

The Rewards of Hospitality

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Genesis

The story of three travelers who visited Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18 demonstrates what generous hospitality looked like in the ancient world, and what we can do to practice hospitality in our work today.

Seminomadic life in the country would often bring people from different families into contact with one another, and the character of Canaan as a natural land bridge between Asia and Africa made it a popular trade route. In the absence of a formal industry of hospitality, people living in cities and encampments had a social obligation to welcome strangers. This practice also served to protect those living around the settlements. An incoming stranger, who might represent a threat, could be transformed into an ally through the offer and acceptance of hospitality.

Abraham's reaction to the strangers highlights several customs that were common in the Ancient Near-East. Only the male head of household could offer the invitation of hospitality. The stranger had the right to refuse, but this could be considered an affront to the honor of the host and could be a cause for immediate hostilities. Once the invitation was accepted, the roles of the host and the guest were governed by further rules of custom. The guest could not ask for anything. The host would provide the best of what he had available. The guest was expected to reciprocate

immediately with news, predictions of good fortune, or expressions of gratitude for what he had been given. And the host would not ask personal questions of the guest.

These customs allowed hosts and guests to slowly build a relationship based on mutual disclosure and respect. Although these traditions might seem outdated today, the story of Abraham and Sarah's hospitality still offers insight into building relationships that we can apply to our work.

By extending and accepting hospitality, people who start out as strangers get to know each other better. This is true whether the stranger is a new coworker, a boss or subordinate, or a potential client.

Today the hospitality industry accounts for 9 percent of the world gross domestic product and employs 98 million people. While it may no longer be practical to host strangers at home, the model of hospitality still applies to the workplace. Sharing an unhurried meal or an extended period of time together, two strangers can slowly build a new relationship. Good working relationships, like the relationship between hosts and guests in the ancient world, are marked by respectful boundaries and mutual disclosure. The result, as in Abraham and Sarah's story, is blessing for all.