



Hospitality: Loving the Stranger

SESSION 1

How did persons in the ancient Near East practice hospitality? What examples of this practice exist in the Hebrew Bible?

Introduction

Among the nomads of the ancient Near East, a vast area covering the modern-day nations of Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, travel could be a dangerous proposition. Few public tents or inns existed. The intentions of strangers could be difficult if not impossible to gauge. And given the semiarid nature of the land, fresh water and edible food could become a rarity. So how did the ancient wayfarer negotiate such dangers? This study will explore the basic principles of the ancient practice of hospitality, analyze both positive and negative examples of the observance in the Hebrew Bible (also known as the Old Testament), and look at ancient and contemporary theological questions associated with this social phenomenon.

Basic Principles

The practice of hospitality in the ancient Near East has been noted by scholars in some of the earliest written tablets. For instance, in Tablet 2 of the *Gilgamesh Epic* (an ancient Babylonian narrative over four thousand years old), a monster-of-a-man named Enkidu is befriended, cleaned, clothed, and civilized by a woman named Shamhat. In turn, both characters are shown hospitality by a group of shepherds. Finally, Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet, become fast friends, and encounter acts of both hospitality and hostility until Enkidu meets an untimely death. As scholars investigate such ancient texts, a clear set of practices and principles surrounding hospitality emerges.



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First, both individuals and towns appeared obligated to offer hospitality to a stranger. Second, if the stranger failed to accept the offer of hospitality, it would be considered an insult to the honor of the one who made the offer, culminating in conflict and possible bloodshed. For this reason, most offers were accepted. Third, the person offering hospitality (in the ancient world, almost without exception the male leader of a household or village) accepted responsibility for the honor of the stranger.¹ This task involved protecting the physical well-being of the stranger and interpreting any threats to the visitor as a personal affront. Fourth, the host must offer the guest food, water, and safe lodging while exchanging stories of good news and fortune with the guest. Finally, the length of stay would be negotiated between the host and the guest.

One does not need to read very far in the book of Genesis to find these principles of hospitality at work. For instance, Genesis 18 begins with the LORD (also known as Yahweh) appearing to a ninety-nine-year-old Abraham in the form of three male strangers (in the Hebrew

Bible, Yahweh could take on the disguise of a human stranger). Apparently spry for his age, Abraham “ran from the tent entrance to meet them” to offer hospitality to the strangers: water for washing the feet, a little bread for the stomach, and a brief respite from the hot midday sun, after which the strangers were free to leave (2–5). The strangers accept the offer, placing themselves in the care of the patriarch. The writer of this narrative provides an additional notion to hospitality: offer the guests more than originally stated and of the highest quality. Abraham instructs his wife, Sarah, to take three *seahs*, or measures, of flour (approximately 6.5 pounds) to make cakes while he slaughters the best of his calves and prepares a feast, including curds, quite the delicacy in a desert environment. Abraham and Sarah exceed the terms of the verbal contract made with the guests, which brings honor to both the guests and the household.

But what of the component of shared narrative of good news and fortune? The writer of Genesis 18 fulfills the obligation in two ways. First, the strangers announce to Abraham that Sarah, advanced in years and no longer menstruating, will give birth to a son, at which point Sarah, eavesdropping, laughs and wonders aloud if she will experience sexual pleasure at her age (9–12). The strangers (aka Yahweh) confront Sarah about her laughter. Perhaps to avoid dishonoring the guests, the writer has Sarah deny everything. Nevertheless, good news: Sarah will be a mother.

Second, Abraham escorts the strangers to the parameter of his encampment (as hospitality code required), at which point the visitors decide to tell a second, less-joyful tale. Apparently the residents of Sodom (an ancient Hebrew word meaning “burned”) and Gomorrah (literal meaning: “heap” or “buried”), two towns probably located near the Dead Sea, are engaging in actions that Yahweh finds most grievous. Yahweh does not tell the reader the particulars of their offense, called “their sin” (in Hebrew, *chatta’ah*). Instead the term suggests a non-righteous behavior that may be intentional. Perhaps living in towns named “Burned” and “Buried” might cause some natural disposition toward evil among the citizenry. Nevertheless, the author provides no further clues to the questionable behavior.

The intention of the strangers is to check on the “outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah.” Interesting enough, the reader is never informed as to who told Yahweh about

the unrighteous actions of these citizens. If the rumors are validated by the visit, the cities will be destroyed. Before the strangers leave the encampment, Abraham presses the strangers to consider saving these cities if as few as ten righteous persons can be found. Yahweh agrees. In this manner, the narrative takes a more positive, hopeful note, fulfilling the obligations of hospitality. At this point, the story ends with Yahweh leaving the encampment and Abraham returning to his tent. This particular social contract of hospitality ends with all components met.

When Hospitality Is Challenged: Genesis 19

The story is replicated in Genesis 19 with some interesting twists and turns. First, the reader is told of two “angels” (in Hebrew, “human messengers”) instead of three men. Second, night has fallen. In the ancient world, night would be considered a dangerous time to be walking the streets, especially for foreigners. Third, Lot is “sitting in the gateway of Sodom.” From earlier chapters in Genesis, the reader learned Lot was the nephew and brother-in-law of Abraham and definitely not a native of Sodom. But by placing the character of Lot at the gateway of the town, the writer intends to demonstrate an elevated degree of honor for Lot: the town has taken in the stranger and considers him an elder—quite the hospitable set of actions. Maybe Sodom is not such a bad town after all.

In words similar to those of Abraham, Lot offers hospitality: wash your feet and spend the night. The length of stay was clearly established: early the next morning. Surprisingly, the strangers initially refuse the offer, claiming they will sleep in the town square. Under ancient hospitality customs, the strangers would now become suspect and hostilities could easily erupt. Instead, Lot “urged them strongly” (in Hebrew, “nagged” or “pestered”) until the strangers entered his home. Lot then makes them a feast (no details) and offers unleavened bread (bread baked before the yeast can rise). Lot’s wife (who is never named directly in the narrative) has yet to appear.

Before they retire, a challenge to Lot’s hospitality emerges. The males of Sodom “both young and old” surround Lot’s home and demand that he bring the strangers out so they can “know” (in Hebrew, *yada*)

them. Scholars debate the meaning of *yada* in this context. Some translate the term as “interrogate,” while many other researchers contend the term implies a violent sexual encounter: the men of Sodom want to rape and kill the strangers. Rape (either heterosexual or homosexual) was considered anathema in ancient Israelite culture, usually countered with terrific acts of vengeance and violence.² Whatever the intention of the original writer, Lot’s hospitality faces a serious challenge. The honor—and lives—of his guests and household are at stake.

Lot steps outside his home to address the men. Calling them “brothers,” Lot tells the mob they can take two of his virgin daughters and do whatever they want with the girls, suggesting perhaps that Lot understood the demands of the men as purely sexual. The men respond in anger to Lot’s offer, reminding one another of Lot’s outsider status, rebuffing Lot’s attempt to judge them, and claiming they will deal more harshly with Lot than with the strangers. The enraged crowd presses “hard against the man Lot,” possibly suggestive of attempted rape.

In a strange turn of events, the strangers rescue Lot from the crowd, blind all the men, and save Lot and his two daughters before destroying the two cities. Lot’s wife, told by the strangers not to look upon the destruction, disobeys and is transformed into a pillar of salt (salt pillars are common features around the shores of the Dead Sea, so perhaps this tale attempts to account for this natural phenomenon). It appears Lot and his daughters were saved because of their hospitable actions. But could the situation have turned out differently? To respond to this question, we must turn our attention to another book of the Hebrew Bible.

Judges 19: When Things Fall Apart

The book of Judges initially appears to function as a history of the Tribal Confederacy Period of Israel (1250–1050 BC). Closer investigations by biblical scholars, however, reveal a deeper set of purposes. While some of the elements of the narratives may date back to the Tribal Confederacy Period, the structure and content reflect the work of the Deuteronomistic historian (known as DH), a writer and possibly two editors writing between the years of 621 and 587 BC. Their purpose was to write a



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political-theological history of the Tribal Confederacy Period showing the ancient tribes of Israel spinning from initial order into bloody chaos, suggesting that this time before the first Israeli king would have been culturally, religiously, and morally bankrupt. Indeed, even the famous folk heroes, known as judges, are often portrayed as flawed. For instance, Judges 13–16 depicts the life of Samson, the most famous of the judges. The DH writers state that Samson was raised as a Nazarite, a person who would be a special servant of God. The vows of a Nazarite include these: do not touch dead things, do not drink alcoholic beverages, and do not cut one’s hair. But Samson ultimately violates all three vows. In addition, the strong, manly character Samson is painted by the DH writers as possessing a super libido, frequenting prostitutes and demonstrating a weakness for Philistine women while cheerfully killing Philistine men by the hundreds. Not exactly the poster boy for hospitality.

By Judges 19, Samson has been dead for several years and much of ancient Israel experiences unrest. The chapter begins with the reader being reminded of the lack of a king who would rule over the entire country. An unnamed Levite, who resided in the northern hill country, travels south to the small town of Bethlehem and acquires a concubine, a woman purchased by a financially secure married male for the purpose of sex and possible procreation. The narrative suggests the father of the unnamed concubine (who himself lacks a name) sold his daughter to the Levite. The Levite and his concubine head north, returning to his homeland. The concubine becomes upset with her master (in Hebrew “whored against him”) and returns to her father’s house in Bethlehem. The specific nature of the conflict is never made explicit, although it should be kept in mind that a woman could be called a “whore” for numerous reasons, only some being sexual in nature.

After four months, the Levite heads to Bethlehem to “speak to the heart” of the concubine. The time lapse is one of the many curiosities of the narrative. Why wait four months? And once arriving at the father-in-law’s home, the two men eat, drink, and party for five days. What happened to the tender “heart speak” that was to occur? While the narrative demonstrates hospitality code at work, it does so at the marginalization of the concubine.

And the Levite and concubine abruptly leave as the sun sets on the fifth day, rejecting the father-in-law’s offer to spend yet another night, bringing dishonor to the household, and setting up the opportunity for hostility, given the ancient principles of hospitality explored in the first part of this session. As night falls, the Levite decides to reject the suggestion of his servant to head toward Jerusalem (Jebus), traveling instead to Gibeah, a small hilltop town occupied by Benjaminites, one of the tribes of Judah.

It is at this point that Judges 19 begins to parallel the story of Lot and the two strangers in Genesis 19. Night has fallen. The Levite decides they will spend the night in the town square. Finally, an elder resident of Gibeah—who just happens to be from the northern hill country himself, thus an outsider—offers hospitality, insisting it would not be safe to spend the night in the square. The offer is accepted, and the travelers wash their feet, eat, and drink. Sound familiar?

While they are eating and drinking, the men of Gibeah surround the house, asking for the strange man—apparently the Levite and not the servant—to be sent outside so the men could “have intercourse with him” (22; as in Gen. 19, the Hebrew word *yada* is used but is translated here as “intercourse” in the NRSV). Like Lot, the elder man goes outside to offer his virgin daughter to the mob. But a sickening twist to the hospitality code occurs at this point: the elder man also offers the Levite’s concubine. As with the situation with Lot, the mob rejects the offer. But the Levite apparently rescues the elder man and throws his concubine into the crowd. The text becomes horrific: the concubine is raped and tortured throughout the night—supposedly while the Levite enjoys the hospitality of the elder.

In the morning, when the Levite is ready to leave, he finds the body of the concubine on the threshold of the elder man’s home. After receiving no response to his command “Get up,” the Levite places the body of the

concubine on a donkey and takes it back to the northern hill country, his homeland. Once home, the Levite cuts the body into twelve pieces, sending one part to each of the leaders of Israel, an action designed to bring about an emergency assembly to hear the case against the Benjaminites of Gibeah and desire for massive bloodshed and revenge. Israel collapses into civil war. By replicating Genesis 19, the DH writers provide a historical context to the book of Judges while demonstrating the collapse of hospitality as well as civilization.

Theological Ideas of Hospitality

Several theological concepts surround the ancient practice of hospitality. First, if Yahweh could take on the disguise of a stranger (or several strangers, for that matter), one should treat all foreigners with the respect one would grant God. Second, a disruption of the hospitality code could bring about divine retribution: dishonor, death, destruction, or warfare. Likewise, observance of all the principles of hospitality could bring on miraculous favor, such as when Abraham and Sarah are told they will have a son, even at their advanced ages. Third, these narratives suggest that the honor of God was directly linked to the honor of both host and guest. Failure of either party to abide by the ancient rules of hospitality could be perceived by God as a sin. Finally, in the narratives investigated in this session, God appears nomadic in nature, wandering without a home throughout the lands. While eventually tabernacles and temples would be constructed for this deity, Yahweh would continue—with a few notable exceptions in the Hebrew Bible—to dwell among the people.³ This god’s preference for the company of humans, fused with a deep interest in how humans treated one another, served as a hallmark of Yahweh, separating God from all other deities described in the Old Testament. Practicing hospitality was central to the ancient religion of Yahwehism, which would serve as the foundation for Judaism.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. For an interesting exception to this “male-only” rule—and a notable violation of hospitality—read Judg. 4:17–22.
2. For instance, read Gen. 34.
3. For one notable exception, read Jer. 12:7–13.