

HOSPITALITY

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Because the ancient world could be a hostile place, there were customs in place to protect and preserve travelers. This included giving travelers food and water and often a place to stay the night where they could be protected from the dangers of being in a strange place. These hospitality customs find expression in several places in the Old Testament.

For example, the Old Testament pairs the stories of Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18 and 19 in order to illustrate the two men's commitment to hospitality. In fact, Genesis goes out of its way to highlight Abraham's open-handed generosity in chapter 18. As part of Abraham's offer of hospitality to the three travelers in Genesis 18:4–5, Abraham offered the men a "little water" and a "morsel of bread." Abraham ran and told Sarah to make cakes from three "measures" of finely ground flour. "Measure" here is the translation of an ancient measurement called a *seah*. Based on archaeological evidence, we know that Abraham's three seahs of flour is the equivalent of around ninety-three cups of flour—which would make many cakes. Similarly, Abraham killed a young calf and served it to these travelers with butter and milk. Rather than giving them just bread and water, Abraham threw the three strangers a huge feast.

In the following chapter, Lot is similarly presented as hospitable to strangers. He insisted on taking two of the same strangers that had visited Abraham into his house so that they could stay the night. Like his uncle Abraham, Lot threw the travelers a feast (Genesis 19:3). The men of Sodom serve as foil for Lot because they wished to violate the hospitality bond, from which Lot tried to protect his guests. Genesis presents Lot's salvation from the destruction of Sodom as a result of his generous hospitality to strangers.

Individuals such as Moses, the Israelite spies, and the prophets Elijah and Elisha were preserved and protected by the ancient hospitality customs. These customs helped to make the ancient world a little bit less dangerous.

It is possible to see reflection of these customs in our present-day religious experiences. Symbolically, God invites us into His home (the church building) and offers us bread and water (the sacrament), thus giving us “travelers” His protection and blessings.

Related verses

Genesis 18:3–8

Genesis 19:1–4

Exodus 2:15–20

Joshua 2:1–7

1 Samuel 25:4–9

1 Kings 17:9–16

2 Kings 4:8–10

Credits

Author: Avram R. Shannon

General Editor: Taylor Halverson

Associate Editor: Morgan Tanner

Senior Editor: Sarah Whitney Johnson

Assistant Editor: Verlanne Johnson

ScripturePlus Design: Jasmin Gimenez Rapple