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Does the Bible Support Sanctuary?

By David Van Biema

To understand the role that scripture plays in debates over the New Sanctuary Movement, it helps to be familiar with an insider term: proof texting — the cherry-picking of Biblical quotations out of context in order to claim scriptural authority for a particular proposition.

Nobody likes to be accused of proof texting, but in a soundbite culture, it's hard to resist — so darn tasty. Here's a typical exchange: Opponents of gay marriage cite Leviticus 18:22: "You shall not lie with a man as with a woman. It is an abomination." They also like Romans 1:26-7: "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions... the men... committing shameless acts with men." But gay marriage defenders note that Leviticus also orders the faithful to stone mouthy children to death, and that the "dishonorable passions" passage can be read to equate homosexuality with sins such as envy and gossip that are practiced openly every Sunday in the pews.

On the New Sanctuary Movement, the usual roles are reversed — liberals sling chapter and verse, while conservatives argue that the true "sense" of scripture contradicts them. When Sanctuary proponents cite the verses below, they go to pains to contextualize them, both biblically and in terms of secular morality. Nonetheless, as a religious movement, a lot of their oomph comes from being able to rattle off the following:

For Sanctuary

Numbers 35:11: "...then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there." Activists cite this as a kind of ancient model for their movement. Various verses in the Old Testament describe "cities of refuge," where someone guilty of causing accidental death can escape the dead man's bloodthirsty relatives. Says New Sanctuary Movement co-founder Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, "This is so relevant to the question of aliens: They have committed a crime, but is the punishment [deportation, and the corresponding disruption of productive lives and families] appropriate?"

Leviticus 19:33: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong... [he] shall be as native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Progressive Evangelical leader Jim Wallis refers to this as "the Levitical immigration policy." It reaches deep into Judaism's Exodus saga for its justification. The Israelites were (legal) immigrants in Egypt, but the Egyptians persecuted them when their numbers seemed too threatening; God brought down the plagues. Thus the verse is a warning to Jews never to turn into the Egyptians; a role Salvatierra and her colleagues feel Americans are now perilously close to playing.

Matthew 25: 35: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Probably the verse most often cited by those in the movement. In a passage known as The Great Judgment, Jesus explains who will be saved and who damned. Describing those who make the cut, he leads off with the triad quoted above.

Hebrews 13:2: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." This New Testament passage is probably a reference back to Abraham in the Old Testament, who, approached by three strangers, threw them a feast, only to find that they were supernatural. Paul Lim, an Evangelical Christian and Assistant Professor at Vanderbilt Theological Seminary finds special meaning in the fact that the original Greek word for "hospitality" in this verse, "philoxenia," is actually stronger. It means "the love of strangers." Or, as he points out, the opposite of xenophobia.

Against Sanctuary

Interestingly, opponents of the sanctuary movement do *not* suggest that its prooftexts are taken out of context. Instead, they suggest that the movement exaggerates the obligations the verses place on the believer.

Richard Land, head of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission for the theologically and politically conservative Southern Baptist Convention, cheerfully acknowledges his duty to the stranger. "As Christians we have a responsibility to love our neighbor as ourselves and do unto others as we would have them do unto us," he says. He was a supporter of the recent failed comprehensive immigration reform bill.

But he feels that the New Sanctuary Movement goes further than the Bible mandates. "I think that's an awfully drastic step, to say that we are going to disobey the law," he says. [Actually, Movement lawyers claim it is technically legal, although others disagree. But part of Sanctuary's magnetism is unquestionably that by boarding illegals in a church, which the INS is unlikely to raid, it provides them de facto protection from the law.] Says Land, "I would never turn someone away. If they showed up, you should help them. But that's different from me saying, 'If you're illegal, then we will protect you from the government.' I don't think the Bible requires that."

To back his position, Land and almost every other Sanctuary opponent cite Romans 13: 1-7: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."

The obvious problem with this verse is that it makes no mention of sanctuary or even immigrants. Land is simply saying you should obey the law. And he acknowledges that there are times when obeying a law — he names the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 — is contrary to Judeo-Christian morality.

Nonetheless, the passage is an important bridge to a larger — if extra-biblical — argument. Unlike the Old Testament, the New is not overly concerned with the details of national governance. Partly because first-century Palestine was so firmly under the Roman heel, and partly because early Christianity was oriented toward citizenship in the Kingdom of God rather than of man, there's not much on how to drive down inflation or protect a border.

But as Christians became more powerful, theologians starting with St. Augustine of Hippo in the early 5th century, expanded the little there was into theories of empire and social good such as "tranquility of order," which the saint thought the state could attain through tempered justice.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, shares Land's conviction that the Bible doesn't mandate Sanctuary participation. She writes that the prooftexts refer to a situation where "there is a terrified, perhaps bleeding, usually hungry person at one's door and one takes him or her in. It has nothing to do with countries or nation states, and once one starts to move to big collectivities it gets much trickier."

Nonetheless, Elshtain, an Augustine expert, is willing to project biblical morality into circumstances when denying entry to groups of immigrants is flat wrong, such as Franklin Roosevelt's unwillingness to admit a boatload of Jewish refugees from the Third Reich, resulting in their almost certain doom. But this, she writes, "is completely different from uncontrolled border crossing by people whose motivations are not life and death in the sense I am describing it but, rather economic."

In such cases, she feels, we may weigh philoxenia against other values. One is fairness — "there are people lined up waiting ... 10 years on lists to enter the country legally." The other is the integrity of national borders: "Hannah Arendt argued that if the state means anything, it means a territorially bounded place, a civic place that sets up terms for citizenship," and where Augustine's "tranquility of order" can be established.

Elshtain also questions the Sanctuary advocates' use of prooftexting. "When the religious conservatives do it," she observes, "liberals go bonkers. But when the left does it, they are being good Christians."

Well, that depends largely on to whom your talking. But being on the wrong side of a prooftext battle may actually not be such a bad thing: It stretches the interpretive muscles and makes the Gospel a bit more real for having been questioned, even in soundbite form.