forbid a Moabite from entering (an aspect discussed later in this paper). Having admonished the Israelites only a verse earlier that they should ensure that the "camp be holy: that he see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee," Moses goes on to establish the rule that they "shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee." Rather, the servant seeking the refuge "shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him" (Deuteronomy 23:14–16). Theocharous suggests that the "characteristics of the refugee . . . are also present in the law of Deut. 23:16–17 [15–16]: (a) the fact that it most probably concerns foreigners who seek refuge in another land, (b) the element of fear that is clearly discernible and (c) the obvious urgent need for asylum protection."[8]

Theocharous goes on to explain that while the original verses and the law discuss the specific treatment of a slave, it should be noted that in antiquity, the term *slave* was not "restricted to [actual] slaves, but it generally characterizes [any person] under authority."[9] This idea suggests that the person defined as the slave in the passage has experienced fear, flight from dangerous circumstances, and asylum seeking, which denotes that the slave is also a refugee as defined by the UN. Concluding, Theocharous explains that "understanding the slave as [a] 'refugee' allows the reader to examine what the law says, not only with respect to slavery, but also with respect to refugee asylum."[10]

Refugee scholars Christopher Wright and Marcel Macelaru explore the fact that migration itself is such a common thread throughout the Bible that readers "hardly notice it as a major feature." This migratory theme shows that while not all movements had the same purposes, many were similar in that they were made out of necessity for the migrants' survival and their own protection, as well as that of their posterity[11] Looking further into the migration patterns, Jonathan Burnside suggests that the term *stranger* was readily used to define someone migrating "from another tribe, city, district

or country" who had left his or her homeland out "of necessity."[12] We can easily conclude that while migration was a typical occurrence in antiquity, the Lord himself did want Israelites to pay attention to the migrants, especially to those who were leaving their homelands out of necessity. He alluded to that idea by using Israel's own Exodus story to clearly remind the Israelites that not only were they strangers in a land but there was also a certain parallel in their own movement to freedom, a parallel comparable to the movement characterizing the refugee: movement driven by fear, persecution, and oppression. The Lord states to Moses, "Behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them" (Exodus 3:9). The Lord later affirms that he "will bring [them] up out of the affliction" (Exodus 3:17) and that he remembers the covenant he has made "to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, wherein they were strangers" (Exodus 6:4). The necessity for migrating out of Egypt, the actual Exodus with all its challenges and trials, and the longing for the promised land evoke imagery easily comparable to modern images of thousands of people walking across deserts and crossing large bodies of water in hopes of arriving in a place that will provide safety—a type of a promised land. God did not define the term *stranger* to denote a refugee or a fugitive, yet he was quick to remind the children of Israel what it was like to be a stranger on multiple occasions. We therefore suggest that the refugee is included in God's request to extend kind and protective treatment to the stranger, a treatment that would fit the needs of today's refugee.

In his talk "Refuge from a Storm," given at general conference in April 2016, Elder Patrick Kearon reminded us that "there are an estimated 60 million refugees in the world today, which means that '1 in every 122 humans . . . has been forced to flee their homes,' and half of these are children."[13] Elder Kearon echoes the Lord's reminder that the children of Israel were strangers in their land, and he reinforces the notion that we—as an extension of the children of Israel through our baptismal covenants and as children of God—need to reconsider

the provisions of care and protection extended to refugees. Just like God reminded the children of Israel that they were once strangers, Elder Kearon exhorts us today to remember that as members of the Church, we "don't have to look back far . . . to reflect on times when we were refugees, violently driven from homes and farms over and over again."[14] He then asks, "What if *their* story were *my* story?,"[15] a question first asked by Sister Linda K. Burton in her April 2016 general conference talk, and answers that question for members of the Church by stating, "Their story *is* our story, not that many years ago."[16] His caution to the membership to "be careful that news of the refugees' plight does not somehow become commonplace when the initial shock wears off" is strikingly similar to the Lord's warning issued in Leviticus 19:33–34 to not let the children of Israel forget that they were once strangers. Like the children of Israel, we need to remember the "millions of refugees worldwide, whose stories no longer make the news."[17]

It is no wonder that Elder Kearon's plea encouraged many Latter-day Saint individuals and groups to spare no effort in reaching out and providing necessary help. One such effort was the founding of a refugee awareness nonprofit organization in 2015 named Their Story Is Our Story (TSOS). With the goal to ensure that the stories that "no longer make the news" and the people behind them are still remembered, TSOS documents first-person stories and accounts of refugees' journeys from homes lost to homes found. Established by a handful of writers, artists, and humanitarians who wanted to put their talents to work on behalf of refugees entering Europe, TSOS headed to Greece in the spring of 2016 to film, photograph, interview, paint, and ultimately befriend refugees for the first time.[18] Hoping to capture a couple dozen stories, the team returned with over seventy interviews involving nearly two hundred people. Since then, TSOS has grown to include dozens of team members—including refugees and former refugees—from several countries and continents. Having traveled the world documenting stories of refugees, refugee volunteers, and refugee-supporting organizations and, more recently,

by conducting interviews via the internet and in the communities where refugee programs are already established, TSOS has gathered hundreds of stories and produced dozens of videos, all of which can be found on the TSOS website and in the Global Refugee Archive housed at Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library. TSOS believes that raising awareness and allowing the viewer to be educated through these stories can help further the Lord's law to not oppress the stranger to but remember him or her. Since the stories collected have helped to strengthen the discussion at hand, they will be used as case studies in the discussions herein of the verses from Exodus and Leviticus.

## Deconstructing the "Us" versus "Them"

It is often supposed that the function of the Old Testament is to tell the story of God's chosen people, the children of Israel.[19] However, upon closer examination, we can see that the story begins before that, with the creation of humankind as a whole. Only in Genesis 12 are we introduced to Abraham and thus to the eventual birth of Israel. While this might seem a trivial point, Old Testament scholar Hans-Georg Wünch postulates that this sequence of events bears an important message about Israel's self-perception and their perception of strangers:

> What does it say about Israel that its Holy Scriptures start with the fact that God created Adam and Eve in his image and therefore humankind as a whole, not [as] Israel's predecessors only? What does it say about Israel that the first covenant between Yahweh and humans is one with the whole of humanity, not one with Israel? All of this makes [it] clear that Israel does not understand itself as the centre of humanity or as the most important nation amongst all others. As a latecomer in history, Israel understands its own identity as directly coming from Yahweh, who picked up this small and

> almost meaningless people and made it his people. Therefore, its identity rests in Yahweh, not in its own strength or relevancy.[20]

His postulate leads to the conclusion that the children of Israel perceived themselves as a peculiar people among all of God's creations. This led Israel to clearly delineate between those who belonged in the "us" inner circle of the covenant and those who belonged in the "them" circle partly because the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were strangers in Canaan themselves, and as a people, the Israelites were surrounded by the worship of gods other than Yahweh. In reality, when God told Abraham that he will "bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3), he created the contradiction in which Abraham was given the foreknowledge that through his seed the blessings would be bestowed upon humankind, while at the same time alluding to the fact that Abraham's seed would "be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years" (Genesis 15:13).

Let us remember that the "Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour: And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage. . . . Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save alive" (Exodus 1:13–22). Nonetheless, God reassured Jacob in a vision and said, "I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation. I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again" (Genesis 46:3–4).

The suffering the Israelites endured was central to their development of empathy and understanding for the plight of others.[21] Therefore we can see that God helped the Israelites learn from their painful experiences how to be a blessing unto the nations. In essence, it could be postulated that God's hope for Israel was that their story of migration and estrangement would create a holy and a just society where "religious and social duties and responsibilities are inseparable."[22] And since God is long-suffering, he created very specific rules and instituted rituals to remind the children of Israel of their heritage and to provide a code for them to learn how to

remember the other without abandoning their covenantal duties. In fact, God created the code as part of that covenant to ensure that the children of Israel would be aware of the other as a stranger. However, by allowing strangers to dwell among the children of Israel, the Israelites eventually learned a way to be "in the world, but not of the world."[23] This covenantal duty was as important to the Lord as it was to the children of God. As a result, they distinguished themselves from different types of strangers and used three different words to describe the level of potential danger to the covenant—whether the strangers might lead the children of Israel astray, show some sympathy to the covenant, or even desire conversion—and the associated course of action and interaction toward a stranger: namely, *gēr* (resident alien, sojourner, guest), *nēkār* (foreigner), and *zār* (outsider).[24] Of the three, scholars agree that *gēr* is the most neutral in connotation and is the term most often used in the Old Testament verses.[25] The term *gēr* is used ninety-two times throughout the Pentateuch,[26] and it is used to describe the patriarchs and the children of Israel while in other lands,[27] as well as a

> person from another tribe, city, district or country who has left his [or her] homeland and who is no longer directly related to his original setting. He is someone who lacks the customary social protection of privilege and who has, of necessity, placed himself under the jurisdiction of someone else. . . . This being so, it is sensible to suggest that the noun *ger* should be translated as "immigrant." The phrase "resident alien" is awkward and the term 'sojourner' is archaic. "Immigrant" . . . adds the motif of "social conflict." It does this in three main ways. First it highlights the original circumstances of social conflict that are inevitably responsible for causing people to become immigrants in the first place. People usually become *gerim* as a result of social and political upheaval. This could be caused by war, famine, oppression, plague and other social misfortunes. Second it is consistent with the conflicts that can result when immigrants try to settle in a new environment. . . .

> Third, it highlights the immigrant's "outsider" status in the adopted social setting.[28]

By choosing to use the word *ger* to describe both the children of Israel while in their migratory state and a stranger as mentioned in the Leviticus verses, God creates an interconnectedness between the two different groups of people and deconstructs the separation of "us" and "them" at an emotional level. At this point, it should be highlighted that all through their existence as the covenant people, the children of Israel struggled to remain a peculiar people. While their identity rested in the Lord, as Wünch pointed out, the children of Israel often adopted the belief structures of others around them, sometimes to the point that they walked away from the covenant and perverted the ways of the Lord. Even during their exodus journey there are instances of such behavior. This is not what the Lord means, however, when he seeks for them to deconstruct the "us" versus "them." The spiritual separation caused by the Israelites' sins is a crucial part of their becoming a blessing to the other. What the Lord is asking the children of Israel is to not forget, to develop empathy based on that memory for the plight of others, and to be a blessing unto others. In other words, the Lord reminds the children of Israel that while they are his covenant people and he wants them to remain as such, the stranger is also the Lord's creation. The stranger is a child of God, a *gēr* deserving of protection because, as Burnside points out, his or her migration is based on social or political upheaval and is therefore not optional. One might suggest that at this point in time, Israel had a shared story of oppression to connect them with the other, but this might not be the case for them as well as for us today. By default, this may lead to our inability to deconstruct our own "us" versus "them" fences. In this paper, we argue that the inability to deconstruct the "us" versus "them" does not lie in a lack of a shared story but rather in the *perception* of such. Elder Kearon reminded us that we do have a shared story of oppression through the stories of our own beginnings as God's chosen people. This is why the images from the Grecian

shore of the lifeless body of Alan, a drowned three-year-old, along with his older brother, Galib, 5, and their mother, Rehanna, 35, provide connection—we remember our own struggle during the early years of the Restoration, and this helps us to build empathy for the other.[29] God himself shows us that this interconnectedness is present in more ways than we imagine and that it can easily be reinforced through the powerful imagery of remembering and acknowledging the other, as Lisa Campbell's story shows:

> Like most people in the US, I hadn't been aware of the scale of the refugee disaster until . . . I saw for myself the piles of life jackets and the boats stacked on the beach. . . . It was hard to wrap my head around what I was seeing. I was horrified at the stories that I heard.
>
> There is probably not an emotion that I didn't experience, standing there day after day on the shore, watching the boats come in. . . . I had no refugee experience, but I'm a do-er . . . . I ended up running the camp for 18 months, until the Greek government shut it down. . . . From my perspective, this work is like being a mother. . . . I've learned that love is a choice. When they [the refugees] were informed that the camp[30] was closing, these people came to me and said things like: "You've been like a mother to me, I don't know what I'm going to do without you." And I realized that I had met my goal—which was to take care of them and show them they are loved. . . .
>
> The residents of our camp felt like "refugee" had become a dirty word. But they're refugees because they want the same things in life that you and I want. We had engineers, lawyers, teachers, musicians, artists, police officers—people from all walks of life. They were just like you and me.[31]

As we learn about the stories of refugees, we quickly realize that their stories are reflections of our own. While we might not be able to specifically relate to stories of persecution and maltreatment, we can identify instances in our lives that have been challenging,

**Figure 1.** *Lisa Campbell. Courtesy of TSOS, 2016.*

meaningful, and important and connect them with the stories of others. Campbell's experience shows not only dedication to Christlike love but also a realization that human-to-human interaction reveals more similarities than differences; as she learned, *they* are just like *us*. Remembering that something relatable is within every person's narrative helps us to deconstruct the reservations we may hold toward others. As a peculiar people and as a covenant people, the Lord asks us to allow emotional connection to occur, just as he asked of the children of Israel. This allowance opens us up for the next level of spiritual transformation—that of loving the other as we love ourselves. But what does it mean to love another as oneself? God provides the answer in the Pentateuch.

## Love a Stranger as Thyself

Luma Khudher suggests that an important aspect of the commandment given in Leviticus 19:33–34 is the belief that the "*ger* is under God's special protection."[32] This could be the case because of their vulnerable state or of God's ability to perceive Israel's apprehension in dealing with anyone outside of the covenant. To curb potential human propensities that would result from either of the two, God instituted a wise system that provided specific obligations about what it meant for the children of Israel to implement the commandment of loving a stranger. Being the observers of the letter of the law, such specific indications made Israel aware that this was not a mere "sentimental generalization" but rather an actionable commandment.[33] Wright and Macelaru summarize the laws God gave:

- comprehensive protection for foreigners from any and all forms of abuse and oppression (Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 19:33)
- protection from unfair treatment in court (Exodus 23:9; Deuteronomy 1:16–17; 24:17–18)
- inclusion in Sabbath rest (Deuteronomy 5:12–15; cf. Exodus 20:9–11)
- inclusion in worship and covenant—*gērîm* were to be included in the whole life of the community, especially if they were assimilated through circumcision (Exodus 12:48–49; Leviticus 16:29–30; 17:12, 15; 18:26; 24:16; Numbers 15:14; Deuteronomy 14:28–29; 16:10–14; 26:12–13; 29:10–13; 31:12)
- provision of fair employment practices (Exodus 21:2–11; Deuteronomy 15:12–18; 21:14–15)
- access to agricultural produce, or "gleaning rights" (Leviticus 19:9–10; 23:22; 25:23; Deuteronomy 24:19–22)
- equality before the law with native-born (Numbers 15:15–16).

These protection provisions constitute some of the best practices for transitional societies and the successful integration of refugees and asylum seekers into modern-day societies.[34] For the purposes of this paper, let it suffice that we underline once again the notion of the Lord ensuring that "loving as thyself" comes with a provision of specific protections that the state and people of Israel were to grant to the refugee. To this day, these protections aid newcomers in feeling accepted in and becoming valuable, contributing members of their new societies.

The story of Ruth beautifully portrays the fact that these protections were applicable even after the time of Moses. In this book we are introduced to a family who leaves Bethlehem and moves to Moab because of a famine in the land. In other words, we are introduced to a refugee family who would today fall under the category of a climate refugee. We learn from the first few verses that life for this family is not easy. When the husband and sons of the family pass on, the widow, Naomi, desires to return to her native land, knowing that she will find enough mercy back home to sustain her. However, Naomi has acquired two daughters-in-law (Ruth and Orpah), who have different nationalities and worship different gods from the people in Bethlehem. As a result, neither of her daughters would qualify as *gerot*, and their worship of gods other than Yahweh would be looked down upon by the people in Bethlehem. Naomi may have feared that her daughters-in-law would not be extended financial mercy upon their return to her native land and that the likelihood of them securing good marriages would be limited. Consequently, Naomi implores them to remain in their own country where they might have other prospects for financial security and protection through new marriages. Ruth must have been aware of the conditions she would possibly endure by going back to Israel with Naomi. But Ruth tells Naomi, "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do

so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me" (Ruth 1:16–17). In her famous statement, Ruth steps away from everything that endangers her from being seen as *gēr* or equal in the covenant, an action that makes her words even more poignant. She renounces her old ways and her nationality, and she willingly takes on Naomi's God to be hers too, dismantling any notion of fear or rejection that her presence in Israel could cause. Her unfailing love and devotion to Naomi is stronger than that fear, and the years of living under the same roof have likely made a true convert out of her, one who identifies with Naomi's people. That this could very likely be the case is not only supported by her poignant statement but also by the fact that none of the terms for *stranger* are found in the text of the story when Ruth is described. Because her heart was pure, she was given God's special protection. As the book progresses, we see that this purity of heart led to Ruth's marriage with Boaz and a lineage that produced a king of Israel—ultimate clues that she had been accepted into the covenant.

The introduction to the book of Ruth in the Old Testament seminary manual explains that the book of Ruth "addresses the belief held by some . . . [that the children of Israel] should separate themselves entirely from those who were not of Israelite descent . . . [and provides] valuable balance by reminding its readers that the great-grandmother of the revered King David was a faithful woman from Moab who converted to Israel's religion and married within the covenant. Ruth demonstrated kindness to others and loyalty to the Lord. One of the main messages of the book of Ruth is that such faithfulness is more important than ethnicity."[35]

Ruth's story shows us that when we encounter a stranger, even one who has a different ethnicity or worships a different god, it is more important to look into the heart and to embrace the person as a child of God because we never know who stands before us. Ruth not only becomes the great-grandmother of David but is also "an ancestor of our Savior Jesus Christ."[36]

The message is clear. The treatment we provide to today's refugees will have a lasting effect and can help them (re)discover God, change society for better, and be benefactors to our own posterity. Alternatively, our neglectful treatment toward these refugees (or rather the protection we hesitate to provide) can make their lives more difficult, as shown in Naomi's story, and can contribute to their struggle to secure their future and peace. TSOS has documented many stories on both sides of the spectrum. Faroosh's desperate plea personifies the plight of thousands of refugees that have been forced to flee their homes in search of safety and security but have found only a lack of protection upon arrival in foreign lands:

> In the name of God, my name is Faroosh. We are from Afghanistan. I used to work in the media in Afghanistan. We didn't have economic problems there. We left our country because of security problems. I worked as a cameraman in a private television program where we made a documentary movie about the Taliban and the war. I was threatened by the Taliban several times. We went to dangerous places like the Kandahar Province to report and film. When they realized what we were doing the Taliban attacked us.
>
> Due to the dangerous situation, we fled from Afghanistan into Iran. After that we spent about 12 hours walking through the mountains until we arrived in Turkey. At first, I had planned to stay in Turkey but the police arrested us. They were not nice with us and they were not helpful. Also, Turkey was not a safe country to live in. There were two or three suicide bombings while we were there.
>
> Because of all these problems we came here to Greece but we don't see any progress in our situation. We have no freedom to move on to other European countries. We don't have enough money to go forward and we don't know about our future.

**Figure 2.** *Faroosh and his family. Courtesy of TSOS, 2016.*

> If peace returns to Afghanistan one day, we will definitely go back. I had a peaceful and good life there. I had a house and a job. The only problem was the war and the lack of life security. I think there is no solution for my country unless our leaders solve the problems.[37]

Stuck in a limbo, Faroosh and his family have struggled to move on and establish their lives because they are seen as strangers and are treated as such by their country of reception. Despite their abilities, they cannot progress any further because they are not seen as equal contributors to the society in which they find themselves. That is, the love they are afforded does not match the love one would give to oneself. Rather, it is the bare minimum care that the reception country's citizens feel obligated to provide.

On the other hand, part of Leonard's story shows the great potential for refugees and their long-term outcomes when they are provided protection and assistance:

In 1997, I was coming [home] from school with a bunch of kids. We saw 2 men come and they took us. We were forced to join the military. I was 17 at the time. After 6 months, they decided to take us back, to go fight. And, when I went to the other side of the water, to the dock, I heard a strong voice telling me, "Run, Leonard, run!" . . . The closest refugee camp was in Malawi, a different country. In the refugee camp, life wasn't easy. I call it the hell on this earth. . . . In 2004 I came to the United States.

I ended up being homeless. . . . After a week, I heard a strong voice saying "Leonard, this is not what brought you to America. You can be better than this. You need to ask for help. If you don't ask, no one will help you. You need to ask for help." I thought, "Who can I ask for help?" One Saturday morning, I saw somebody pull a car into the back of the library [parking lot]. A couple got out of the car, old people. I followed them, and I kept yelling, "I need help, I need help." The wife heard me yell, and then she yelled to her husband, "Doug, can't we help this young man?" I said, "I am a refugee from Congo, and I'm homeless."

He answered, "Oh we have met a lot of people from Congo. We served a mission in South Africa. Here's my business card." So, they left me with a business card and told me to call them. On Monday I called them, and they said, "We were thinking about you. Can you come live with us?" I was like, "Yes, I will come live with you." So, I went to live with them in South Jordan [Utah]. And over there, they were farmers, so I learned how to milk cows and a lot of other things. They paid all my tuition for 5 years and now I have a Bachelor's degree. Imagine, I never finished high school, I don't have a high school diploma. But I have a bachelor's degree today.

I got a job with a small company called Health Access Project. We partner with the Department of Workforce Services to provide health care to refugees. Doing case

management for refugees in medical settings, I found out that the problems I had when I came to this country are still the same problems refugees are having now. I decided to use my personal experience to help other people. So, I took $3,000 from [my] bank account, I took an office, and I started putting all the legal papers together and today we have an organization called Utah Valley Refugees. We bring refugees from Salt Lake County and all over the United States to come here. What we do with them is just simple. We help them with medical needs. We help them with housing. We teach English classes at the office and we also have classes on employment. We partner with Utah Valley University, so we have students who are going there. So far, in 3 years now, we have been able to help more than 100 families. And among those 100 families, 5 families have already bought a home. They are homeowners. We have a few people who are in the military, we have 2 Utah Valley University graduate students. We actually hired a case manager who was among the first refugees we helped here.

**Figure 3.** *Leonard Bagalwa. Courtesy of TSOS, 2019.*

I feel blessed today. I feel blessed and I feel successful. I call myself one of the most successful refugees in this country. I came here 15 or 16 years ago. Now, I own a home. I have a good job. I have a family. I have a degree. If you compare me to a person my age who was born here, I think we are on the same level. And they have been

> here more than almost 40 years! I always thank our Heavenly Father for that help from above.[38]

The elderly couple mentioned by Leonard occupies only a small space in his personal narrative, and yet their act of selfless love made an incredible difference in the life of the young man they saw standing before them and eventually in the lives of many others who were blessed through him. Does this not sound like the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham, "and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed?" These two stories show that loving others as we love ourselves means that we should provide others with the same opportunities we have been given and be the instrument God uses to fulfill his promise of blessing all families of the earth. What effect would such fulfillment have on the giver? Because all of God's laws served a higher purpose for the children of Israel and because his final goal is to accomplish the immortality and eternal life of humankind (Moses 1:39), we can conclude that God implemented the law of loving others as ourselves to aid in the exaltation of the entire human family.

## The Path to Holiness

God himself prefaces Leviticus 19 with a call for Israel to "speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). This is why scholars of the Old Testament have suggested that the laws found in Leviticus constitute the Holiness Code, or the Laws of Holiness, because they call for the "ethic of imitating God (*imitatio Dei*)," or, rather, they "[imitate] the acts of God" toward another human being.[39]

The idea of imitating God received much attention in antiquity, where Plato himself asserted that the doctrine of *imitatio Dei* meant "becoming like God" by mimicking his higher ways for the betterment of the world.[40] Maimonides, a medieval Jewish philosopher, suggests that "the perfection in which [people] can truly glory is attained

by [them] when [they have] acquired—as far as this is possible for [them]—the knowledge of God, the knowledge of his providence, and of the manner in which it influences his creatures in their production and continued existence. Having acquired this knowledge, [people] will then be determined always to seek lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness and thus to imitate the ways of God."[41]

Thus, how do we imitate God? Since one of his attributes that is often repeated throughout the scriptures is his ability to remember and act upon that memory,[42] a plausible way to imitate God could be seen in our ability to preserve memory. As we do this, we can offer strangers relief and encourage kindness and mercy toward them as we act upon that remembrance for the benefit of others. In the story of Ruth, both Ruth and Naomi are imitating the acts of God toward another human being as they care for each other. However, while we often speak of Ruth's unfailing devotion to Naomi, we sometimes neglect to realize that Naomi's remembrance of her own plight and its utilization to benefit Ruth is what creates the spiral of imitating acts. Naomi loves this young woman even before we enter the story, and through her kind and wise continual direction, Naomi eventually secures Ruth's future. However, because Naomi shows kindness, she is granted financial stability, blessings, and, finally, holiness from God. After her son's death, Naomi could easily have dismissed Ruth. But just like Lisa Campbell in TSOS's first story, Naomi loved Ruth as if she were her own flesh and blood. The memory of that love is what makes Ruth stay with her, and the resulting dance of reciprocity in caring for each other elevates them both. Naomi, the refugee of yesterday—like Leonard in TSOS's third story—becomes the deliverer to Ruth, the refugee of today, because of Naomi's ability to remember. Let us not forget that both Ruth and Naomi are actual ancestors of King David and of Christ. The same promises and blessings that we often attribute to Ruth for her faithfulness in her story are also promised to Naomi because of her own refugee story that has made her strong, resilient, loving, and charitable Nonetheless, it is ultimately in the act of remembering, loving, protecting, and

accepting a Moabite woman (as if she were her own child) that Naomi finds holiness and is rewarded with incredible posterity, holiness, and a closeness to God.

One should take note of August Klostermann's definition of love as "an event where even the highest degree of self-reference dissolves into an even higher self-giving."[43] Loving one's neighbor and the stranger involves special kinds of creative acts that open up new and transformative spaces and relations in all regions of social life, usually divided by race, economic class, gender orientation, and religion. Holiness is thus achieved not through exclusion or separation but by an inclusive attitude, thereby including those who are different from you.[44]

Refugees today differ from those in the local communities in which they find themselves. Elder Kearon expounds on this, reminding us that "being a refugee may be a defining moment in the lives of those who are refugees, but being a refugee does not define them. Like countless thousands before them, this will be a period—we hope a short period—in their lives. Some of them will go on to be Nobel laureates, public servants, physicians, scientists, musicians, artists, religious leaders, and contributors in other fields. Indeed, many of them were these things before they lost everything. This moment does not define them, *but our response will help define us*."[45]

The act of remembering is important to the Lord. It is his way to remind us of the covenant and to demonstrate that this covenant is still in effect, as long as we fulfill our part (see Isaiah 49:14–16). It is therefore in the act of remembering the stranger that we demonstrate that we are doing our part to keep our covenant with him or her. Elder Kearon's words remind us that whether or not we, as covenant people, follow the Holiness Code has an impact on our own opportunity (not on the refugees' opportunities) to imitate God and become more like him. As modern-day covenant children of God, we need refugees to attain exaltation just as much as they need us in order to achieve that goal. God gives us an open invitation to be saviors on the mount, and if we accept that call, not only will our acts of kindness

define us, but they will also refine us[46] until we receive the image of God in our countenances (Alma 5:14).

## Conclusion: Stories Are a Way to Remember

God besought the children of Israel not to forget their own story of marginalization. This concept constitutes the greater commandment of remembrance given to the covenant people and is deeply ingrained in the Old Testament as well as in modern-day scripture. In the illustrated reference work for Latter-day Saints, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament,* Richard Holzapfel, Dana Pike, and David Seely describe the importance of what they term as the "Eleventh Commandment": "The Hebrew verb *zakar,* "to remember," is used no fewer than 169 times in the Old Testament in one form or another. Often called the Deuteronomic imperative, the call to remember could be appropriately identified as the "Eleventh Commandment." Recollection or remembrance thus becomes the vehicle through which the faith of the ancestors is maintained and passed to the next generation."[47]

Through the covenant of remembrance, we receive holiness and exaltation, not only because it strengthens our faith but also because it calls upon us to act as God would. In covenanting to remember him, we covenant to keep his commandments and observe his laws. Ultimately, the goal is to lead us to covenant that we will remember his children as he remembers us, but even more importantly, it will lead to us remembering them as *he* does and acknowledging our divine kinship to others as our siblings and as his children (Mosiah 18:9–10, 27–29). In antiquity, this commandment was fulfilled by passing on stories orally and recording them for future posterity in journals and books. By this passage of stories, the human family is linked and connected through the generations of time, and bonds are created that would not exist otherwise. In essence, remembrance through story gathering and story sharing becomes the act through which human families are bound to each other until they are all

linked back to God. With its vast library of stories, media assets, and contributions from other like-minded organizations, TSOS's digital and scholarly archive encompasses all aspects of the refugee experience. This open access and digitally searchable archive will be the first of its kind in the world and serves as a nexus of "all things refugee," from firsthand stories curated by both refugees and nonrefugees, to film, photography, scholarly research, artwork, theater, music, maps and charts, conference proceedings, podcasts, and other information resources yet to arise on the rapidly expanding and constantly changing landscape of refugee experiences. By so doing, TSOS aims to live up to preserving the memory of the strangers who are children of God and who need us to keep a record of and remember their sufferings (Doctrine and Covenants 123:1–6). At this hinge point in our world's progress where there are more forcibly displaced people (70.8 million+) and bona fide refugees (30 million+)[48] than at any other time in recorded history, creating the archive is one important way to honor the law in Leviticus 19:33–34. The principal hope is that this deep well of knowledge will become a resource to help change perceptions about and the reception of refugees, assist leaders and citizens as they seek to understand and respond intelligently to refugee crisis, and facilitate the knowledge that there is no "us" versus "them." Indeed, as we take care of the refugee, we will realize "that the neighbor here is the one who, as made by God, shares our *imago Dei*," and that as such, we will recognize that we "are variations on a theme, the theme of finite yet strikingly beautiful and varied images of God who need each other."[49]

## Notes

1. Daniel Taylor, "Story-Shaped Faith," in *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 109.
2. In her book, *Telling the Gospel through Story*, Christine Dillon discusses the impact using stories has in the conversion process of each individual

listener. She emphasizes that the retelling of biblical stories can change people from hostile to sympathetic and help them develop new ways to understand God, life, the world, and their space in it as faith-oriented beings. For a more detailed discussion, see Christine Dillon, *Telling the Gospel through Story* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 23–30.

3. See 2 Nephi 26:33; Acts 10:34–35; 17:26; Romans 2:11; Galatians 3:28.
4. Dan Belnap, "'How Excellent Is Thy Lovingkindness': The Gospel Principle of Hesed," in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 170–86.
5. Taylor further elaborates, "Imagine having all the propositions of the Bible but none of the stories. No Genesis or Exodus, none of the historical books of the Old Testament, no Gospels, no Acts—only Romans, parts of the Epistles, and scattered assertions and commands from here and there. Those assertions and commands would still be true, but we would have very little idea of what to do with them." Taylor, "Story-Shaped Faith," 108–9.
6. In his paper, Robert E. Lund suggests that God provided the rules for the children of Israel to "improve the condition of the people" and strengthen their spirituality. For a detailed discussion, see Lund, "Teaching Old Testament Laws," *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 8, no. 3 (2007): 52; W. Cleon Skousen suggests a similar theme, stating that despite all the efforts made by Moses to create another Enoch society, "he lacked a people worthy of it." See W. Cleon Skousen, *The Third Thousand Years* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Publishing, 1964), 255.
7. "Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on International Protection," UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency; USA, reissued 2019, p. 18, https://unhcr.org/en-us/publications/legal/5ddfcdc47/handbook-procedures-criteria-determining-refugee-status-under-1951-convention.html, unfortunately, not at my fingertips.
8. Myrto Theocharous, "Refugee Asylum: Deuteronomy's 'Disobedient' Law," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30, no. 4 (2017): 465.
9. Theocharous, "Refugee Asylum," 465.
10. Theocharous, "Refugee Asylum," 465.

11. Christopher J. H. Wright and Marcel V. Macelaru, "The Refugee Crisis—A Shared Human Condition: An Old Testament Perspective," *Transformation* 35, no. 2 (2018): 93.
12. Jonathan P. Burnside, *The Status and Welfare of Immigrants: The Place of the Foreigner in Biblical Law and Its Relevance to Contemporary Society* (Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 2001), 13–14.
13. Patrick Kearon, "Refuge from the Storm," *Ensign*, May 2016, 111.
14. Kearon, "Refuge from the Storm," 111.
15. Linda Burton, "I Was a Stranger," *Ensign*, May 2016, 14.
16. Kearon, "Refuge from the Storm," 111.
17. Kearon, "Refuge from the Storm," 113.
18. "About Us," Their Story Is Our Story, https://tsosrefugees.org/about.
19. Hans-Georg Wünch, "The Stranger in God's Land—Foreigner, Stranger, Guest: What Can We Learn from Israel's Attitude towards Strangers?," *Old Testament Essays* 27, no. 3 (2014): 1135.
20. Wünch, "Stranger in God's Land," 1135.
21. Leon Sheleff suggests that true awareness of the purpose of Israel's experience should have "provided a conceptual framework that would make Israeli leaders more sensitive to the pleas and plight" of the strangers in their midst. For more information, see Sheleff, "The Stranger in Our Midst: The Other in Jewish Tradition—From Biblical Times to Modern Israel," *Israel Studies Bulletin* 14, no. 2 (1999): 6–8. Ultimately, their suffering was a similitude of Christ's suffering. As Alma suggests, Christ needed to experience the pain and anguish in his physical form to be able to reach into the depths and gather all of his creations to him, and the children of Israel experienced a small portion of this when they waded through their bondage in Egypt and became better able to understand the far-reaching nature of the Atonement (see Alma 7:11–12).
22. Stephen J. McKinney, Robert J. Hill, and Honor Hania, "Old Testament Perspectives on Migration and Responsibility for the Refugee," *Pastoral Review* 11, no. 5 (2015): 59.
23. James A. Cullimore, "To Be in the World but Not of the World," *Ensign*, January 1974, https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1974/01/to-be-in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world. See John 15:19; 17:14–15.

24. Wünch, "Stranger in God's Land," 1140.
25. See Luma A. Khudher, "You Were Once Foreigners": Biblical Law on Care for the Stranger in Our Midst," *Bible Today* 56 (2018): 9–12; Wright and Macelaru, "Refugee Crisis," 94–95.
26. Burnside, *Status and Welfare of Immigrants*, 13.
27. Genesis 15:13; 23:4; Exodus 22:21–23; 23:9; Leviticus 19:34. See also Khudher, "You Were Once Foreigners," 9; Wright and Macelaru, "Refugee Crisis," 94.
28. Burnside, *Status and Welfare of Immigrants*, 13–14.
29. Adnan R. Khan, Jonathon Gatehouse, and Nancy Macdonald, "The Tragedy That Woke Up the World," *Maclean's* (2015): 14–19.
30. The more appropriate terminology would be a *refugee center*, or a *transit center*; however, many non-governmental organizations name their establishments "refugee camps."
31. Global Refugee Archive, Story 409; Lisa Campbell, interview by TSOS team, spring 2016, in author's possession.
32. Khudher, "You Were Once Foreigners," 9.
33. Wright and Macelaru, "Refugee Crisis," 95.
34. Integration is most often described as a process that enables a newcomer to achieve an "equal footing with the native population in terms of functioning in society, . . . particularly through meaningful socioeconomic inclusion." The process itself takes years and is very complex. From learning the language and customs of the land, to establishing home and livelihood, the most successful integration is a two-way street requiring "adaptation on the part of the newcomer but also by the host society." For a more detailed discussion, see Dirk Jacobs and Andrea Rea, "The End of National Models? Integration Courses and Citizenship Trajectories in Europe," *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 9, no. 2 (2007): 264–83.
35. "Introduction to the Book of Ruth," in Old Testament Seminary Teacher Manual (2015), 286.
36. Thomas S. Monson, "Models to Follow," *Ensign*, November 2002, 61.
37. Global Refugee Archive, Story 005; Faroosh, interview by TSOS team, spring 2016, in author's possession.

38. Global Refugee Archive, Story 640; Leonard Bagalwa, interview by TSOS team, summer 2019, in author's possession.
39. August Klostermann, "Beiträge zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Pentateuchs," *Zeitschrift für die gesammte Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 38, no. 3 (1877): 416. See also Hendrik L. Bosman, "Ethical Redefinition of Holiness," *Old Testament Essays* 31, no. 3 (2018): 572, 579.
40. David N. Sedley, "The Ideal of Godlikeness," in *Oxford Readings in Philosophy: Plato*, ed. G. Fine, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 309–28. See also Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Volume 1: Structure and Growth of Philosophical Systems from Plato to Spinoza* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 194–96; Charles Duke Yonge, trans., *The Works of Philo, Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 62.
41. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:54. See also Sefer ha-Mitzvot, Rabbinic teaching, Positive Commandment 8, https://chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/940233/jewish/Positive-Commandment-8.htm. Howard Kreisel, "'Imitatio Dei' in Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed," *AJS Review* 19, no. 2 (1994): 169–211.
42. Genesis 9:15–16; Leviticus 26:42, 45; Jeremiah 31:34.
43. Klostermann, "Beiträge zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Pentateuchs," 416.
44. Bosman, "Ethical Redefinition of Holiness," 587–88.
45. Kearon, "Refuge from the Storm," 114; emphasis added.
46. Elizabeta Jevtic-Somlai, "Reshaping Refugee Rhetoric," *Bridges Magazine* 1 (2019), https://kennedy.byu.edu/reshaping-refugee-rhetoric.
47. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 140.
48. "Refugees," United Nations, Global Issues, 2019, https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/refugees.
49. Cecilia González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 10.