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‘ U N D E R T H E S H A D O W O F  
M Y R O O F ’ ( G E N . 1 9 : 8 ) .  
T H E L A W O F H O S P I T A L I T Y  
I N T H E B I B L E

S a m o S k r a l o v n i k

Introduction

In ancient Israel, hospitality was not merely a question of good manners, but a moral institution which grew out of the harsh desert and (semi) nomadic way of life. This institution of welcoming the weary traveller and of receiving it in one's midst developed from the necessity of the desert into a highly esteemed virtue in Jewish (Christian and also Muslim) tradition.

The Bible overflows with examples of this hospitality. As soon as Abraham, "sitting by the entrance to his tent near the sacred trees of Mamre" (Gen. 18:1), saw three men standing nearby, he hurried to invite them into "under the shadow of his home", and said: "Please come to my home where I can serve you. I'll have some water brought, so you can wash your feet, then you can rest under the tree. Let me get you some food to give you strength before you leave. I would be honoured to serve you." (Gen. 18:3-5). Similarly, Laban was eager to welcome Abraham's servant (Gen. 24:28-32) while Rebekah attended to the comfort of his camels. Manoah did not allow the angel to depart before he had partaken of his hospitality (Judg. 13:15), and the Shunammite woman had a special room prepared for the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4:8-11). One of Job's claims (appeals) is that he "opened (his) doors to the traveller" (Job 31:32).

The extreme to which hospitality was taken is shown by the stories of Lot and the old man of Gibeah who were prepared to sacrifice the honour of their daughters in order to protect their guests, who were to them complete strangers: "Friends, please don't do such a terrible thing!

I have two daughters who have never been married. I'll bring them out, and you can do what you want with them. But don't harm these men. They are guests in my home." (Gen. 19:4-8; Judg. 19:23-24)

Failing to show hospitality, on the other hand, was punished. Gideon punished the elders of Succoth and Penuel since they did not want to host / feed his army (Judg. 8:5-9): "Gideon made a whip from thorn plants and used it to beat the town officials (of Succoth). Afterwards he went to Penuel, where he tore down the tower and killed all the town officials there." The men of Israel made war on the Benjamites for their breach of hospitality (Judg. 19-20):

My wife and I went into the town of Gibeah in Benjamin to spend the night. Later that night, the men of Gibeah surrounded the house. They wanted to kill me, but instead they raped and killed my wife. It was a terrible thing for Israelites to do! ... Everyone agreed that Gibeah had to be punished.

Nabal's natural death (suffering a heart attack) was understood as the punishment for having failed to offer hospitality to David's men (1 Sam. 25,2-38).<sup>1</sup>

Hence, the "law" of hospitality is a strongly rooted custom in the Bible (tradition). But what are the reasons for such "irrational" behaviour towards stranger(s)? To properly answer these questions, one must first assess a wider cultural and historical context. In many respects, the Israelites were inspired by the customs of the neighbouring nations; the attitude toward the weak members of society is by rule no exception.

### A Wider Cultural and Historical Context of Ancient Mesopotamia

The aim of this chapter is not to establish or even suggest literary or customary dependence but rather to reveal a range of ideas that were to some degree present (or absent) in the ancient world of fertile crescent (before the historical emergence of Israel).

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<sup>1</sup> "Hospitality," Jewish Virtual Library, AICE 1998-2018, accessed August 16, 2018, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hospitality-in-judaism>.

A special relation toward the weak members of the society – widows, orphans, and the poor – is not Israel's uniqueness. Centuries before the historical appearance of Israel the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia have established a special relationship toward the weak, and even legalized it. In the cultures of the fertile crescent we encounter the first attempts to create the social and legal standards of human and social behaviour with the so-called law collections or codes. The oldest known and preserved code, the Code of Ur-Namu, was written on cuneiform tablets c. 2100–2050 BC. The most famous (or known), the Code of Hammurabi, is three centuries younger and dates back to about 1754 BC. In this context we must (at least) mention the Code of Lipit-Ishtar (c. 1870 BC) and the Code or the Laws of Eshnunna (Bilalama) (c. 1930 BC).

These codes or laws compilations unwittingly give us a peek, a riveting glimpse into the daily life of early human societies and civilization. It is noteworthy that all the mentioned codes – and also the reforms of Urukagina,<sup>2</sup> a ruler of the city-state of Lagash c. 24<sup>th</sup> century BC, which are sometimes cited as the first example of a legal code in recorded history – expose consistently the concern for protection of powerless as one of the fundamental characteristics of the rulers.

Thus, the earliest legislator, Ur-Namu, in the epilogue of his code, typical of Mesopotamian law codes, invokes the deities for Ur-Nammu's kingship, Nanna and Utu, and decrees "equity in the land". He ensures that "the orphan was not delivered up to the rich man; the widow was not delivered up to the mighty man; the man of one shekel<sup>3</sup> was not delivered up to the man of one mina". Hammurabi similarly claims that on the orders of the god Marduk, with his code, he will guarantee justice and prosperity. In the prologue and epilogue, we read:

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<sup>2</sup> He is best known for his reforms to combat corruption, which are sometimes cited as the first example of a legal code in recorded history. Although the actual text has not been discovered, much of its content may be surmised from other references to it that have been found. In it, he exempted widows and orphans from taxes; compelled the city to pay funeral expenses (including the ritual food and drink libation for the journey of the dead into the lower world); and decreed that the rich must use silver when purchasing from the poor, and if the poor does not wish to sell, the powerful man (the rich man or the priest) cannot force them to do so.

<sup>3</sup> "The man of one shekel" means the poor, and "the man of one mina are" the rich.

... then Anu and Bel called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak (...)

That the strong might not injure the weak, in order to protect the widows and orphans (...) In E-Sagil, which I love, let my name be ever repeated; let the oppressed, who has a case at law, come and stand before this my image as king of righteousness; let him read the inscription, and understand my precious words: the inscription will explain his case to him; he will find out what is just, and his heart will be glad.

What is of paramount importance, and must not be overlooked, is the fact of dichotomy between the epilogue and the prologue on the one hand and the legislation (laws) on the other. "When the laws are sandwiched between a prologue and epilogue which proclaims the deeds and divine mandate of the king, then the law collection is part of a royal *apologia*", van Houten argues.<sup>4</sup> Laws, which are separated from religious and historically coloured epilogues and prologues, do not establish direct relationship toward the powerless, and it would also be in vain to look for social provisions.<sup>5</sup> Norman Lohfink, with Hammurabi's assurances in mind, writes:

Suppose an "oppressed man," or an orphan or a widow, following Hammurabi's advice, went to E-Sagil and read the 282 paragraphs of the law code. They would not find even a single occurrence of the words "poor" or "oppressed." Could that put their mind at ease? There is no social legislation in the code of Hammurabi. Nor is such to be found in the laws of Ur-Nammu, nor in the laws of Lipit-Ishtar, nor in any other law collection of Mesopotamia. To be sure, few laws in these codes make a distant approach to the topic of the problems of the poor. But they never deal directly with the poor or with their rights in society. The language of the proper law lacks the semantic field of poverty and oppression. There is a well-known linguistic difference between prologues and epilogues on the one hand, and the proper laws on the other. It concerns dialect and style. But we should add that there is also

<sup>4</sup> Christiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law; A Study of the Changing Legal Status of Strangers in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 29–30.

<sup>5</sup> Norbert Lohfink, "Poverty in the Laws of the Ancient Near East and of the Bible," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 34–50; Léon Epsztein, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible* (Paris: SCM Press, 1986), 16; Shalom M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (Leiden: Brill 1970(2005)), 20–21.

a difference in the worlds created by the two segments in the text of the law codes. The prologues and the epilogues outline a world in which everything aims at caring for the poor. But the proper laws do not even mention the poor. We do not imagine that this is because these laws suppose that poverty no longer exists in the world they regulate. The laws simply pass poverty by in silence—and that in spite of the fact that by their prologues and epilogues, at least in the case of Hammurabi, these very laws are proclaimed as a reason why the oppressed can set their minds at ease.<sup>6</sup>

The social principles presented in epilogues and prologues are thus “regulations” without legal sanctions and, consequently, with a very limited possibility of use in real life.

However, have foreigners (aliens and refugees) been considered as “a weak member of society” and thus protected? Leo A. Oppenheim writes regarding this topic insightfully:

It remains uncertain to what extent foreigners – non-citizens or non-natives – were admitted into the city [i.e. city state, the most commonly organized lifestyle regarding the time and place]. Typically, their status must have been diplomatic, that is, dependent on their relation to the palace. Foreign emissaries, traders, political refugees, and others were able to move in and out under royal protection or could even be incorporated into the royal household. It is probable that, to some extent, non-citizens were allowed to settle in the *kāru*, the harbour of the city, a section outside of the town proper. They enjoyed a special administrative, political, and social status. The institution of “sojourners” or resident aliens, allowed to live within the city, which is known to us from the Old Testament, appears in Mesopotamia only in the west where a text from Ugarit speaks of “the citizens of the city of Carchemish together with the people (allowed to live) within their gates.” At those periods of Mesopotamian economic history when much of the overland trade was in private or semiprivate hands, a special section (*bit ub(a)ri*) within the city wall seems to have been set aside for foreign visitors or merchants, e.g., the “Street-of-the-People-from-Eshnunna” in Sippar. Evidence from the Nippur of the Persian period might indicate the practice of having foreigners, and certain social classes (also craftsmen), live in separate quarters or streets, since they are all said to be under the supervision of special officials. *An observation on the relation to foreigners may be in order in this context: the concept of, and terminology relating to, hospitality is conspicuously absent in Mesopotamia.* This

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<sup>6</sup> Lohfink, “Poverty in the Laws,” 37.

contrasts with the Old Testament, where the nomadic background can be readily adduced as explanation, but presents an instructive similarity to Greece—not the Greece of Homer and its reflection in literature, but that of the polis, with its aversion to the non-citizen and all its discrimination, economic as well as social, against the alien. Since family ties were generally ineffective in Mesopotamia and clan-relationships not in evidence in cities, other forms of association assumed their function in providing status and protection for the individual. Such associations could be professional, religious, or political.<sup>7</sup> (emphasis added)

#### In the Words of Christiana van Houten:

It would be illuminating to this study of how the Pentateuchal laws deal with the alien if we could compare them with the way in which other ancient legal collections treated them. In looking for comparative material, we presume that the existence of aliens was not confined to the people of Israel, nor to the land of Canaan. The causes of leaving one's homeland which are described in the Old Testament, i.e. famine, war, family conflict and blood guilt, are common to all peoples.

*My search for laws which would regulate how the citizens of the land are to treat an outsider who needs to stay among them for some time yielded nothing in the Mesopotamian legal collections.* Instead, the Laws of Eshnunna, the Code of Hammurabi and the Middle Assyrian laws each contained only one law pertaining to the alien, and in each case it dealt with the phenomenon of the alien only from the vantage point of the family left behind.<sup>8</sup> (emphasis added)

The fact that the alien is mentioned in all the law collections in the Pentateuch, and “not at all in the Mesopotamian codes”, does not necessarily mean that the Babylonians were unsympathetic to the alien. Hospitality to the stranger may have been one of the accepted mores of the culture and yet may not have been included in the legal tradition, she argues.<sup>9</sup>

The omission can be explained by noting that these law codes are addressed to the citizens of a land in order to establish justice among them. The aliens as non-citizens are not part of the intended audience,

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<sup>7</sup> Leo A. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), 78–79.

<sup>8</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

although they may in fact be members of the society.<sup>10</sup> “The second possible reason is that the mentioned codes, in fact, were not laws in the strict (modern) sense. If we define a law code as a body of law which seeks to be comprehensive and to which judges are bound when deciding cases, then none of the law collections qualify as a law code.”<sup>11</sup> Firstly, it is clear that they are not intended to be exhaustive. For example, the Laws of Hammurabi contain no laws pertaining to murder, the Code does not say what would be the penalty for murder.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the nature, purpose and scope of these ancient Mesopotamian law codes.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the fact that the alien is not mentioned “at all in the Mesopotamian codes” and absence of “the concept of, and terminology relating to, hospitality” one must clearly see that a special relation toward the weak members of the society emerged centuries before the historical appearance of Israel. Israel, therefore, enters in the already formed and legalized tradition, but adds or exposes its speciality, i.e. the attitude toward the foreigners.

The historical experience of Egypt, the experience “to be an alien”, “to be a refugee” is key to this addition. Based on the hostile attitude from Egypt, the Israelites were invited not to do the same: “Don’t mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remem-

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>13</sup> “The fact that the Code of Hammurabi was recopied for more than a millennium with no significant changes indicates that at some point it had changed its genre. It had become canonical literature and was recopied in scribal schools for its own sake. In conclusion, Westbrook claims that when the legal texts are copied without changes being made, then they are no longer functioning as references for judges, but that when legal collections are being revised, this indicates that they are being applied in the courts.” (van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, 29; Raymond Westbrook, *Biblical and Cuneiform Law* (Paris: Gabalda, 1988), 256) “In these matters, the Old Testament laws seem to be similar. As the Laws of Hammurabi were not referred to in legal practice, so also the biblical laws are not referred to by the judges, or any other practitioners of the law in the biblical text. For example, when Boaz seeks to carry out a legal transaction at the city gate (Ruth 4), no law collection is cited or referred to, yet all parties understood and agreed to the legal procedure and the consequences. It was clearly an authoritative legal tradition operating, and yet the text gives us no indication whether it was written or oral or both.” (van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, 30)

ber, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 19:33-34)

It seems, therefore, that the right place to look for an explanation of this difference is in the particular history of the Israelite people. Bearing in mind not only the historical experience of Egypt – since some scholars dispute it or even do not acknowledge to Exodus any historical value – one must focus on nomadic roots of the Israel’s ancestors. The patriarchs are portrayed as aliens, both in Canaan and Egypt. These traditions play an important role in the legal collections in the *Old Testament* (Exod. 22:20; 23:9) and may also have led to the formation of laws which protected not only widows, orphans and the poor, but also the alien.

### The Nomadic Roots of Israel and the Alien

Israel begins in the desert: “My ancestor was homeless, an Aramean (יִבְרָא יִמְרָא)” (Deut. 26:5) The Hebrew verb יָבַד, “to be homeless / to wander / to be(come) lost” refers to Israel’s nomadic roots, to the ancestors of the Israelis which at the beginning of their history lived a nomadic and semi-nomadic life. Although Israel has never been a real nomad, a real Bedouin, the values of nomadic way of life are / were not foreign there.

Determining a precise time frame of this period, i.e. the period of the “founding fathers” (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) is impossible. The three-generation narrative probably reflects centuries-long processes of settling of the Semitic tribes in the regions of the fertile crescent. Most scholars understood the travelling narrative of the Abraham tribe in the context of the expansion of the nomadic tribes from the desert and steppe regions of Asia to the area of the city states of Mesopotamia, the fertile land between Tigris and Euphrates, and Kanaan in the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. Although there is insufficient historical evidence to accurately determine the timeline, their arrival at Kanaan can be placed in the period between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.

Nomadic life dictates a special social order and a special way of behaviour. In the desert, an individual who has separated from his group must necessarily count on the reception by the groups he meets or to



whom he joins. Hospitality was a necessity for nomadic peoples because there were no “hotels” in the wilderness. Even within the towns and cities there were often no inns available.<sup>14</sup> Hospitality is therefore a necessity for living in the desert, but this necessity has become an “ethical imperative”.

Through hospitality, the host and the guest, who were previously unknown to each other, now enjoy social interaction. The function of hospitality is to transform an unknown person (who may pose a threat) into a guest, thus removing the threat (2 Sam. 12:4; Job 31:32 and other texts).<sup>15</sup> The fundamental purpose of hospitality is to turn strangers into guests. Therefore, Malina writes: “Hospitality might be defined as the process by means of which an outsider’s status is changed from stranger to guest ... The outsider is ‘received’ and socially transformed from stranger to guest ... Hospitality, then, differs from entertaining family and friends.”<sup>16</sup>

Scholars have drawn analogies between the alien referred to in the *Old Testament* and other fringe peoples. R. de Vaux, when discussing the practice of hospitality in the *Old Testament*, showed, for example, that Abraham’s hospitality at Mambre (Gen. 18:1-8) refers to the customs of nomads. The law of asylum which he sees functioning in modern Bedouin societies is reflected, he claims, in the *Old Testament* institution of protecting the alien.<sup>17</sup> De Vaux argues:

Hospitality, we have said, is a necessity of life in the desert, but among the nomads this necessity has become a virtue, and a most highly esteemed one. The guest is sacred: the honour of providing for him is disputed, but generally falls to the sheikh. The stranger can avail himself of this hospitality for three days, and even after leaving has a right to protection for a given time. This time varies from tribe to tribe: among some it is “until the salt he has eaten

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Lee Roy, “Old Testament Foundations for Christian Hospitality,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35 (2014): 2.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond T. Hobbs, “Hospitality in the First Testament and the Teleological Fallacy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 95 (2001): 17.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce John Malina, “The Received View and What It Cannot Do: III John and Hospitality,” *Semeia* 35 (1986): 181.

<sup>17</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, 36–37.

has left his stomach,” in big tribes like the Ruwala of Syria it is for three more days and within a radius of 100 miles.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, V. H. Kooy describes the duty of hospitality to a stranger in terms of present-day Bedouin customs<sup>19</sup>.

However, some scholars have expressed doubts whether the nomadic way of life could have survived through millennia and through the settlement process. But the practice of hospitality is not the only one that has survived. Blood-vengeance, which is the law of the wilderness, has become a permanent institution, solidarity of the clan has too never disappeared.<sup>20</sup> De Vaux on the other hand claims that language, Hebrew,

which is even more conservative than customs, retained several traces of that life of years gone by. For example, generations after the conquest, a house was called a “tent”, and not only in poetry (where it is frequent) but also in everyday speech (Judg. 19:9; 20:8; 1 Sam. 13:2; 1 Kings 8:66). Disbanded soldiers return “every man to his own tent” (1 Sam. 4:10; 2 Sam. 18:17). “To your tents, Israel” was the cry of revolt under David (2 Sam. 20:1) and after the death of Solomon (1 Kings 12:16).<sup>21</sup>

However, this expression did not last, for afterwards we read how every man returned “to his house” (1 Kings 22:17) or “his town” (1 Kings 22:36).

Though it is less significant, the frequent use, in Old Testament poetry, of metaphors borrowed from nomadic life should not pass unnoticed. Death, for example, is the cut tent-rope, or the peg which is pulled out (Job 4:21), or the tent itself which is carried off (Isa. 38:12). Desolation is represented by the broken ropes, the tent blown down (Jer. 10:20), whereas security is the tent with tight ropes and firm pegs (Isa. 33:20). A nation whose numbers are increasing is a tent being extended (Isa. 54:2): Lastly, there are countless allusions to the pastoral life, and Yahweh or his Messiah are frequently represented as the Good Shepherd (Ps. 23; Isa. 40:11; Jer. 23:1-6; Ezek 34, etc.).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Instructions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Vernon H. Kooy, “Hospitality,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, vol. II*, ed. Georhe Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 654.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

We have other indicators that the practise of hospitality did not decline with the changes in social conditions. Even in later times, when the Jews were settled in cities, this virtue was held in highest esteem. Isaiah (58:7) preferred charity and hospitality over fasting (or as the true way of fasting). Job, in complaining of his misfortunes in spite of the fact that he had led a virtuous life, mentions among other things that he had always opened his door to the stranger (Job 31:32); while Eliphaz as the reason for misery which had befallen Job points that he had not been hospitable (22:7). Ben Sira condemns the habits of the man who takes advantage of the custom of hospitality (Sir. 29:23-28; 40,28.30).

This is also evident from the later sources. In the *Testament of Abraham* (20:15), a pseudo-epigraphic text of the *Old Testament*, we can read: "Let us too, my beloved brothers, imitate the hospitality of the patriarch Abraham." The writer of Hebrews, *New Testament* epistle, alluding to Abraham's experience, admonishes his hearers: "Do not neglect hospitality, for by this some have unknowingly hosted angels" (Heb. 13:2). Abraham's hospitality become the foundation for later encouragements to hospitality in *New Testament* (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). 1 Peter 4:9 (KJV): "Use hospitality one to another without grudging." Paul makes this especially the duty of a Christian bishop, as he claims in 1 Timothy 3:2, "A bishop then must ...be given to hospitality".

This is not all. Taking into account the texts, depicting the end of the world, we can assume that this custom will be kept up to the end of the world and even beyond. Hospitality is especially enjoined by the Saviour: "He that receiveth you receiveth me ..." (Matt. 10:40.42). The abandonment of hospitality is one of the charges which the Judge of mankind will allege against the wicked, and on which he will condemn them: "I was a stranger, and ye took me not in." (Matt. 25:43)

### Hospitality in Hebrew Bible

From biblical and other ancient texts, Andrew E. Arterbury arrived at a definition of hospitality in the ancient Mediterranean world: "At its core, hospitality is the Mediterranean social convention that was employed when a person chose to assist a traveller who was away from

his or her home region by supplying him or her with provisions and protection.”<sup>23</sup>

From the scattered references an idea can be formed about who was entitled to enjoy hospitality and of the manner in which a guest was received in an ancient Jewish household.

### The Object of Hospitality Is an Alien Traveller, not a Resident Alien

Throughout the history of discussions on hospitality, Abraham – the archetype of the Hebrew race – has served as the example of biblical hospitality. His encounter with three “men” is cited repeatedly in Jewish and Christian literature, as already mentioned, including *Jubilees*, Philo, Josephus, *1 Clement*, *Testament of Abraham*, *Apocalypse of Paul*, Origen, John Chrysostom, Augustine, *Genesis Rabbah* and the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>24</sup>

According to Bruce J. Malina, the narrative of Genesis 18 as the first stage of hospitality illustrates *evaluating the stranger* (usually through some tests about whether guest status is possible).<sup>25</sup> It is evident from Abraham’s greeting that he recognised his visitors as alien and travellers. However, hospitality was not offered to everyone.<sup>26</sup> Two types of people would not be welcomed as guests. The first would be traders who travel in the process of their business (cf. Gen. 37).<sup>27</sup> The second would be “strangers,” *gerim*.

But, who were “strangers,” *gerim*? Although nowadays a “stranger” can mean “a person or thing that is unknown or with whom one is

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 132.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew E. Arterbury, “Abraham’s Hospitality among Jewish and Early Christian Writers: A Tradition History of Gen. 18:1-16 and Its Relevance for the Study of the New Testament,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30 (2003): 359–367.

<sup>25</sup> Malina, “The Received View,” 182.

<sup>26</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw (“Hell and hospitality,” *Word & World* 31 (2011), 13–14) observes that even God’s hospitality is not without limits. Moab is excluded from the eschatological feast of Isaiah 25. She cites other examples of God’s exclusionary hospitality: Psalms 23:5; Isaiah 65:13; Zephaniah 1:7; Matthew 22:13; Luke 1:53 and Revelation 19.

<sup>27</sup> Hobbs, “Hospitality in the First Testament,” 18.

unacquainted", in Hebrew Bible the term "stranger" (*ger*) signifies more specifically a "sojourner, resident alien".<sup>28</sup>

The word may be used of individuals or groups. Abraham was a *ger* at Hebron (Gen. 23:4), and Moses in Midian (Exod. 2:22; 18:3). A man of Bethlehem went with his family to settle as a *ger* in Moab (Ruth 1:1). The Israelites were *gerim* in Egypt (Exod. 22:20; 23:9; Deut. 10:19; 23:8).<sup>29</sup>

The ancient texts considered an Israelite who went to live among another tribe as a *ger*: a man of Ephraim was a *ger* at Gibeah, where the Benjaminites live (Judg. 19:16). ... From the social point of view, these resident aliens were free men, not slaves, but they did not possess full civic rights, and so differed from Israelite citizens. ... Since all landed property was in Israelite hands, the *gerim* were reduced to hiring out their services (Deut. 24:14), as the Levites did for their own profession (Judg. 17:8-10). As a rule, they were poor, and are grouped with the poor, the widows and the orphans, all the "economically weak" who were recommended to the Israelites' charity. The fallen fruit, the olives left behind on the tree, the leavings of the grapes, the gleanings after the harvest were to be left for them (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19-21, etc., cf. Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Ezek. 22:7; Zech. 7:10). .... The Israelites were to help them, remembering that they themselves had once been *gerim* in Egypt (Exod. 22:20; 23:9; Deut. 24:18.22), and for the same reason they were charged to love these aliens as themselves (Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19).

They were to share in the tithe collected every third year (Deut. 14:29), and in the produce of the Sabbatical year (Lev. 25:6), and the cities of refuge were open to them (Num. 35:15). In legal actions, they were entitled to justice just like the Israelites (Deut. 1:16), but were liable to the same penalties (Lev. 20:2; 24:16.22). In everyday life there was no barrier between *gerim* and Israelites. Some *gerim* acquired a fortune (Lev. 25:47; cf. Deut. 28:43) ...<sup>30</sup>

A "stranger" (*ger*), therefore, is a person who has entered the community from the outside and who has taken up residence more or less permanently.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the stranger (*ger*) may not be unknown at all; in fact, the stranger might be a neighbour and / or friend and would

<sup>28</sup> Lee Roy, "Old Testament foundations," 2; David John Alfred Clines, ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 70.

<sup>29</sup> De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 75.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. "It is noteworthy that nearly all these passages were written shortly before the Exile: Deuteronomy, Jeremias and the Law of Holiness in Leviticus. Thus it seems that at the end of the monarchy the number of *gerim* in Judah had increased, and provision had to be made for them. There had probably been an influx of refugees from the former northern kingdom."

<sup>31</sup> Hobbs, "Hospitality in the First Testament," 20.

not be considered a potential threat.<sup>32</sup> The *ger* is protected by a number of laws, see the above citation, and the Israelites must not oppress or exploit the resident alien, but there is *not a single case* in Old Testament where hospitality is extended to a defined stranger (*ger*).<sup>33</sup>

### Hospitality is Limited to a Fixed Period of Time and Includes Protection

Keeping in mind the archetypal Gen. 18, Abraham's offer of hospitality does not include overnight accommodation. He invites the travellers to wash their feet, eat, and rest, but he says to them, "after that you may go on" (Gen. 18:5). He will not detain them after they have eaten and rested.<sup>34</sup> When the travellers respond saying, "Do as you say", they are accepting Abraham's offer, acknowledging its extent and agreeing to his terms. Visitors would usually remain over night, but hospitality was normally limited to no more than three days.<sup>35</sup> If a guest stayed longer, he would become a burden or, conversely, if the host kept the guest longer, this could be interpreted as hostility (Gen 24,31.54-61).<sup>36</sup>

Guests are not expected to compensate the host, but there was a sense of reciprocity, Koenig argues, that often results in a benefit to the host. For example, the custom requires the guest to report any news and to express gratitude.<sup>37</sup> The expression of gratitude may be in the form of a blessing, as it was in the case of Abraham's visitors, who promised that Abraham's wife Sarah would have a son (Gen. 18:10-14). Through

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<sup>32</sup> Walter Vogels, "Hospitality in Biblical Perspective," *Liturgical Ministry* 11 (2002): 165.

<sup>33</sup> Hobbs, "Hospitality in the First Testament," 20-21; Lee Roy, "Old Testament Foundations," 2-3.

<sup>34</sup> Arterbury, "Abraham's Hospitality," 360.

<sup>35</sup> Hobbs, "Hospitality in the First Testament," 3.

<sup>36</sup> Vogels, "Hospitality in Biblical Perspective," 166; "In the case of Genesis 18, the men were not travelling with any animals, but normally the host would also care for any animals that might accompany the guests. In Judges 19, for example, the Levite's host 'gave his donkeys fodder' (19,21; cf. Gn 24,31-32)." (Lee Roy, "Old Testament foundations," 3)

<sup>37</sup> John Koenig, "Hospitality," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. III, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 299; Vogels, "Hospitality in Biblical Perspective," 166.

Abraham's generosity and risk, God blesses the host by granting Sarah a child.<sup>38</sup>

Abraham's story is not the only narrative of hospitality in which God is "discovered redemptively in the meeting" and "the vulnerable stranger, the one who ostensibly has nothing to offer, becomes a source of enrichment to the reconfigured household".<sup>39</sup> After hosting and protecting "two men", the angels, Lot and his family are delivered from Sodom (Gen. 19). When Abraham sends his servant on a quest to find a wife for Isaac, the event of hospitality serves as the setting for the fulfilment of the divine plan.<sup>40</sup> The poor widow of Zarephath with a "handful of flour and a little olive oil" (1 Kings 17:12) is rewarded by two miracles; she and her son are sustained through a time of drought, "she and her family had enough food for a long time", and when her son unexpectedly dies, he is raised from the dead.<sup>41</sup>

"Bring me your son," Elijah said. Then he took the boy from her arms and carried him upstairs to the room where he was staying. Elijah laid the boy on his bed and prayed, "Lord God, why did you do such a terrible thing to this woman? She's letting me stay here, and now you've let her son die." Elijah stretched himself out over the boy three times, while praying, "Lord God, bring this boy back to life!" The Lord answered Elijah's prayer, and the boy started breathing again. (1 Kings 17:19-22)

During the stay of the guest, the host was personally responsible for any injury that might befall his guest. The extreme to which hospitality was taken, as mentioned, is shown by the stories of Lot and the old man of Gibeah who were prepared to sacrifice the honour (and the life) of their daughters in order to protect their guests, who were to them complete strangers (Gen. 19:4-8; Judg. 19:23-24): "Friends, please don't do such a terrible thing! I have two daughters who have never been married. I'll bring them out, and you can do what you want with them. But don't harm these men. They are guests in my home." We therefore find that the element of protection is central to the meaning of the narra-

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas E. Reynolds, "Welcoming Without Reserve? A Case in Christian Hospitality," *Theology Today* 63 (2006): 199.

<sup>39</sup> Reynolds, "Welcoming Without Reserve?," 198.

<sup>40</sup> Koenig, "Hospitality," 300.

<sup>41</sup> Lee Roy, "Old Testament Foundations," 4.

tive. Lot's sense of duty is so strong that he offers to turn over his own daughters in place of the guests. This illustrates in an extreme way that "the guest is sacred", as also de Vaux claims.<sup>42</sup>

### Outline of Hospitality in Rabbinical Literature

"Among the ethical teachings of the Rabbis, the duties of hospitality occupy a very prominent position."<sup>43</sup> Rabbinical literature widened the scope of the virtue of hospitality. It was considered a great *mitzvah*, especially when it was extended to the poor (Shab. 127a–b) and when the hospitality was due to a scholar. It was said that one who shows hospitality to a student of the Law is regarded as if he had offered the daily sacrifice (Ber. 10b.63b; Qid. 76b; Gen. R. 58:12).

Abraham and Job were regarded by the Rabbis as the models of Jewish hospitality. Numerous legends cluster about these names in the haggadic literature, illustrative of their generosity and hospitality. The doors of their houses were open at each of the four corners, so that strangers coming from any side might find ready access (Gen. R. 48,7; Yalk., Job, 917; comp. Soṭah 10a). Of Job it is related that he had forty tables spread at all times for strangers and twelve tables for widows.

"Let thy house be open wide; let the poor be the members of thy household," is the precept expounded by one of the earliest Jewish teachers (Ab. 1:5). Rab Huna observed the custom of opening the door of his house when he was about to take his meal, and saying, "Any one who is hungry may come in and eat." (Ta'an. 20b)<sup>44</sup>

Hospitality is even more important than prayer. The Midrash (Lam. R. 4:13) relates that even at the height of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem, mothers would deprive their children of the last crust in order to grant hospitality to a mourner.

Two extremes were avoided through a clear definition of the duties of host and of guest: the host was forbidden to make his guest uncomfortable either by appearing miserable, or by watching his guest too

<sup>42</sup> Vogel, "Hospitality in Biblical Perspective," 168; De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> "Hospitality," *Jewish Encyclopedia 2002–2011*, accessed August 5, 2018, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7905-hospitality>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



attentively (Maim., Yad, Berakhot 7:6), or by neglecting to serve his guest himself (Kid. 32b). The guest was instructed to show gratitude (Ber. 58a), to recite a special blessing for his host (Ber. 46a; Maim., Yad, Berakhot 2:7). Several centuries earlier, Ben Sira (second century BC) had already defined the table manners which were to be practiced by the guest (Eccles. 31:21-26), and had condemned the parasite who took advantage of hospitality (29:23-28; 40:28-30).<sup>45</sup>

In the Middle Ages, hospitality became even a necessity among the Jews. The poor mendicants or students were distributed among the households of the town, and a system of “Pletten” (פֿלעטעלפּ; “meal tickets”), bills for which the poor traveller received meals and lodging at a household, was introduced. This system still lives in many Jewish communities. Most of the Jewish communities have their *haknasat orehim*, institutions where travellers may obtain lodging during their stay in town.<sup>46</sup>

“Hospitality has been a staple of Jewish life and tradition since the first Jewish home – the tent of Avraham and Sarah,” rabbi Wein Berel claims. It is mentioned as being one of the values that if fulfilled grants one reward in this world and the merit of the good deed remains a factor in the World-to-Come as well. “Throughout the ages the open door to strangers has been a facet of Jewish life. I remember the home of my grandparents in Chicago where the door was never locked so that in the event that a visitor would arrive when they were not home or were asleep and needed a place to rest, he could come right into the house,” the rabbi also describes his youthful memories.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion: Hospitality as an Opportunity for Intercultural Dialogue

The Old Testament practice of hospitality is, as we will see, relevant to our contemporary multi-cultural and multi-religion context. However, several “weaknesses” of the Old Testament practice should be noted first.

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<sup>45</sup> “Hospitality,” *Jewish Virtual Library*.

<sup>46</sup> “Hospitality,” *Jewish Encyclopaedia 2002–2011*.

<sup>47</sup> Rabbi Wein, “Hospitality,” *The Voice of Jewish History 2009–2018*, accessed September 1, 2018, <https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/hospitality-237.html>.

For example, the choice of guests was limited to travellers. Old Testament hospitality was extended only to travellers and only for short periods of time.<sup>48</sup> Further, normally, it was the men who decided which travellers should receive hospitality. Women were often either subservient (even in the case of Abraham) or, even worse, they were abused (stories of Lot and the old man of Gibeah). Vogels observes that: "Abraham gives orders to his servants and to Sarah, whom he treats like a servant, and they have to prepare the meal; she is not even present to the visitors, she is in the kitchen even though the promise certainly concerns her."<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, we have seen that both the Bible (Old and New Testament) and Jewish Rabbinical literature give strong emphasis to Abraham and (his) hospitality. In the assessment of the issue of hospitality the dominant Old Testament character is Abraham and his hospitality.

What can one deduce from this? Three and a half billion people, i.e. more than a half of the entire human family, traces its history or faith back to Abraham. All three Abrahamic religions, not just Jews and Christians, positively value Abraham as their father, ancestor, but every religion does this in a different manner: Christians understand him as a spiritual father, and father by faith, Judaism and Islam understand him as a physical ancestor. Although there are considerable differences in the perceptions of Abraham, at the same time all monotheisms respect Abraham. The character of Abraham thus offers the opportunity for dialogue, more precisely, a trialogue, a common junction where the space for conversation, respect and peaceful coexistence opens. This "common junction" is the value of hospitality, to which, however, a modern religious vortex presents new challenges.

In this paper, we showed that in a very heterogeneous biblical tradition, in biblical (*Old and New Testament*) and non-biblical (rabbinical) sources, there is a common core value, the value of welcoming and respecting the alien (refugees). With respect to the Quran, which refers to and summarizes several elements of the biblical tradition, including

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<sup>48</sup> Hobbs, "Hospitality in the First Testament," 28.

<sup>49</sup> Vogels, "Hospitality in Biblical Perspective," 164.

the value of hospitality (prim. Q 11,69-82), this value in its core shows a possibility and a method of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue in today's world.

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