

Biblical theology of hospitality

Waldemar Janzen

Hospitality has recently been rediscovered not only as a Christian virtue but as a prominent theological theme in the Bible.¹ The Old Testament has no term corresponding to our *hospitality*, while the New Testament uses several Greek words sparingly.² Both testaments, however, present the God-human relationship metaphorically as a host-guest relationship and call on human beings to extend God's hosting role toward other human beings. As always, we must remember that the metaphorical appropriation of such human realities for God-language is selective and adaptive.

To understand the meaning of the host-guest language, we need to consider briefly the essentials of hospitality on the human plane as practiced in the ancient Mediterranean world, including Israel and Judaism.³ Hospitality was governed by widely accepted conventions. To observe these earned honour for host and guest alike, while their disregard brought shame. Guests were outsiders: strangers, such as travellers or fugitives, or resident aliens who had attached themselves to a clan or extended family. Having passed some initial testing, the outsider would be accepted by the host—normally a family head—as a guest, usually by a ceremony such as footwashing or anointing. The central obligations of the host were to provide food, lodging, and protection with a generous spirit and a readiness to incur inconvenience, cost, and sometimes danger. Guests, on the other hand, were to accept gratefully what was offered, refrain from demanding or assertive behaviour, and not overstay their welcome.

Theology of hospitality in the Old Testament

God as host, and God's creatures as guests in God's universe

The host-guest relationship between God and people is nowhere expressed more explicitly and succinctly than in Lev. 25:23: "The land (*'erets*) shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine;

with me you are but aliens and tenants” (NRSV). This verse defines the status of human beings—primarily Israel, here—with respect to God and to the earth.⁴ This land belongs to God, not to humans. Our text stands in the context of the legislation for the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25), which provides that every fifty years reforms should take place to restore land to the families who had originally received it as their share of the promised land. Land could change hands, but not in perpetuity, or finally.

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If God owns the land, what are its human occupants? Our text (NRSV) says they are “aliens and tenants” (*gerim we-toshabim*; RSV: “strangers and sojourners”). We could say “long-term guests” or “landed immigrants.”

This characterisation has grave consequences for how the guests are to live. Israelites are forbidden to sell the land they occupy as if it were a commodity they owned. In addition, God’s land ought to be distributed fairly to *all* God’s resident guests. Legislation stipulating periodic land redistribution offsets the deep-seated human desire to be owners rather than guests, to be able to dispose of God’s earth without restriction or accountability.⁵

Hospitality extended, hospitality refused

In Genesis 1, God offers the newly created world as living space and its plants and trees as food to all living creatures; they are to be guests in God’s world and at God’s table.⁶ Humans receive the special commission to be God’s image, to be God’s representatives or caretakers of creation. Genesis 2 reinforces this picture, but adds one feature important for our theme: the restriction that the humans are not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In other words, while enjoying God’s gracious provisions, God’s human guests are to preserve awareness of and respect for God’s ultimate ownership.

Genesis 3 shows humans in rebellion against these limits set by the owner. We usually think of Adam and Eve’s eating from the forbidden tree as an act of disobedience. So we define sin as disobedience. But more specifically, what form does their disobedience take? Adam and Eve say, in effect, “We want unlimited use and control of the world.” In this light, sin can be

described as the human attempt to be owners rather than guests. The result is their expulsion from the garden, though not from God's world. They may still live off the fruits of God's earth, but they will have to work for their bread by the sweat of their brow, fighting thorns and thistles as they do so.

Chapters 4–11 expand this theme of human takeover. Cain treats his brother not as a fellow guest but as one whose life he owns. Even the flood changes little in this human desire for ownership. In the covenant with Noah it is God who accommodates his unruly guests and grants them more control. Specifically, God now allows Noah and his descendants to use the

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animals as food (9:1–7). But again, God institutes a reminder of God's ultimate ownership: The blood of the slaughtered animals, symbolizing their life, is to be poured out on the ground, not eaten. By granting humans the right to eat meat, God does not abandon nonhuman life to human ownership.

Finally, the people construct a great monument—"a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens"—to claim the earth for humanity. But this effort is driven by fear: "Otherwise we shall be scattered around upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). Their fear is of not owning, of impermanence of place, of having the status of those who

need hospitality, of being "aliens and tenants." God's judgement on the tower builders is precisely what they wanted to avoid: "The LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth" (Gen. 11:9; cf. Cain, whose punishment was to "be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth" [Gen. 4:14]).

Hospitality extended anew

This sets the stage for the call to Abram and his family to take on themselves the uncertainties of leaving their homeland and their kindred to set out as aliens (Gen. 12:1–3; cf. 15:13; 35:27; Exod. 6:4). But with them goes the promise of God, the great owner and host, to give them a homeland where they will be able to live and multiply by God's grace. In the language of hospitality: God

extends an invitation to them to come and be God's guests in the part of God's land that God will give them.

Exodus is the story of God leading Israel from a foreign land, Egypt, toward the land promised to Abraham. That journey continues beyond Exodus, until Joshua conquers the promised land and distributes it to the tribes of Israel.⁷ Even before the

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Israelites reach the land promised to Abraham, however, God invites them to come into his own presence at Mt. Sinai: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings *and brought you to myself*" (Exod. 19:4; italics added). God's invitation "to myself" has precedence even over the promised land.

The journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai is already marked by the hallmarks of hospitality, God's provision of food (manna and quails), water, and protection (Exodus 15–17). Two rituals confirm the conclusion of the covenant at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 24): One

is a sacrifice, but the other is a kind of communion meal: "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel.... God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, *and they ate and drank*" (Exod. 24:9–11; italics added).⁸

The latter part of Exodus (25–31; 35–40) tells of the construction of the tabernacle or sanctuary. Like Mt. Sinai, the place where God receives and hosts Israel, the tabernacle is a symbol of hospitality. It is the place where Israel can receive God, but even more, where God invites Israel into his presence.

The temple, as successor to the tabernacle, later becomes the place to which God invites representatives of the people to make a pilgrimage three times a year. Israel is invited to be God's guests. To the rituals there belongs feasting with each other, as fellow guests, in the presence of God. Deuteronomy 16 establishes the festal calendar. Here we read: "Rejoice before the LORD your God—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you—at the

place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name" (Deut. 16:11; italics added; "the place" points to the temple in Jerusalem).

That Israel was conscious of its guest status in the temple is also evident in the psalms. Psalm 39:12 expresses it in a pleading mood:

*Hear my prayer, O LORD,
and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears.
For I am your passing guest,
an alien, like all my forebears.*

Psalm 23:5–6, on the other hand, basks in the security of the host's protection and provision:

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

Isaiah 25:6–9 looks ahead to the coming of the day of the Lord (kingdom of God) in its fullness and describes it in terms of God's eschatological banquet:

*On this mountain [Mt. Zion]
the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow,
of well aged wines strained clear....
It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him,
so that he might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*

A redeemed humanity is entertained at the Lord's table in a mood of fulfillment and rejoicing.

God's hospitality as a call to human hospitality

If God's relationship to Israel, and by extension to all humanity, can be described as that of the divine host to his human guests, it follows that all human beings are fellow guests in the host's house, the created world. The challenge placed before Israel in the Old Testament's covenant laws is to live out in daily life this understanding of being fellow guests in the promised land after its occupation. One can say that hospitality embraces virtually all of Old Testament (biblical) ethics.⁹ To put it differently: What do I owe my neighbours? To share my livelihood (my life) with them. And that is the essence of hospitality.¹⁰

Of the abundant examples from Old Testament laws and other texts I will cite only a few. Many laws specifically direct Israelites to show concern for strangers or aliens. For example: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 22:21; see also 23:9, et al.) And: "The alien

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who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; *you shall love the alien as yourself*, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 19:34; italics added). Other laws, often associated with those concerning the alien, assure good treatment of other weak members of society, especially the widows, the orphans, and the Levites: "Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or

inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake" (Deut. 14:28–29; see also Deut. 24:19–22; 26:12–15; et al.). Those for whom God has provided richly are to provide for the less advantaged among them.

Other texts demonstrate, praise, and encourage hospitality. Abraham hosts three strangers with model hospitality, not

knowing that they are divine guests (Gen. 18:1–15). As so often, it turns out that the hosts receive more than they give; in this case Abraham and Sarah receive the promise of a child.

Job's oath of innocence, listing all the sins he has not committed, places special emphasis on his practice of hospitality:

*If I have withheld anything that the poor desired,
or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail,
or have eaten my morsel alone,
and the orphan has not eaten from it....
if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing,
or a poor person without covering,
whose loins have not blessed me,
and who was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep;
...then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder,
and let my arm be broken from its socket....
The stranger has not lodged in the street;
I have opened my doors to the traveler.*

(Job 31:16–23, 32)

In an unusual example of peacemaking, the prophet Elisha exhorts the king of Israel to treat his Syrian prisoners of war to a meal, then send them home. The account concludes with the strikingly relevant words: “And the Arameans [Syrians] no longer came raiding into the land of Israel” (2 Kings 6:23). For even the killer (perhaps wrongly accused or having unintentionally caused another's death), cities of refuge are to be provided (Num. 35:1–34; Deut. 4:41–43; 19:1–13; Josh. 20:1–9).

In sum, in the Old Testament, God the great host invites his guests into his house, the created world, to enjoy its riches and blessings. But God also expects these guests to follow God's example and share their livelihood, their life, with their fellow guests on God's earth.

Theology of hospitality in the New Testament

Jesus as host

In the New Testament as in the old, God, the source and owner of all good things, is the host *par excellence*. Jesus, as God's Son, extends God's invitation and welcome to all. It is “noteworthy

that the images of God's kingdom that predominate overwhelmingly in Jesus' teaching are those associated with the production of food and drink or homelike refuge for God's

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creatures."¹¹ This is particularly true of Jesus' parables, which repeatedly present the kingdom as a banquet or feast (e.g., Matt. 22:1–14; Luke 14:15–24). In God's kingdom, the hungry shall be satisfied (Luke 6:21).

Jesus exemplified the kingdom's inviting openness to all. It is surely significant that his only miracle reported in all four gospels is the feeding of the five thousand (Matt. 14:13–21 and parallels). The mood of his ministry was festive, earning him sharp criticism from his opponents (see Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34; Matt. 9:14–15). The image of Jesus as host was so distinctive that the disciples of Emmaus recognized him "in the breaking of bread" (Luke 24:35).

Jesus' host role climaxes, of course, in the Last Supper, which he introduced, according to John's Gospel, with the welcoming act of footwashing (13:1–20). This supper is linked explicitly to the Old Testament covenant as well as to the future eschatological or messianic banquet (Matt. 26:20–29; Mark 14:17–25; Luke 22:14–20).¹²

Jesus as guest

Jesus, the Son of God and host on God's behalf, is also the fully human one, who cannot be understood apart from his role as guest. The inns of David's hometown have no room for the Son of David (Luke 2:1–7). While "foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests," he has nowhere to lay his head (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58). A wandering and homeless prophet, sent by God but rejected by many (Luke 4:16–30; John 1:11), he finds refuge with those willing to take him in. Women minister to him (Matt. 27:55). To feed the five thousand, he accepts the loaves and the fish given to him (Mark 6:38–41 and parallels). Even the hosting of the Last Supper takes place in a borrowed hall (Mark 14:13–16 and parallels), and eventually Jesus' body is hosted in the grave of Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:42–46 and parallels). This pilgrim existence is continued by his emissaries and followers, as we see

especially in Acts, but also elsewhere (Heb. 11:38–40; 1 Pet. 2:11; 3 John 5–8).

In his very homelessness, however, Jesus gathers around him a congregation of those who open themselves to him. Mary and Martha are paradigmatic (Luke 10:38–42), but Joseph of Arimathea belongs here, too, as well as many others. In fact, hospitality to the homeless Jesus becomes the gate into the kingdom. “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Rev. 3:20; cf. John 13:20). The parable of the last judgement portrays Christ the king separating the sheep from the goats on the basis of hospitality extended or refused (Matt. 25:31–46).

Inversion of roles

The themes of Jesus the host and Jesus the guest belong inseparably to each other through a characteristic inversion. The guest who is offered hospitality turns into the host from whose blessing the hosts-turned-guests can live a new life. We noted this inversion theme in the case of Abraham, whose guests turned out to be divine bearers of promise (Gen. 18:1–15). The writer to the Hebrews sees such an inversion of roles as an ever-present possibility: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2). Jesus’ parable of the last judgement assumes the same (Matt. 25:37–45).

According to accounts of Jesus’ earthly ministry, those who invite him find themselves becoming guests at God’s table. Zacchaeus is a prime example (Luke 19:1–10), but nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the raising of Lazarus. This friend who repeatedly hosted Jesus receives his very life at the hands of his guest (John 11:1–44). The blessing of the host through the guest does not stop with Jesus, but continues with his disciples, as we read in Acts (8:26–40; 10:23–48; 16:13–15; 16:29–34; 17:10–12; 18:7–8; 28:1–10).

Jesus’ hospitality as good news and as offence

Central to Jesus’ message is the identity of those he invites and those from whom he accepts hospitality. Here lies both the good

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news and the offence. On behalf of God, Jesus invites all; if any are given preferential treatment, it is those with greater need. The general openness to all, characteristic of hospitality in the ancient world and evident in the Old Testament, has by the time of Jesus been heavily overlaid by careful distinctions between the worthy and the unworthy. Social status, religious purity, national origin, wealth, and power are systematised into rules regulating hospitality.¹³ When Jesus refuses to be restrained by these rules regarding whom to invite or visit, he evokes release and joy in some, and deep enmity in others.¹⁴

Hospitality after the manner of Jesus ceases to be a pleasant Sunday afternoon function and turns into a reordering force in society. It becomes also the arena of risk, battle, suffering, and martyrdom. The cross is the extent to which Jesus and God go on behalf of the invited guests.

A word to present-day believers

For the followers of Jesus, extending hospitality remains a central way of continuing our master's mission, of realizing the presence of the kingdom even while we are travellers on the way to our final home where the messianic banquet awaits us.¹⁵ The communion table remains the central and constant symbol of this hospitality. It is also a symbol of sacrifice, of the body and blood of Jesus given on the cross. His followers are not allowed to forget that our calling to be guests and hosts is a calling to share our life, to take up the cross. But beyond the cross is the welcoming realm of the host who has prepared a table for us in the sight of our enemies (Ps. 23:3; cf. John 14:2).

Notes

¹ See Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality As a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), with a select but rich bibliography.

² Our *hospitality* derives from Latin *hospitalitas*. The New Testament uses several words related to *xenos* (meaning both *stranger* and *host*) to express our concept of hospitality: *xenia* (*place of lodging, hospitality*); *xenizein* (*entertain as a guest*); *xenodochein* (*show hospitality*); *philoxenia* (*hospitality, love of hospitality/stranger*); *philoxenos* (*hospitable*).

While these terms indicate that there is a certain coherence of understanding of the diverse aspects of hospitality in the New Testament, a concordance search for hospitality-related texts is more productive if focused on words such as *guest, table, bread, banquet, stranger, alien, sojourner*.

³ For the Old Testament, these are presented succinctly in Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, "Hospitality," in *Social World of Ancient Israel, 1250–587 BCE*, ed. Matthews and Benjamin (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Pubs., Inc., 1993), 82–7. For the New Testament world, but with an eye to the Old Testament also, see Bruce J. Malina, "Hospitality," in *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, rev. ed., ed. John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Pubs., Inc., 1998), 115–18. It is widely recognized, however, that a common tradition of hospitality—albeit with variations depending on time and place—permeated the ancient Mediterranean world. With respect to the two testaments, one notices a slightly greater emphasis on the meeting of needs of travellers or disadvantaged people in the Old Testament, while the New Testament world was more concerned with status and religious purity. But this may be due, at least in part, to the character of texts preserved.

⁴ The Hebrew *'erets* can mean both *land* and *earth*. Addressed to Israel here, the accent should fall on *land*, i.e., the promised land, but in the background stands the wider meaning. That God is also the owner of the earth is well attested to elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 24:1).

⁵ From Elijah on (in the story of Naboth's vineyard, 1 Kings 21), the prophets announced God's judgement on those who, in keeping with the economic trends, attempted to turn land into a saleable commodity (e.g., Isa. 5:8; Mic. 2:1–5). For a detailed study of this Jubilee legislation, see Ben C. Ollenburger, "Jubilee: 'The land is mine; you are aliens and tenants with me,'" in *Reclaiming the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of Waldemar Janzen*, ed. Gordon Zerbe (Winnipeg: CMBC Pubs., 2001), 208–34.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann calls Genesis 1 "a song of praise for God's generosity" ("The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," in *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, ed. Patrick D. Miller [Minneapolis: Fortress Pr., 2000], 69). He contrasts living by God's generosity and abundance (blessing) with a mentality of a self-centered consumerism, powered by the myth of scarcity, that drives us to a Pharaoh-like obsession with control that "makes us greedy, mean, and unneighborly" (72). Note also the praise of the creator's bountiful provision for all creatures in Psalm 104 and Job 38–39.

⁷ In the canonization process, the faith community of Israel did not include the occupation of the land in the Torah, or Pentateuch (the five books of Moses). Thus the Torah defines true Israelites as "aliens and tenants," those still on the way, with God's ultimate goal still before them. See James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1972).

⁸ In this central covenant text, God is presented as hosting—entertaining at a meal—the representatives of the people of Israel. It affirms the host-guest relationship between God and Israel in a forceful way. This text is one of the Old Testament's chief anchoring texts for the Lord's Supper instituted by Jesus. The Lord's Supper passages in the New Testament take up covenant language (rare in the New Testament, except in Hebrews) to present Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, as the divine host who invites to the Lord's table. In both testaments, therefore, entering into covenant with God can be expressed as accepting God's invitation and receiving God's hospitality through fellowship at the Lord's table.

⁹ Thomas W. Ogletree makes the daring—but in my opinion correct—claim that "to

be moral is to be hospitable to the stranger” (*Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding* [Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1985], 1). See also note 10 below.

¹⁰ I have argued elsewhere that *hospitality* is in many ways a more fitting term for the comprehensive responsibility often designated in Christian circles as *justice*; see Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1994), 42–4, 55–7, 209, and throughout.

¹¹ John Koenig, “Hospitality,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freeman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:301. For the New Testament, John Koenig has traced in detail the ubiquity and central function of hospitality as a theological motif, in *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers As Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1985). Cf. also “Hospitality,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:299–301. For an in-depth study of one gospel from the vantage point of hospitality, see Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 2000). Byrne highlights the infancy stories, the visit to Nazareth, the visit in the house of Simon, the story of the good Samaritan, Martha and Mary, the banquet in 14:1–35, the prodigal son, the visit with Zacchaeus, the Lord’s Supper, and the visit at Emmaus. The New Testament section of this paper is to a large extent an adaptation of my treatment of the subject in Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*, 206–9, with special indebtedness to Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*.

¹² See also Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 38–42, 117–19.

¹³ See note 3 above.

¹⁴ “Part of the offence [of ignoring strictly drawn religious convention] was the joyous freedom of Jesus’ table practice” (Bruce Chilton and J. I. H. McDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 96; cf. also 96–9). Similarly Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, a New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 101.

¹⁵ A thoughtful and biblically rooted sample of the growing literature on the practice of Christian hospitality is Michele Hershberger, *A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises* (Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1999). Cf. also Fred Bernhard and Steve Clapp, *Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality and the Vital Congregation*, rev. ed. (Elgin, Ill.: Andrew Center, 1997).

About the author

Waldemar Janzen learned to value hospitality as a Christian practice during his refugee and immigrant years more than half a century ago, and has in recent years come to see it as a pervasive theme in the theology of both the Old and the New Testaments. Professor of Old Testament, Emeritus, at Canadian Mennonite University, Janzen has written several books, including the Believers Church Bible Commentary on *Exodus* (Waterloo and Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 2000), and *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1994).