

# Entertaining Angels: Hospitality in Luke and Acts

BY ANDREW ARTERBURY

In Luke's writings the ancient practice of hospitality—the custom of welcoming travelers or strangers into one's home and establishing relationships with them—becomes the prism through which Jesus' disciples can view one another and others as valuable children of God.

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Today we think of hospitality as the custom of feeding family, friends, and neighbors in our homes or hosting these people for a night or two. The writers of the New Testament, however, were working with a significantly different definition of hospitality or *xenia*. The ancient custom of hospitality revolved around the practice of welcoming strangers or travelers into one's home while promising to provide them with provisions and protection.<sup>1</sup>

Hospitality in the first century could be a very risky venture, just as taking strangers into one's home is a dangerous decision in many corners of the world today. Nevertheless, in the books of Luke and Acts we see an appeal for Jesus' disciples to practice hospitality in their lives and ministries.

## ANCIENT HOSPITALITY

Strangers who were traveling in a new region did not always find a hospitable reception in antiquity. For starters, they were easy prey for thieves and robbers who trolled the roadways in sparsely populated areas. Furthermore, many townspeople saw mysterious strangers as threats and therefore sought to shun, abuse, or eliminate these outsiders before they could harm the community. Recall, for instance, how the men of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-11) and the men of Gibeah (Judges 19:14-26) wanted to take advantage of strangers and selfishly abuse them in violent ways. As a result, one of the

core features of ancient hospitality included the host's implicit vow to provide the stranger with protection.

In essence, the custom of hospitality in antiquity grew out of a desire to neutralize potential threats – both threats to strangers and threats to one's community. Not only were generous hosts protecting strangers from thieves along the road and from townspeople inclined toward mob violence, they were seeking to protect their household and community from the wrath of the stranger. In the event that a traveler had either military resources or "magical" powers, it was thought that a host's abundant generosity might neutralize the potential threat while cultivating the stranger's favor (see, for example, the story of Joshua's "spies" being hosted by Rahab in Joshua 2:1-21 and 6:22-25). As a result, the leading citizens of a community often bore the primary responsibility for hosting strangers.

Ancient hosts also were obligated to meet their guests' needs by supplying them with necessary provisions. Upon their guests' arrival, meritorious hosts fed strangers an initial meal and at times provided them with lodging without asking their guests questions about their identity or place of origin. In addition hosts would often provide them with water for cleaning their feet and with new clothes if they needed them. Then, after the guests had finished the meal, hosts finally were free to inquire about their guests' identity, home region, and travels.

If they both agreed, a host and guest might exchange valuable gifts that symbolized the formation of a long-term, reciprocal guest-friendship or alliance between the two of them and their families (see, for example, *Iliad* 6.215-231). In this way, both people took on the permanent responsibilities of a host and a guest. Each one vowed to provide protection and provisions for their counterpart whenever the other was traveling in one's region. Indeed, during the time periods when Abraham was alive and the *Odyssey* was first written, "guest-friends" generally showed more loyalty to their counterpart than to the people of their own region. Finally, the host would "send the guest off" with enough provisions for at least a day's journey and often would provide a guide to accompany the guest until he or she had traveled safely out of the region.

Why would anyone extend such hospitality to a stranger since it was both a dangerous and potentially expensive practice? In a Greco-Roman context, hosts were likely motivated by fear of an ominous stranger, by fear of Zeus, the god of hospitality, or by a desire to create politically advantageous alliances with powerful counterparts. In Hebraic and Christian contexts, however, the motive for hospitality more often grew out of the desire to please God by showing love toward a fellow worshiper. For example, Abraham and Lot are revered for showing kind hospitality to travelers (Genesis 18:1-16 and 19:1-23, respectively). In each case they graciously welcome complete strangers into their homes seemingly unaware that their guests are actually Yahweh or Yahweh's angels.<sup>2</sup> In the end, however, Yah-

weh rewards their attempts to show love toward their fellow human beings by blessing them. One or both of these stories apparently provides the background for the Christian instruction, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:1-2).

In Hebraic and Christian contexts, then, a follower of God showed love for God and others by extending hospitality to complete strangers. In addition, though it was not the primary motivation, some followers of God likely were motivated to extend hospitality to strangers by their desire to cultivate God's blessings upon their own lives and households.

### **HOSPITALITY IN LUKE-ACTS**

Early Christian authors taught that while it was advisable for Christians to minimize the risks and even the abuses inherent in this ancient custom, they should not neglect to extend hospitality to those in need.<sup>3</sup> For most early Christians, an absence of hospitality would mean an absence of love for God and neighbor. This perspective is especially vivid in Luke's writings. Let's explore Luke's emphasis on hospitality in three passages that are unique to his work: Luke 10:1-16, Luke 24:13-35, and Acts 9:43-10:48.

In *Luke 10:1-16* Luke describes Jesus' commissioning of seventy disciples who will travel in pairs to various towns to spread the news about his message and ministry. (While Mark 6:6b-13, Matthew 10:1-15, and Luke 9:1-6 narrate Jesus' commissioning of "the twelve," only Luke goes on to relate this appointment of the "seventy others.") Jesus instructs the seventy to depend on the hospitality of the townspeople they encounter. For instance, he prohibits them from carrying their own provisions. Instead, the blessing and peace of God will rest upon those hosts who extend hospitality to Jesus' servants (10:4-6). He forbids the disciples, after they enter the home of a gracious host, from moving about from house to house. Rather than seeking for more prestigious or luxurious accommodations, they are to accept willingly the provisions they have received (10:7).

Finally, Jesus commissions the seventy to minister to their host families and communities. Rather than merely receiving provisions and protection, the traveling missionaries are to meet the needs they encounter along the way and to proclaim the Kingdom of God. "Whoever listens to you listens to me," Jesus concludes, "and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me" (10:16). The townspeople's response to these strangers, Jesus' disciples, will function as their response to Jesus himself.

The ethical implications of these instructions are enormous for Christian guests in a context of hospitality. First, Jesus requires his disciples to participate in the custom of hospitality (10:4). He wants them to be dependent upon their hosts, who in this case seem to be unaware of Jesus' ministry. Their willingness to stay in the homes of people who are not yet disciples

of Jesus opens a door for God's blessing and work in their lives and communities. Clearly Jesus does not want his disciples to operate from a position of superiority. Rather he teaches them to work from a position of equality if not dependency as they seek to carry out his ministry and message.

Furthermore, Jesus demands that his disciples be grateful to their hosts and content with what they have been provided. They must not seek out wealthier or more prestigious hosts within the same community. This would be very countercultural for a first century Greco-Roman audience and likely even for a Jewish audience. In essence, Jesus forbids his disciples from evaluating their hosts based on the status they hold in society. To carry out their mission properly, Jesus' disciples must form deep and loyal bonds with those whom they encounter along the way. Christian guests cannot constantly be looking for better offers and more advantageous hosts.

Finally, Jesus teaches his disciples that his ministry and message are far more important than the identity of the messenger (10:16). As we have seen, it was common in antiquity to refrain from asking about a guest's identity until after the guest had been welcomed and fed. Jesus builds on this practice when he informs the disciples that their potential hosts' reaction to them is not about their own identity or status. It is not even about how articulate or charismatic they are. Rather, Jesus' identity and message will provide the focal points in the hospitality relationships that his disciples forge.

In *Luke 24:13-35* we read about a pair of disciples walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus after Jesus' crucifixion. These two, Cleopas and another, had heard reports about Jesus' resurrection, but they were slow to believe (24:18-25). A "stranger" joins them on their journey (24:18).

Unbeknownst to them, the stranger is none other than the resurrected Jesus in an unrecognizable form (24:15-16). In this respect Jesus' actions resemble the visit from Yahweh in Genesis 18 or his angels in Genesis 19. As the disciples arrive at their home in Emmaus, the stranger continues to travel onward. However, the disciples insist that the stranger

accept their hospitality, especially because the day is drawing to a close (24:28-29). Once inside, the hosts prepare a meal for the traveler. When the stranger breaks the bread, the disciples' "eyes [are] opened" and they recognize Jesus. At that point he vanishes from their sight (24:31). As a result, the two disciples believe fully in the resurrected Lord and return to Jerusalem to spread the good news to "the eleven and their companions" (24:33-35).

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This story presents Luke's readers with implicit ethical directives for Christian hosts. The burning question in this passage is: Why does Jesus take on the form of a stranger? Surely Jesus' dramatic appearance and his interpretation of the Scriptures would have been just as effective and memorable had he appeared in a recognizable form from the beginning. (In several other post-resurrection appearances recorded in the Gospels and Acts, the risen Jesus is recognizable from the outset.) Moreover, if Jesus is to take on an unrecognizable form, why does he not choose a more prestigious one – perhaps appearing as a priest or government official?

Initially, Cleopas and the other disciple think the stranger is foolish, uninformed, and slow to understand. Yet, to discover the truth about the resurrected Jesus, they are forced to listen to and learn from the unassuming stranger. It is only as these two disciples journey with the stranger, listen to him, extend hospitality to him, and break bread with him that they are able to experience the risen Lord and receive his message for them and for the other disciples.

These two disciples in Emmaus become prime examples of Christian hosts. Rather than shunning strangers, Jesus' disciples would do well to journey alongside them. Rather than exclusively *speaking* to those they encounter along life's journeys, Jesus' disciples would do well to *listen* first. Rather than deeming others to be foolish, ignorant, and of no benefit, Jesus' disciples would do well to assume that God might have revealed himself to strangers. Rather than taking things at face value, Jesus' disciples should realize that the Spirit is at work in the world around them. Almost certainly Luke is inviting his readers to conclude that if they extend hospitality to strangers like these two disciples did on the road to Emmaus, they too might "entertain angels without knowing it" and experience the resurrected Jesus in the process.

In *Acts 9:43-10:48* Luke weaves together three hospitality encounters: Peter accepts the hospitality of Simon the tanner in Joppa (9:43 and 10:6), Peter extends hospitality to Cornelius's messengers despite the fact that Peter is already a guest in someone else's home – Simon the tanner's (10:17-23), and Peter accepts hospitality from Cornelius, a Roman centurion living in Caesarea (10:24-48). In describing this crucial juncture in the spread of early Christianity, Luke draws attention to the custom of hospitality. Here I will limit my discussion to the third hospitality encounter, which is easily the most important one in the book of Acts.<sup>4</sup>

The narrative tension in Acts 10-11 revolves around the identity of Cornelius: he is a Roman soldier who fears God, but this Gentile has not chosen to become a practicing Jew (10:1-2, 11:3). After an angel of God speaks to Cornelius in a vision about Peter (10:3-6), Cornelius sends for Peter and invites him to lodge in his house. Surprisingly, Peter accepts the invitation to receive hospitality in Cornelius's house. It is surprising precisely because Jewish travelers tended to seek hospitality exclusively among their fellow

Jews (10:28; 11:2-3; cf. Judges 19:12). Yet Peter, after pondering the vision that God gives him (10:9-16), comes to realize that he should not consider any person “profane or unclean” (10:28; cf. 11:12). As a result, he accepts hospitality from Cornelius and enters his home. Once inside, Peter explains the good news of Jesus Christ to him (10:34-43) and the gift of the Holy Spirit falls upon Cornelius and the other Gentiles gathered in his home (10:44-46). Subsequently, Cornelius and the other Gentiles are baptized.

Hospitality becomes the vehicle through which the evangelization and incorporation of the Gentiles into the life of the Christian community are first realized.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the custom of hospitality functions as the prism through which Jewish Christians are able to see Gentile converts in a new way – no longer as “profane or unclean,” but rather as covenant partners in the community of Christians. Hence, Luke creates a direct link between the custom of hospitality, which bridges the gap between people of different regions and cultures in antiquity, and the integration of the Gentiles into the life of the Church.

Here, too, Luke’s earliest readers would have discovered a sure foundation on which to establish their understanding of Christian hospitality. Jesus’ disciples must not allow cultural differences (e.g., food laws) to blind them to the work of God. Peter initially resists the vision of the clean and unclean animals in 10:9-16. Similarly, as long as Jesus’ disciples are imprisoned by the categories of clean and unclean people, they will never be able to enter into equitable hospitality relationships that allow for the spread of the gospel. God’s first step in reaching out to the Gentiles consists of overturning the prejudices of God’s messengers.

The cross-cultural practice of hospitality provides an ideal vehicle for sharing the gospel with unbelievers and unifying the Christian Church despite its disparate mem-

bership. By entering into an alliance or covenant with those from cultures that are foreign to them, Jesus’ disciples are forced both to give and to receive benefits from those God has called them to love. Acts 9:43-10:48 demonstrates how they are to function as host

and guest in a reciprocal hospitality relationship. Peter moves seamlessly from guest to host and back to guest again while God provides the “gift” that seals the permanent relationship among those who worship him.

Ultimately, this passage teaches that Jesus’ disciples in all generations must allow God to move them past their prejudices. Through the ministry of Christian hospitality God can forge permanent, interdependent bonds

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among his followers and with those who have previously been seen as “strangers.”

## CONCLUSION

Luke repeatedly focuses on the ancient practice of hospitality, the custom of welcoming travelers or strangers into one’s home while committing to provide them with protection and provisions. This custom functions as an effective bridge for evangelization and the unification of the early Church. Yet this custom is not a one-sided ministry for Jesus’ disciples: they are called to be both exemplary hosts and exemplary guests as they carry out the ministry of Jesus in word and deed. Hospitality establishes a truly interdependent and reciprocal relationship that requires disciples, whether they are hosts or guests, to view the stranger as a valuable child of God.

These Lukan hospitality texts remain relevant for Christians today. Even more than in the ancient world, we encounter travelers and strangers from vastly different regions and cultures. Some are traveling by choice (e.g., students and immigrants), while others travel by necessity (e.g., evacuees from natural disasters and refugees from war-torn regions). In Luke’s writings, we hear a call to extend hospitality to these strangers in creative ways.

With the early Christians we should take wise steps to guard against those who might abuse generous hosts (*Didache* 11-12), but we may not neglect the Christian ministry of hospitality. As Jesus’ disciples, we should proactively seek to extend protection and provisions to strangers. As we do this, we may encounter God’s presence in the midst of our hospitality. We may well “entertain angels without knowing it.”

## NOTES

1 Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting*, New Testament Monographs, 8 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 131-132. For a more complete description of hospitality in antiquity, see pages 15-132.

2 Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), I:462. Fretheim suggests, “From the narrator’s point of view, Yahweh appears to Abraham at his home (v. 1). From Abraham’s point of view, however, three men stand near him (v. 2).”

3 See, for example, the early second century instruction in *Didache* 11.4-6 and 12.1-2.

4 I examine these encounters in more detail in *Entertaining Angels*, 135-181.

5 John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 86-87, 103.



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