

Houston, Fleur S. *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself: The Bible, Refugees, and Asylum*. Routledge, 2015, 214 pages. ISBN 978-1138859319

Fleur Houston's *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself* asks a complex and timely question: What does the Bible have to say about refugees? Houston's work introduces current refugee crises and then "attempt[s] to reflect critically on the significance of the Bible for Christian life and action in the field"(xi). Since the book relies on familiarity with biblical text, I assume that Houston is writing to progressive Christians who want to know what their traditions have to say about immigration. Within this group, the book seems especially aimed at citizens of the US, UK, and Australia, particularly since much of her book focuses on the failure of these countries to respond sufficiently to refugee crises. Her explorations of biblical passages do not simply moralize. Instead, as she says in the conclusion: "This book offers no simple answers to the problems that force people to flee their homes and seek refuge in another country. But it does challenge readers to take the moral claims of refugees and asylum-seekers seriously and calls inhumanity and injustice into question. It shows how an engagement with the Bible can shape the way we see the world and make some Christian sense of things" (164). While Houston occasionally missteps by relying too much on background knowledge in biblical studies, nevertheless her work deftly introduces both the fields of refugee law and critical biblical studies to Christians who are concerned but not sure what their Scriptural traditions have to say. I will begin with a Chapter-by-Chapter summary of the book and then turn to my affirmations and critiques of the book as a whole.

Houston begins by defining key terms and laying out her methodology, beginning with three definitions for refugee: "first... a person who has been forced to leave his or her home on a temporary or permanent basis chiefly because of war or persecution; second, in terms of the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951<sup>1</sup>... and third, the term is used of a person who has been granted asylum" (1-2). She then frames the biblical question: "How can the Bible inform the debate?" (2). Biblical literalism often assumes that the text directly speaks to current situations, whereas biblical criticism often makes the text alien and unable to speak to the present day. She adopts Paul Ricoeur's middle way to get beyond this impasse; in his "hermeneutical arc," Ricoeur suggests a three stage process of reading Scripture: "first, allow it to 'speak' to us as it stands. Then we make a careful critical examination of the text, allowing for form and redaction criticism and reflecting on the narrative in its historical context. And finally, we go back to the passage, now rich with meaning and giving us new understandings and insights" (2). This strategy later becomes central to Houston's examination of biblical texts.

Chapter 2 introduces refugee law by presenting the current migration crisis. She notes that countries in the Global South often receive more refugees since people come from neighboring countries. In contrast, nations in the Global North have "made a significantly smaller contribution towards refugee protection than the poorer nations of the South" (10). She then tracks particular refugee crises in Palestine, Syria, Somalia, and Cuba. In each case, factors such as war, lack of resources, and political revolution motivated people to move. She also portrays travel difficulties for refugees: many go long distances and must hire professional smugglers to navigate unfamiliar places. One particularly poignant example of this difficulty was a dinghy that sailed from Tripoli in 2011. After the boat's engine failed, they started sending out distress signals. Over the course of

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951 defines "refugee" as follows: "a person who is judge to have a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion' and who 'is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable... or... unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country'" (Article 1A(2))

two weeks, fishing vessels, NATO ships, and a navy vessel all refused to help them; when they finally landed, only nine of the seventy-two passengers survived. Finally, she recognizes that many leave their homes because of persecution, but refugee law has been slow to respond to domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and sexual orientation-based claims.

Chapter 3 looks closely at asylum law in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Since each of these countries prioritize their own citizens' interests at the expense of others, refugees as outsiders are subject to misrepresentations as competitors, leeches, and criminals. Houston steps back to the credible fear interview process when refugees arrive: "There can be injustice where interviews and decisions are made too quickly, there is also undoubtedly injustice in overlong delays" (39). Often times, these factfinders see narrative discrepancies not as common for those who experienced trauma but as proof that "asylum-seekers [are] liars and opportunistic cheats" (40). In the United States, asylum-seekers are usually detained since they "are tainted with criminality" (51). In all three countries, asylum-seekers face barriers to work, housing, and social benefits because of their liminal status. Some resort to selling drugs or prostitution in order to avoid destitution, which only reinforces the myth of their criminality. After her heavy focus on the mistreatment of asylum-seekers, Houston closes with stories of asylum-seekers' triumph in the face of adversity. She recognizes human dignity in these stories and closes with: "Can an affirmation of the moral claims of people in need be reconciled with instances where societies violate human worth and treat refugees and asylum-seekers with indignity, even cruelty, as if they did not matter?" (68). She then devotes Chapters 4 through 8 to respond to this question with biblical texts.

In Chapter 4, Houston tracks the status of *ger*, Hebrew for stranger, in the Old Testament. This masculine noun usually refers to someone who is neither an Israelite nor a foreigner. In Exodus, a variety of "prescriptions for proper ethical behavior suggest that the *ger* was not being treated fairly either in the courts or in the community" (73). In most cases, while distinct from the Israelite, the stranger receives better treatment than the foreigner (Deut. 10:19). Leviticus moves beyond these distinctions by addressing the community as "Israelites and *gerim* together" (78). Houston then turns to narrative to see these laws at work, framing them with Barton's suggestion "that the aim of the narratives is not to develop moral qualities by encouraging the reader to follow the example of Biblical characters, but to grow ethical perception through entering the complexity of a particular situation" (80). Houston deals thoroughly with the story of Ruth, since it illuminates these legal provisions in practice. Since Ruth is a Moabite and not a man, she describes herself "accurately as *nokriyah* (Ruth 2:10), a non-Israelite. Only with the *ger* does Israel enter into formal mutual relationships" (86). As a widow, she gets some protections, but the law otherwise marginalizes her. In order for Boaz to marry her, he had to circumvent the land's succession by relying on the heir's reluctance to be responsible for her. In Ruth's story, Houston discovers the complicated nature of prescriptions toward immigrants within the Old Testament but also shows how "an immigrant, even from Moab, may be a source of blessing" (92).

Chapter 5 calls Israel's story into question by centering God's exclusion of other people. While the story of Israel's exile resonates with black and Latinx liberation theologies, "YHWH's intervention is primarily motivated not so much by response to the 'cry' of the oppressed, whoever they happen to be, as by the fact that Israel is 'my people'" (95). Israel's passage into the promised land included the slaughter of the Canaanites already living there, and the usurpation of their land. This story has reverberated in brutal colonial enterprises over time, so she asks: "does the story of Exodus in fact subvert the contemporary discourse of universal human rights?" (96). Instead of treating Exodus as a simple moral of deliverance for the oppressed, Houston says that "historical

accounts may be intentionally biased in favour of an ideological agenda” so an ethical task remains in reading them (102).

Chapter 6 deals with Ezra-Nehemiah, which detail Israelites’ return to Jerusalem under Persian rule. Both books are “drenched in ideology: there is an exaggerated sense of election by race” (118). These books uphold the ideology of “repatriation discourse” by assuming all Israelites wanted to return to Jerusalem and the “emptiness of land” by assuming it remained empty for their rightful return (120). In addition to the political boundaries, Ezra was particularly incensed by the fact that some had married “unclean” non-Israelites, so he requires all to divorce foreign wives and forget their children (Ezra 9-10). Nehemiah picks up this thread when he realized that some children could not speak Hebrew, so he “cleansed them from everything foreign” (Neh. 13:30). Houston underlines these stories to show the Bible’s inclusion of ideologies that contradict the welcome found in Deuteronomy and other books (132).

In Chapter 7, Houston turns to Jesus. She begins with how Jesus’s passage as a baby in Matthew, while probably not historical, aligns with the experience of a refugee family. Next, she points to Jesus’s first public sermon in Luke 4 where he proclaims that the good news is for “the *ptochoi*, the destitute, the very ‘offscourings of the city’” (136). The congregation does not take kindly to this message, “so much so that his hearers try to lynch him” (137). For Jesus, the good news was not necessarily “a robust policy program to build a better country. But he did call people to relate with active compassion to those who were destitute, an attitude which, if taken seriously today, would effect radical change in political policies and the ways in which these are implemented” (139). This ethic is underscored in Jesus’s call of love for God and neighbor and the demonstration of this call in the story of the Samaritan. The lawyer provoked the story by asking “Who is my neighbor?” but “Jesus’ commentary on the Torah does not commit the reader to ‘having’ a neighbor but to ‘being’ a neighbor” (142). However, not even Jesus is free from problems: he was unwilling to heal the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter after calling her a dog. While there are ways to read this other than Jesus looking down on a foreigner, it goes to show that we cannot develop an absolute ethic from Jesus’s actions.

Chapter 8 reflects on what hospitality would look like as Christians respond to refugees today. Houston emphasizes the difference between conditional and unconditional hospitality: “conditional hospitality is a clearly defined way of receiving guests according to certain expectations... unconditional hospitality, on the other hand, has no ‘rules’. There is no formal invitation. The host opens himself [*sic*] to the unknown, not seeking to understand or domesticate the newcomer” (153). Out of this, she critiques the aims of philanthropy since it often retains the power dynamic of host over guest. The conclusion ends where we started: “through the exercise of ethical imagination, we are able to see and name inhumanity and injustice for what they are” (164). While they do not directly speak to refugee crises today, biblical texts offer a lens through which to see the plight of the “stranger.” Houston’s work “shows how an engagement with the Bible can shape the way we see the world and make some Christian sense of things” (164).

Overall, Houston’s *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself* provides a helpful introduction to the fields of refugee law and critical biblical studies. In addition to the depth in each field, each can provide a new way of reading the other. Just as modern refugee crises provoke a different reading of biblical texts, these very texts can frame a different response to refugee crises on the part of individuals, communities, and countries. Houston’s introduction to these fields benefitted from her meticulous research and clear structure: they underline her ability to speak authoritatively to both. The intersection she finds between refugee law and biblical texts is especially pertinent now since so much anti-immigrant rhetoric comes from white Christians in the Global North. She provides an incisive intervention in the production of these harmful ideologies by offering new ways to

approach the sacred Christian texts. In what follows, I will break down the parts of the book that helped her meet her this goal and parts that could use some reworking.

To begin, Houston's book introduced modern day refugee law in a digestible fashion. Her success stems from her usage of narrative; instead of beginning with substantive law, she starts by telling one immigrant's story, and then retroactively applies legal standards to it. For instance, Houston gives the story of a man who petitioned for asylum in the UK in 2007 to introduce the concept of statelessness. He claimed he was Bedoon, an ethnic minority in Kuwait, but the immigration authorities thought his identification was fake. However, he also had no Kuwaiti identification, so he could not go to Kuwait either. Houston utilizes this story to exemplify the difficult situation of statelessness and follows it with an explanation of the UNHCR's protocol of assisting stateless persons. Instead of confusing readers by giving the law first, the man's story grounds the legal standards in reality. In another case, Houston introduces us to "Mary," a Ugandan woman who was kidnapped and enslaved by the Lord's Resistance Army only to experience the same treatment after the Ugandan army "liberated" the camp. It took her five years to get a grant to stay "outside the rules" because her abuse was not linked to any political party. Mary's story reveals the difficulty of abused women attempting to fit into a "particular social group," and her struggle helps to explain why refugee law fails to account for some forms of abuse on the basis of class membership (28). Only now "courts in the UK and other countries are beginning to develop the law around asylum in a way that takes women's experiences into account" (28). In general, it's easy for refugee law to overwhelm since it has so many moving parts. By always grounding the complex law in someone's story, Houston also gives us a glimpse of her broader goal in using biblical text as narrative for making ethical decisions.

Instead of assuming that biblical stories have a clear message for present day dilemmas, Houston models Ricoeur's "hermeneutical arc" by laying out the stories as ones that require ethical imagination. This is a clear strength of Houston's work: it builds on her use of narrative to explain the limitations of refugee law and uses it to show the breaks in any clear biblical message. Houston's narrative approach shows how biblical law and other motivations factor into stories in the Old and New Testament. In the same way that there are no clear answers in someone's decision to move, the stories in the Bible offer no clear answers, just more stories for us to grapple with. Just as law and decisive moments arise in someone's migration story, Houston applies this mode of analysis to Ruth. The law does not have the final say for Ruth: the law limited her in one way whereas Boaz treated her in another (89). So too can we imagine beyond what Western countries have to offer asylum-seekers by framing their situation in narrative.

Another strength of Houston's approach to the biblical text is that she does not pull any punches of biblical criticism. Too often, liberal Christians treat the Bible as if it presents a simple and unequivocal call for justice. Houston does a good job of avoiding this simplistic narrative, and instead frames the ethical dilemmas held by biblical stories. For instance, while she recognizes that Israel's exile story has become a "mainstay" for black and Latinx liberation theology, we must take care to realize that God's deliverance in that story is not for everyone. God only delivers God's chosen people, and in Joshua God legitimizes the slaughter of the Canaanites and taking of their land. While Israel's story can provide comfort and resilience to those oppressed, Houston makes us consider the whole story. She directs us toward the postcolonial critiques of Israel's passage into the promised land: does this story mean that the oppressed will simply become the oppressor? Another depiction of ambiguity comes on the heels of Jesus's stories and commands. While Jesus's life presents some really compelling ethical dictates, one particularly troubling moment is his encounter with the Syrophenician woman. She seeks healing for her daughter and while Jesus had healed others, he calls her a dog, and says his ministry is not yet open to non-Jews. Instead of

presenting Jesus as the answer, Houston notes the complications that we face when reading everything that Jesus does as the one true way. Here, his response to the woman espouses the racial ideology in Ezra-Nehemiah: distinctions of non-Israelite and Israelite determine who gets healing and who does not. While he eventually relents, this story presents not the resilience of Jesus but the resilience of the Syrophenician woman. Just as she challenged Jesus to provide for more people, so too we should critique the moments when his message excludes some, especially the poor, from the good news.

While I appreciated Houston's presentation of the many texts, I should also note that I am a master's student in theological studies who has taken a variety of biblical studies courses. I was able to keep up with her whirlwind tour through many different biblical passages, but I fear that her approach may alienate readers who are not as familiar with critical biblical scholarship. Her constant reliance on biblical scholars seems to assume that the reader knows certain arguments without her needing to explain them. In some cases, Houston manages to avoid this assumption by providing more detail. Her lengthy explication of Ruth gave her room to present the range of scholarly interpretation. I also found that she devoted ample space to the Torah's landscape surrounding the legal status of non-Israelites and Ezra-Nehemiah. In these chapters, she explained what scholars were arguing about some of the key moments and cited them so that people could learn more. On the other hand, some of her treatment of Lamentations, Psalms, Ezekiel, and the Gospels moved too quickly. In each of those sections, she makes single sentence arguments citing biblical scholars, but there is no opportunity for readers to learn more about the polemic within her text. Finally, while I appreciate how the story of the Syrophenician woman complicates the emphasis on Jesus, I thought that Houston missed an opportunity to remark on the fact that the woman is Canaanite in Matthew's version (Matt. 15:21-28). She could have connected this with her earlier reference to postcolonial readings of Israel's passage into the "promised land." What does it mean for Jesus to continue to exclude a people that the Israelites have oppressed and stolen land from? While I recognize that there are no answers and scholars often disagree about how to read a passage, it is worth teasing out whole arguments since this might be some readers' first encounter with critical biblical scholarship.

Houston uses Chapter 8 to speak more broadly to the kinds of hospitality that the Bible might ask for. She critiques philanthropy as an instance of conditional and power-laden hospitality and hopes that churches will develop ethical and ritual practices of unconditional hospitality. I think this chapter would have greatly benefitted from examples of how churches are reading biblical texts to invite and respond to asylum-seekers in particular ways. The Sanctuary and New Sanctuary movements in the US immediately come to mind, but there are plenty of other examples of how Christian churches and not just Christian individuals are attempting to practice radical welcome. I do not mean that Houston should prescribe certain responses since she has already cautioned us of the danger of such formulas. However, practical applications would at least give the reader some footing as to how they might respond instead of just leaving them with the question.

All in all, Houston's *You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself* offers a helpful introduction to contemporary refugee law and the biblical passages that speak to it. While her explication of the biblical text requires more background knowledge than her presentation of refugee law, her approach succeeds by not drawing a simple moral imperative out of complex biblical stories. Still, I think she could have done more to translate her deep knowledge of critical biblical scholarship to Christians who have no experience in the field. Beyond these critiques, I think she does a masterful job of providing biblical reading strategies that promote ethical imagination. As churches in the global North find themselves in countries that are failing to address the crises faced by those in the

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global South, Houston re-introduces the question to Christian readers. How do our traditions speak to what people are experiencing now and how does it frame the welcome we should offer?

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