



**OLD & NEW  
TESTAMENT  
EXAMPLES OF  
BIBLICAL HOSPITALITY**  
by Dr. Jason Young

## OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES OF BIBLICAL HOSPITALITY

Numerous stories illustrate how hospitality can look differently across the genres of biblical literature. Hospitality can be seen as a meta-narrative as well as used as a hermeneutic. As one can imagine, there are voluminous verses, passages, and stories that could be discussed. This article will include select examples from the Pentateuch, Historical Narrative, Gospels, and the Epistles.

### Pentateuch: Genesis 18:1-8

The narrative of Abraham's demonstration of hospitality in Genesis 18 gives the reader a story-setting beginning for what would become a point of reference to future writers and moments involved in showing hospitality. Keil and Delitzsch, stated, "This fresh manifestation of God has a double purpose and that was to establish Sarah's faith in the promise that she should bear a son in her old age, and to announce the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah."<sup>1</sup>

Genesis 18:1-8 reads:

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.



This story finds its setting in the vicinity of Hebron, which is about midway between Jerusalem and Beersheba. Verse 1 references the "oaks of Mamre." This area of "oaks" is also known as terebinths: "The terebinths may have been a larger grove near Hebron, which Mamre allowed Abraham to put to use for encamping in the shade."<sup>2</sup> Mamre is an ally of Abraham, who is also known as the Amorite.<sup>3</sup> This particular time of day was familiar to those in this land due to the extreme heat. Therefore, rest or remaining low key would be ideal for storing energy and protecting one's health. Marcus Dods confirms this and adds, "The scene with which this chapter opens is one familiar to the observer of nomad life in the East. During the scorching heat and glaring light of noon, while the birds seek the densest foliage and the wild animals lie panting in the thicket and everything is still and silent as midnight, Abraham sits in his tent door under the spreading oak of Mamre."<sup>4</sup>

1 C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 228.

2 H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 534.

3 James Orr, gen ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1,973.

4 Marcus Dods, *The Expositor's Bible: Genesis* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1888), 172

Abraham remains in the shaded area of cover while potentially pondering something or maybe even resting, because verse 2 says, “He lifted up his eyes...” He sees three men nearby and understands they must have traversed difficult terrain in unbearable heat and understands he needs to help. This encounter with the LORD (and two angels) is called a theophany, which is the appearance of God to humanity. This is the only place in the Bible where a trio of heavenly guests occurs.<sup>5</sup> Abraham appears to know one of the men according to verse 3, when he says, “O Lord.” In this verse, “Lord” comes from *Adonai*, which is the Old Testament term used for God exclusively.<sup>6</sup>

As the three men are standing near him, which is equivalent to modern-day knocking on a door, Abraham is sitting in the cool but quickly changes his posture towards them. The men remained in their posture to await Abraham’s physical response, which was to invite them into his tent. Before he does so, he bows before them, which was a customary greeting. There appears to be a different response from Abraham toward one of the guests, which E.A. Speiser addresses, “One of the visitors appears to be the leader.”<sup>7</sup> An ancient idea around hospitality implied the host’s willingness and eagerness to run to guests. Abraham quickly moves from a lounging and relaxed posture to one of strategic urgency. He exhibits enthusiasm and willingness to meet every need of the three men.

Abraham fervently organizes the necessary items for his guests to feel hospitality from him and his wife. He persuades them to stay by offering them snacks.<sup>8</sup> Sarah makes fresh bread, since this edible item is typically made just prior to being eaten. She makes an abundance of bread, more than can be immediately consumed by the three men. Abraham personally chose a “tender and good” calf to be prepared for the three men. In other words, he wanted them to have his best. He brings them bread, a calf, and curds and milk, which was a refreshing drink for them to enjoy.

Abraham works intentionally to refresh the men. In fact, he does not partake in the meal; rather, he remains ready to serve them.

Perhaps the most pronounced action Abraham takes is to model for humanity a spiritual lesson, “When anyone receives another human being with warmhearted kindness he may be nearer than he knows to a divine experience.”<sup>9</sup> He sees a need and responds not just appropriately, but remarkably.

He and Sarah give the three men an abundance of bread. They give them the best calf. They give them a refreshing drink. They provide water to wash their dirty and burning feet. This demonstration of biblical hospitality is about extraordinarily caring for the person and their needs, which Abraham and Sarah demonstrate so well. In fact, not offering hospitality like they did would be strange and disruptive. John Calvin writes regarding hospitality, “It is no common virtue to assist strangers, from whom there is no hope of reward.”<sup>11</sup>

### Historical Narrative: 1 Kings 17:7-24

Elijah is a notable prophet, preacher, and miracle worker.<sup>12</sup> Three consecutive stories in chapters 17-18 quickly elevate him to one of recognition and power. The Lord begins to work miracles through and not just for Elijah. One writer notes that these stories “form a clear literary sequence in which the author charts the rise of Elijah’s prophetic powers. In each episode he confronts an increasingly more difficult problem which must be solved.”<sup>13</sup> On the backside of Elijah predicting a drought, the moment comes to fruition. As one can imagine, a drought has an impact on food, finances, livestock, and overall health. In this chapter, two miracles occur with one being a great example of hospitality.

The Lord tells Elijah to go to a specific town where he will meet a widow. The location where she lives is in the

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 216.

<sup>6</sup> Clifton Allen, gen ed., *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 1* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 173.

<sup>7</sup> E.A. Speiser, *Genesis, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 131.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1994), 46.

<sup>9</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), 616-17.

<sup>10</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer Press, 1997), 194.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Genesis* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 468.

<sup>12</sup> Paul R. House, *The New American Commentary, vol. 8* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 212.

<sup>13</sup> R. Cohn, “The Literary Logic of 1 Kings,” *JBL* 101, no. 3 (1982): 335.



middle of Baal country where the prophet will eventually defeat Baalism. As she lives in this town of another god, she will meet the prophet and experience a miracle through him with the power of Yahweh. However, one huge situation has occurred: the rains of the season have not yet come, which are necessary to prepare the earth for crops.

When Elijah encounters the woman, he realizes that the drought has significantly impacted her, so much so, she is out gathering sticks to make one last meal for her and her son followed by an anticipated death by starvation. She is out picking up sticks when he asks for something to drink and then a morsel of bread, which sounds like a simple request, and she responds honorably but truthfully. She does not have any bread made. In fact, she lets the prophet know the reality of the situation, but he still presses her for the bread. He almost comes off as selfish because he wants the widow to feed him first and then she and her son can eat. Perhaps “Elijah’s apparently selfish demand that his wants should be looked after first was a test of her faith.”<sup>14</sup>

She is down to almost nothing, a handful of flour and a little oil in a jug but still prepares and gives to the Prophet Elijah in honor of him being a man of God. He speaks the reward to her as she obeys. The promise is that you will not run out of flour and oil so long as the drought is present. She did as he requested, and her family was blessed with bread for many days. The text does not say there was an abundance, only that sustenance was there as she needed it without running out.

This example of hospitality is centered on not giving

the extra that she had; rather, she gave everything that remained. Anticipating starvation for her and her son, she sacrificially gave to Elijah and with the power of Yahweh, he miraculously provided for her for the remainder of the drought. Hospitality can sometimes be seen as giving from the extra, but this woman exemplified hospitality is giving out of obedience. The reward and blessing are up to God.

The second part of the story is not pointing to hospitality specifically but is connected to the relationship between the widow and Elijah. Their relationship did originate in a moment of hospitality. A.E. Arterbury writes, “Sometimes, the kind welcome of a stranger laid the foundation for a future relationship.”<sup>15</sup> The widow’s son became very ill and died. Her tone and words towards Elijah appear to infer that she believes she has done something wrong or that Elijah has something against her. This moment had nothing to do with sin even though she brings that up to him. Interestingly enough, Elijah even goes before the Lord to ask if the death of her son is payment for something despite the goodness that she showed to him. This moment had a different purpose for both the widow and Elijah. One writer notes, “Perhaps the Lord’s further purpose might be to restore the child for the widow’s good and God’s glory.”<sup>16</sup> Elijah cries out to God and pleads for the son’s life to be restored. Once life was given back to the young man, Elijah gives her back a now-alive son. She then affirms that he is indeed a man of God. In this final section of the story, the widow “understands that the same God who provided the oil has provided life for her son. Baal may be dead, but Yahweh is not, nor is her son. Death cannot thwart Yahweh’s purposes.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and First Book of Samuel, Second Samuel, First Kings, and Second Kings Chapters I to VII* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), 239.

<sup>15</sup> A.E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 57.

<sup>16</sup> Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 141.

<sup>17</sup> House, *New American Commentary*, 215.

## Historical Narrative: 2 Kings 4:8-37

The author of 2 Kings invites the reader into a story with several characters playing important roles in an example of biblical hospitality. Elisha has succeeded Elijah and is now the prominent prophet. In 2 Kings 4:1-7, a great miracle takes place involving a widow with minimal oil being blessed with enough to sell and pay all her debts. Immediately following that story comes another involving Elisha once again. This time, the Shunammite woman, not Elisha, is the primary person of interest at first. Because of her attentiveness and care, Elisha rewards her actions.



Elisha decides to travel to Shunem, which is in the territory of Isaachar.<sup>18</sup> Another author adds that the town is “identified with modern village of Sulam on the slopes of Mount Moreh, overlooking the eastern end of the Plain of Jezreel from the north.”<sup>19</sup> There lived a wealthy woman who provided food and hospitality each time Elisha passed through town. He must have gone through that area regularly, not only because verse 8 references it, but also because she took the initiative to create a more permanent space for him to stay. When one explores the motivation of this couple, that individual will discover “the initial kindness of the woman and her husband was in no expectation of any reward but was the spontaneous expression of hospitable hearts.”<sup>20</sup>

The woman conversed with her husband and because Elisha was a holy man of God, she wanted to do something incredibly kind for him. She decided to complete the small upper room for him whenever he needed it. To add, “This was not a temporary shelter, which is often erected as a guest-chamber on the roof. The walls ensured privacy.”<sup>21</sup> One additional way her hospitality and respect for him was shown can be found in the carefully decorated and equipped options she provided.

The text reveals that “Elisha determined to reward this hospitality.”<sup>22</sup> Said another way, “After some time, when Elisha had spent the night in the chamber provided for him, he wanted to make some acknowledgement to his hostess for the love she had shown him.”<sup>23</sup> He tapped on the shoulder of his servant, Gehazi to help him, which highlights “The intermediacy agency of Gehazi, standing outside, was good manners, for a lady might not easily speak to a man in his chamber.”<sup>24</sup> This conversation involved Elisha offering to speak a word on “behalf to the king or commander of the army” of the Shunammite woman. She responded that she dwells comfortably among her people. However, the burden she and her husband carried more than anything was not having a child, which to many onlookers was negative—so much so it could be seen as curse from God juxtaposed with many children being a blessing from God. Elisha does for them more than they could have imagined and predicted she would have a child that time next spring. She had a baby boy just when he prophesied. This woman and her husband learned that, “often in human experience a casual gesture of kindness, the simple expression of good will and sympathy, brings its train of rich rewards, unexpected blessings.”<sup>25</sup>

Although the rest of the story (verses 18-37) is not specific to hospitality, because of her initial hospitality to Elisha, the next scene matters. Their son grew up and was working in the field alongside his father when he collapsed

<sup>18</sup> James Orr, gen ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 2,781.

<sup>19</sup> T.R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 50.

<sup>20</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3 (New York: Abingdon, 1954), 205.

<sup>21</sup> John Gray, *The Old Testament Library: 1 & 2 Kings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 444.

<sup>22</sup> House, *The New American Commentary*, 267.

<sup>23</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 310.

<sup>24</sup> James Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary: The Book of Kings* (Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 368.

<sup>25</sup> Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3, 206.

and eventually died in his mother's arms. She put her son in the bed where Elisha stayed. This determined woman then set out to find Elisha. When he saw her coming, he sent Gehazi to run out and meet her. She was so distressed that she was holding on to Elisha's feet. His servant tried to stop her, but he said to "leave her alone." Elisha sent his servant to awaken the child to no avail. He came to the house and through a series of specific actions, saw the child come back to life. This story comes full circle because Elisha needed her in the beginning, and she needed him in the end. The one action that started this entire example was her lavish hospitality.

### Gospels: Luke 10:38-42

So far in chapter 10, Jesus has been busy sending out the seventy-two, seeing them return, teaching on prayer, and communicating the parable of the good Samaritan. He then enters a village where two distinct women approach him very differently, and this observation has much to teach about hospitality. The story goes like this:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.

Though the text leaves out the specific town and village he entered, this clarification can be discovered by reading John 11:1, which says, "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha." Mary and Martha are talked about in John 12:1-8 regarding Martha's dinner provision for Lazarus and Mary's anointing the feet of Jesus. Mary was already in the house when Martha welcomed Jesus inside. The impression is given



that Martha is the hostess, as well as the probable older sister, and as one will discover, works hard to do something special for Jesus. However, Mary has a different focus. Complementing this idea, one writer states, "Martha is occupied with things, Mary is occupied with Jesus."<sup>26</sup>

Hospitality has long been a cultural expectation—even more so when Jesus comes into your house. Martha is determined to take care of his needs. However, there seems to be the understanding that Mary would be helping too. They are both focused on the same person but in two very different ways. One is focused on the actual person and his words while the other is focused on her actions towards that same person. Both of their actions seem respectable, but the story will quickly reveal which actions Jesus values as better.

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<sup>26</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, gen ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 1 (*Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002*), 417.

Mary intentionally recognizes the person of Jesus and wants to sit at his feet to listen to his teachings. In this story, and to no one's surprise, Jesus breaks down the barriers between men and women. One theologian writes, "It was unusual for a woman in first-century Judaism to be accepted by a teacher as a disciple."<sup>27</sup> Another writer echoes this understanding, "For a Jewish audience it would be of great significance that a place was given to women by Jesus not simply to do domestic duties in the church but to listen and learn."<sup>28</sup> He shatters norms by establishing that a woman could be a disciple. Perhaps credit could be given to Mary for demonstrating courage to sit at his feet despite those norms. Perhaps she felt comfortable enough with Jesus knowing how he operated and what he valued. This is important for all in attendance because hospitality toward a guest was critical, but that notion got overshadowed when Jesus reset the playing field in order to highlight who and what matters most.

Martha finds herself frustrated—so much so, she complains to Jesus about Mary's lack of service. Is this fair to do to Mary? On some level, yes, because Jewish society valued hospitality and a woman's reputation depended on her ability to demonstrate this well. Martha wants to succeed in what was culturally expected and to add pressure, she is hosting Jesus. Give the service everything and get the duties right were perhaps her mottos in that moment. There appears to be an implication that she wants to listen to Jesus but is distracted by the burden of her duties. Leon Morris puts it like this, "When she could stand it no longer she asked Jesus to intervene."<sup>29</sup> Martha's words to Jesus are emotional and straightforward. In fact, she physically comes in with a sudden burst as well as perhaps a passive-aggressive question. She wants to know if he is concerned about Mary not helping. Martha then tells him to tell her to help.

Perhaps "this was a reproach to Jesus for monopolizing Mary to Martha's hurt."<sup>30</sup> Maybe this is only after she tries

to get Mary to help. Regardless, it is a bold and stunning way to host a guest, namely Jesus. The reader can potentially feel the tension in a moment where one feels she is doing right, and the other is questioning and challenging the guest in the house. To add, "She implies that he is at fault in encouraging her sister's faults."<sup>31</sup>

When Jesus responds to Martha, there is kindness and compassion in response to her inward uneasiness and outward trouble.<sup>32</sup> He says her name twice, which is a sign of emotion. Instead of blasting her, he acknowledges her anxiety and troublesome feelings before he informs her of what is important. He does not explicitly say this, but on some level his words can imply, "The episode is concerned to show that even when domestic service has been harnessed to the purposes of the kingdom of God, the danger remains that its concerns will take possession of us."<sup>33</sup> Jesus does not "disapprove of Martha's activities as such, for they were also the outcome of love for him and were meant to serve him. It was her wrong attitude as revealed in her condemnation of Mary and her dissatisfaction with himself that had to be set right and rebuked."<sup>34</sup> He does not downplay hospitality, but he does set priorities. Although Martha is focused on hospitality, there is obviously a focus on herself with the use of "me" on three occasions. A worthy note is to observe how "she is concerned to engage his assistance in her plans, not to learn from his."<sup>35</sup> Jesus also wants her to know that "serving is good, sitting at Jesus' feet is best."<sup>36</sup> Hospitality was a familiar experience for anyone, especially if one traveled often like Jesus. The act of serving and caring was extraordinarily important. Perhaps there are specific and generic understandings of this story. Listening to Jesus is better than doing things for him, which can help one understand what it means to also care for another person. One can be busy doing things for people and actually miss them, which could diminish the hospitality efforts because despite serving them well, the individual's attitude towards them is not serving them well.

<sup>27</sup> Frank E. Gaebelien, gen ed., *The Expositor's Biblical Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 944.

<sup>28</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 451.

<sup>29</sup> Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 209.

<sup>30</sup> Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Broadman, 1930), 156.

<sup>31</sup> W.N. Clarke, *An American Commentary on the New Testament: Mark and Luke* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1881), 193.

<sup>32</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 358.

<sup>33</sup> John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary: Volume 35b* (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 605.

<sup>34</sup> Norval Goldenhuys, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 316.

<sup>35</sup> Joel Green, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 439.

<sup>36</sup> Robert H. Stein, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 321.



### Gospels: John 4:1-42

John is the only gospel to give account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus had been at work around and in Judea and was preparing to travel to Galilee. The Pharisees are beginning to notice his extraordinary success and the number of his followers increasing. Gerald Borchert explains why he understood Jesus moving between towns when he writes, “The reason was because of the Pharisees. Jesus was in fact making a significant impact.”<sup>37</sup> They were feeling threatened and focusing more on him and his work. Another writer states, “John does not say that the Pharisees took any action against Jesus, or even that they were planning any such action. But it is not likely that they would view with equanimity the rapid increase in the number of Jesus’ followers. Jesus, however, forestalled any action on their part by withdrawing from Judea and setting out for Galilee.”<sup>38</sup> This impetus to leave town would result in a remarkable story impacting a Samaritan woman, his disciples, and an entire town.

In John 4:1-42, Jesus left Judea and passed through Samaria. History proves that devout Jews avoided this route but not Jesus. He made his way to a well where the townspeople would come for water. The hottest part of the day is not when anyone came to the well except the woman who wanted to avoid being in the public eye. She knew people talked about her choices, and there was an element of truth and shame that she did not want to face. On this day, she met Jesus and her life would forever change. Their conversation was full of religious and societal challenges to talk through.

She eventually realized who Jesus was and how she needed what he offered. The impact was so great that she left her jars at the well and ran back to her village to tell them about her interaction with Jesus. They came and listened to him. He chose to remain with them for two more days.

Jesus focused on the territory of Samaria, which is an interesting area to choose, especially when history reveals religious differences. A traveler would choose from two primary routes when traveling from Judea to Galilee, and that choice comes down to where they were on the religion scale. The customary pathway, which was approximately three days, included going through Samaria because it drastically decreased the time and energy required. However, “strict Jews sought to bypass Samaria by opting for a longer, less direct route, which would have involved crossing the Jordan and traveling on the east side.”<sup>39</sup> Interestingly enough, there was no separate political system considering they were under the Roman procurator along with Judea.<sup>40</sup> The religious separation was pronounced, and this was evident even down to the details of travel.

John 4:4 is simple and profound, “He had to pass through Samaria.” He, being Jesus, did not have to pass through Samaria because of geography, but he did have to pass through Samaria because of a divine purpose. Borchert adds that usually “Jesus moved not in response to human pressure but as a result of the Father’s direction and the determined hour for his life.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25a (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 198.

<sup>38</sup> Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 253.

<sup>39</sup> Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2004), 146.

<sup>40</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John, Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 216.

<sup>41</sup> Borchert, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25a, 198.



The religious differences did not detour Jesus from going the shorter route, but the drawing of God to do a great work in the area compelled him to go the shorter route. The end destination was not the goal. The goal was the work his Father had planned for Jesus to do along the way.

The text reveals that Jesus arrives to the area of Samaria, more specifically, the town of Sychar. This small village was near Shechem, “about a half mile from Jacob’s well, which is located in the modern Shechem.”<sup>42</sup> This area had a rich history dating back to the Old Testament. John 4:5 says the area was “near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.” A trusted encyclopedia states, “This ‘field’ is apparently the one at Shechem referred to in Genesis 33:18 and Joshua 24:32.”<sup>43</sup> John Gill adds, “A well so called, either because it was dug by him; or because he and his family made use of it when in those parts, as in verse 12; though no mention is made of it elsewhere, unless any reference is had to it in the blessing of Joseph, to whom the place belonged.”<sup>44</sup> As Jesus arrives to the well, he is tired and thirsty. If he and his disciples left at daybreak, they would have traveled six hours already arriving to the well at noon.<sup>45</sup> The significance of knowing the time is helpful to understand the sweltering heat by this time of day. One theologian writes about this time of day, “The period of the day in the Mediterranean world when it is hot and people are ready for their siesta break. It certainly was not the time for doing rough tasks like hauling water.”<sup>46</sup>

As Jesus sits at the well alone due to his disciples leaving for food in a local town, a woman approaches the well for water. The heat of the day is not a wise and appropriate time to fetch water, but it is proper for her. Why? We learn this woman has an unfortunate history of being with many men. She would be looked down on by women, men, and religious leaders. Why go to the well with other women who judge you? Avoid the awkward moments and simply go alone. Her shame is apparent to herself and she does not need others to pile on her. For her, that shame and avoidance of

others is about to come face-to-face with someone who will speak life and offer satisfaction more than she can imagine. In fact, Jesus epitomizes hospitality by intentionally showing generous care towards her.

Jesus, a Jew, and the woman, a Samaritan, is a problem because “the antipathy between Jews and Samaritans was deeply rooted.”<sup>47</sup> The Samaritans were considered and abhorred by the Jews as half-breeds. The history of these half-breeds includes an important history from D.A. Carson:

After the Assyrians captured Samaria in 722-721 BC, they deported all Israelites of substance and settled the land with foreigners, who intermarried with the surviving Israelites and adhered to some form of their ancient religion. After the exile, Jews returning to their homeland—the remains of the southern kingdom, viewed the Samaritans not only as the children of political rebels but as racial half-breeds whose religion was tainted by various unacceptable elements. About 400 BC the Samaritans erected a rival temple on Mount Gerizim; toward the end of the second century BC this was destroyed by John Hyrcanus.<sup>48</sup>

This stressed relationship got worse as the Samaritans developed their own religious heritage by accepting only the Pentateuch and refused remaining books of the Hebrew Bible. Knowing the history sets the stage for the interaction between two people that should otherwise never do so. On top of the aforementioned reason, a man speaking to a woman is an issue because historically, men did not even speak to their wives in public. Therefore, a Jewish man speaking to a Samaritan woman is doubly challenging. However, Jesus felt no pressure to abide by these rules. Finally, this woman had a questionable reputation. This is her status in this moment with Jesus or so she thinks.

Jesus initially requests a drink of water from her. She immediately questions why he is asking her considering their societal and religious differences. He follows up with further

<sup>42</sup> Frank E. Gaebelin, gen ed., *The Expositor’s Biblical Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 944.

<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 674.

<sup>44</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2003), 113.

<sup>45</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, gen ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 43.

<sup>46</sup> Borchert, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25a, 201.

<sup>47</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 36 (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 60.

<sup>48</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 216.

comments about water, specifically “living water.” As one can imagine, she understands water but cannot understand his “living water” reference because that would imply the water will never end. R.V.G. Tasker explains it well, “But when Jesus mentions ‘living water,’ she assumes that it is of running water as distinct from ordinary well water that He is speaking; and she wonders how He can obtain such water, as there are no streams in the vicinity.”<sup>49</sup> As is common with many who listened to Jesus, “Listeners often thought he was dealing with the physical or mundane level of reality when in fact his words pointed to the spiritual or eternal level of reality.”<sup>50</sup> She carries on by reminding him he has nothing to draw water with and the well is very deep, probably around 100 feet and maybe the deepest well in all of Palestine.<sup>51</sup>

Jesus claims that he is greater than Jacob, which creates a stop in how she now looks at him. He does not specifically promote his elevation over Jacob, but he does offer water that will satisfy her forever. When she hears of his truth and generosity, she wants it right away. However, a quick turn of events unfolds. He goes directly to her heart. A dialogue ensues between the two of them when he wants her to bring her husband to him. She does not have one, she tells him. He then speaks directly and honestly by shocking her and lifting the curtain of her past life.<sup>52</sup> However, he speaks with her when she is probably accustomed to people speaking at her. He agrees with her and then proceeds to go one step further. She has been with five husbands, and the man she is with is not her husband. Archibald Robertson writes, “She had her man, but he was not a legal husband.”<sup>53</sup> The embarrassment one would feel in front of someone that knew you in this manner would be normal. However, “In order to make it possible for the woman to receive the living water about which Jesus spoke, it would be necessary for her to deal with the tragic nature of her sinful life.”<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps the woman is feeling embarrassed or in her declaration of seeing him as a prophet, she changes the

conversation to talk about worship. As discussed before, there has been tension related to places of worship between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus listens to her and resets the playing field. He does so by emphasizing three parts: “First, he announces the impending obsolescence of both the Jerusalem temple, and the Mount Gerizim site as definitive place so of worship; second, salvation springs from the Jews, not the Samaritans; and he explains more positively the nature of worship that forever renders obsolete the conflicting claims of Jerusalem and Gerizim.”<sup>55</sup> Worshipping him is “not simply outwardly by being in the right place and taking up the right attitude, but in his spirit.”<sup>56</sup> People’s approach to God must be genuine and sincere. Jesus reveals to her that he is the Messiah she told him would be coming. He uses the phrase *ego eimi*, which “is an important theological theme that is used in the mouth of Jesus as a self-identifying vehicle for announcing some important theological idea concerning him.”<sup>57</sup>

The disciples return and are surprised at why he is talking to a woman. None of them question Jesus. The woman leaves and her water jar remains behind. Perhaps she is distracted by her experience and in a hurry to go tell others what happened at the well. She begs people to come see him because he revealed everything she had done. The disciples start talking to Jesus about eating since they had just returned from town with food. He once again levels up by emphasizing what he is there to do. His fulfillment is to obey his Father.

When the Samaritan returns to her town, her testimony influences people. They start believing the person she encountered was Jesus and they choose to believe and follow him as well. One writer puts it this way,

<sup>49</sup> R.V.G. Tasker, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 76.

<sup>50</sup> Borchert, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25a, 203.

<sup>51</sup> Kostenberger, *John*, 150-51.

<sup>52</sup> Gaebelein, gen ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, 55.

<sup>53</sup> Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1960), 64.

<sup>54</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 204.

<sup>55</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 222.

<sup>56</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 271.

<sup>57</sup> Borchert, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25a, 209.

The woman's fellow townspeople appear to progress beyond the woman's understanding of Jesus. Shortly thereafter, they started coming to him and more people believed and followed him. The townspeople invited Jesus to stay with them, which he did, only to leave after two days. He was intentionally kind to the Samaritan woman and hosted her at the well when the rules said not to do so. Her life was one to run from, but he called it out and then invited her to a better life. Their interaction resulted in many more people choosing to believe and proclaim in John 4:42 that he "is indeed the Savior of the world."<sup>58</sup>



This brief phrase is significant because "By recognizing Jesus as 'Savior of the World,' the Samaritans accept that salvation may be from the Jews, but it is ultimately for all people."<sup>59</sup>

### Epistles: Hebrews 13:2

In Hebrews 13, a letter written to the Jewish people, the author emphasizes specific virtues with an accompanying action. The writer initially reminds the reader to show brotherly love (phileo) to one another. Beginning with brotherly love is important to understand because "it reveals to the world that we belong to Christ; it reveals our true identity to ourselves; and it delights God."<sup>60</sup> He then builds on the "brotherly love" idea in verse 2: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

Why does the writer feel the need to remind his audience to show hospitality? Was there an impetus? There could be three viable answers contributing to the writer's motivation to address the situation based on the historical context. The first possibility is to understand what travelers experienced traversing the land. Whenever a stranger or non-stranger (Jesus-follower) needed lodging, there were primarily two options, which included an inn or a private

home. Inns were expensive and prohibitive to most travelers. In addition, these inns were not safe from being approached or attacked by prostitutes or robbers. An individual's house made sense because "The earliest Christian assemblies met in homes, which provided a natural setting for the extension of hospitality to traveling brothers and sisters."<sup>61</sup> The second possibility is the Jewish people "have become slack in their friendliness toward strangers."<sup>62</sup> Why could this slackness be appearing? Another writer adds, "Some of them were once very hospitable in their prosperity, but then they were impoverished and so not as able to be hospitable."<sup>63</sup> However, the writer is offering "a plea for unselfishness for the expression of love as service."<sup>64</sup> The third possibility includes strangers that could take advantage of someone showing hospitality. The reality for "Some Christians who had been deceived by such impostors might be chary of offering hospitality too readily next time they were asked for it."<sup>65</sup> Believe it or not, it could be that sketchy people would manipulate or work their way into a home by acting as if they were Christians for the sole purpose of getting free food and lodging. Perhaps Ben Jolliffe, in his thesis, is accurate when he writes, "Hospitality did not disappear, but it was being slowly squeezed out."<sup>66</sup> Philip Hughes poignantly writes, "The vulnerability that goes with the truly hospitable nature is never fully obviated by the adoption of precautionary

58 Borchert, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25a, 209.

59 C. Koester, "The Savior of the World," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no 4 (1990): 665.

60 John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1983), 424.

61 William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 47b (Dallas, TX: Word Press, 1991), 512.

62 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 563.

63 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2006), 296.

64 Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 47b, 511.

65 F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 390.

66 Ben Jolliffe, "What it Means to be Hospitable: Paul's Commands in Light of His Mediterranean Context" (master's thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2006), 18.

measures; nonetheless, Christians should continue to be of all people the most hospitable.”<sup>67</sup> Regardless, the writer is saying that “it is still the duty of Christians to open their houses as well as their hearts to their stranger brethren, especially to such as are occasional visitants on business connected with the kingdom of our Lord Jesus.”<sup>68</sup>

The author of Hebrews assumes his audience brings a level of knowledge and understanding to his letter when he references angels in the second half of verse 2: “...for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Obviously, these words are reaching back to Abraham in Genesis 18 when he encounters three men, one of which is Yahweh, and the other two angels. This particular story can be seen as an anchor example to those in the Jewish community as well as those who follow Jesus. The New Testament examples of hospitality look back to Abraham’s story as central to their actions. Donald Guthrie believes, “The principle is that it is better to assume that guests are angels and to act accordingly rather than risk treating worthy people unworthily.”<sup>69</sup> Hospitality is intentionally showing generous care to a guest. This caring action “constitutes the act of making strangers feel welcome in one’s home and caring for their needs as one would a friend.”<sup>70</sup> When a person offers hospitality, it is not because the people you care for are angels. The writer of Hebrews “is not advocating hospitality on the off chance that one might happen to receive an angel as a guest but rather because God is pleased when believers are hospitable.”<sup>71</sup>

One writer states, “True hospitality springs from the limitless fountain of the divine love manifested to us while we were still estranged sinners (Romans 5:8), and it must likewise be spontaneous, unforced, and free from reluctance.”<sup>72</sup> The writer’s imploring behooves the reader to act with brotherly love and not to hold back on showing hospitality when encountering a stranger or non-stranger. The significance of this simple and profound act is reinforced

in the words of Leon Morris, “Without hospitality in Christian homes, the spread of the faith would have been much more difficult.”<sup>73</sup> The words of one writer holds great strength, “In a sense, we always minister to the Lord when we are hospitable, especially to fellow believers.”<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

The Bible has several stories that depict hospitality. The selections in this chapter are important because they highlight key elements that can help people including: be eager to offer your best, give to others and trust your needs will be met, and provide hospitality regardless of the audience. These actionable efforts come with rewards; therefore, be eager to show hospitality because in so doing, you uphold biblical teachings and actions that reflect how Jesus showed a welcoming and caring attitude toward others. After all, “Brotherly love must be more than an emotion. It must be put into practice.”<sup>75</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 564.

<sup>68</sup> John Brown, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1972), 675.

<sup>69</sup> Donald Guthrie, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 268.

<sup>70</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 79.

<sup>71</sup> Frank Gaebelien, gen ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 146.

<sup>72</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 563.

<sup>73</sup> Gaebelien, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, 146.

<sup>74</sup> MacArthur, *Hebrews*, 426.

<sup>75</sup> Clifton Allen, ed. *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 92.



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