

# An Invitation to a New Era of Biblical Theology: Towards an Old Testament Theology of Hospitality<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the past thirty years, the field of Old Testament theology has largely resisted the idea of a unifying centre, and has instead embraced a plurality of methods to reflect an emphasis on the diversity of perspectives within the Old Testament itself as well as its readership. While recognising the critique levelled against biblical theology for its disservice to the diversity of the canon, it is argued that fresh articulations of Scripture's coherence are pivotal for the life of faith. To this end the value of hospitality is posited as an organising principle for a new way forward, and preliminarily supported by an examination of Genesis 18–19 as a foundational text.

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## 1. Introduction

In the past thirty years, the field of Old Testament theology has largely resisted the idea of a unifying centre and has instead embraced a plurality of methods to reflect an emphasis on the diversity of perspectives within the Old Testament itself as well as its readership. While recognising the critique levelled against biblical theology for its disservice to the diversity of the canon (chiefly by James Barr),<sup>2</sup> it will be argued that fresh articulations of Scripture's coherence

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2. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress,

are pivotal for the life of faith. Further, given the pattern of the history of biblical theology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we should expect a new era to accompany generational shifts. Nearly thirty years on from the publication of Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* (1997), a new approach is warranted, one that focuses not on a unifying theme/metaphor or ideological centre but on a comprehensive and ethically oriented value; to this end, the value of hospitality will be posited as an organising principle for a new way forward.<sup>3</sup> While the prototype for biblical hospitality dawns with creation itself, the exemplar text and counter-text of biblical hospitality, in Genesis 18 and 19, will be examined as foundational texts towards an Old Testament theology of hospitality.

## 2. A Recent History of Old Testament/Biblical Theology<sup>4</sup>

In 1994, Leo Perdue labelled the new era of biblical theology the 'Pluralistic Era',<sup>5</sup> identifying the character of Old Testament theology from the 1990s onward as a pluralistic reconstruction. He admits

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1999). See further John Barton, 'James Barr and the Future of Biblical Theology', *Int* 70:3 (2016): 264–274, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964316640505>.

3. Interestingly, Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, from a systematic-theological perspective, have recently traced a similar theme, but with Exodus and John as base texts (*The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022)). See further Volf's earlier work on this theme with Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019). In my preliminary research, however, hospitality texts most frequently occur in the book of Genesis and the gospel of Luke.

4. For a more comprehensive history of scholarship of OT theology up to nearly the end of the twentieth century, see Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Old Testament Twentieth-Century Theology, 1930–1990*, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992); Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). For 1990 forward, see Brittany Kim and Charlie Trimm, *Understanding Old Testament Theology: Mapping the Terrain of Recent Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020) as well as their 'Annotated Bibliography for Understanding Old Testament Theology', <https://zondervanacademic-cdn.sfo2.digitaloceanspaces.com/production/general/OT-Theology-Annotated-Bibliography.pdf>. For a contemporary snapshot, see Tim Meadowcroft, 'Method and Old Testament Theology: Barr, Brueggemann and Goldingay Considered', *TynBul* 57:1 (2006): 32–56, <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.29202>.

5. *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), xii. I understand the previous two eras as the Generative Era (1930s–1960s), following Walter Brueggemann (*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony*,

[t]his richness in diversity of approaches has added much to our comprehension of the theology of the Old Testament, while at the same time, it has increased the complexity of understanding both the text's theology or theologies and those of the interpreters and the social and ideological frameworks they bring to the task.<sup>6</sup>

Positive implications of the pluralistic era should rightly be acknowledged – for example increased attention to minority- and majority-world voices.<sup>7</sup> However, while this has yielded significant insights, the proliferation has tended toward an overwhelming diffusion of readings and has yet to reconstruct something largely agreed upon. Thus, canonical and literary approaches trend concurrently with social scientific approaches, while staunchly historical–critical methods persist. Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* is typically viewed as the prototype of this era for its postmodern approach, though upholding a single Old Testament theology as characteristic of this era is not only simplistic, as it is of course for any era previous, but antithetical to its pluralistic nature. Thus, Kim and Trimm suggest three categories for recent approaches to Old Testament theology: Hi(story), Theme, and Context, which are then further divided into classifications.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, what Perdue discerned by 1994, Bellinger confirms in 2022: pluralism has led to a proliferation of approaches as vast as there are different types of readerly contexts.<sup>9</sup>

Either the field will continue to atomise or some confluence will be regained, presumably by accounting for the appeals of the advocates from each of Kim and Trimm's categories and drawing these imaginatively and convincingly together. These various approaches attempt to carry forward the contribution of each era, be it grasping cohesion through *die Mitte*, identifying theological strands, tracing salvation history, or emphasis on the canonical

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*Dispute, and Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 41), and the Crisis Era (1960s–1990s), adopted from Childs' title (*Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970)). The first of these, it should be acknowledged, is a false beginning, which amounts to a rebirth of Old Testament theology following its eclipse by *Religionsgeschichte* (Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 22).

6. Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), xv.

7. E.g. Jione Havea and Peter H. W. Lau, eds, *Reading Ecclesiastes from Asia and Pasifika*, IVBS 10 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2020).

8. Kim and Trimm, *Understanding Old Testament Theology*, 8–9.

9. William H. Bellinger Jr, *Introducing Old Testament Theology: Creation, Covenant, and Prophecy in the Divine–Human Relationship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

context.<sup>10</sup> However, ‘Perdue’s image of the “shattered spectrum” rules the day. We now need to find new paths in this discipline.’<sup>11</sup>

What might this unprecedented approach look like? If the pattern plays out, we are on the precipice of change, as major shifts have occurred approximately every thirty years. This is because, regardless of critical rapport and persistent ‘problems’, as Childs and others have contended, a fresh articulation of Old Testament theology is needed for each generation.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. A Proposal for the Way Forward: Towards an Old Testament Theology of Hospitality

To this end, I propose an ethical organising principle be utilised that aims at readerly comprehension of the canonical material tied to praxis rather than forced textual cohesion or disparate description. The organising principle grows out of a biblical value – hospitality – which services many theological metaphors and biblical practices.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, I will not attempt to trace a unifying theme all the way through the biblical text; rather, the recurrent value of hospitality will be examined, which lends itself to host–guest as well as household metaphors native to the biblical world and texts. As Tim Meadowcroft asserts, ‘it is impossible to do Old Testament theology without some central thematic guidance’, what I would prefer to call an organising principle.<sup>14</sup> This is due to the need to differentiate from past attempts to trace a theme all the way through the biblical text. No longer should we be trying to discern the theme from within the text; rather, a biblical theology can be constructed around an organising principle that is not foreign to the text but also speaks into its own day.

This is not dissimilar to the way Brent Strawn conceives of the Old Testament as a ‘grammar’ for constructing contemporary life,<sup>15</sup> in the sense that an Old Testament theology attempts to both discern the way a language works and communicate it to contemporary non-native speakers. Thus, the

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10. Bellinger, *Introducing Old Testament Theology*, 41, following Brueggemann’s claim that each iteration has been important to the task.

11. Bellinger, *Introducing Old Testament Theology*, 41.

12. E.g. William H. Bellinger Jr, ‘A Shape for Old Testament Theology: A Lost Cause?’, *PRSt* 32 (2007): 287–295 (esp. 292).

13. Perdue praises the potential of Brueggemann’s metaphorical approach to deal with various OT perspectives but takes issue with aspects of his articulation (Bellinger, *Introducing Old Testament Theology*, 42).

14. Meadowcroft, ‘Method and Old Testament Theology’, 52.

15. Brent A. Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 8.

author of an Old Testament theology makes a best attempt at understanding how the biblical material works together to communicate a theology before guiding others in how they might consciously form a worldview consonant with it and act ethically in accordance with it. Additionally, hospitality also has the advantage of touch points with various streams and traditions within the canon. Furthermore, the proposed organising principle of hospitality is not meant to flatten previously suggested biblical themes, but rather is flexible enough to envelop texts of creation, covenant, communion, and so on.<sup>16</sup> Finally, as will be demonstrated, ‘Biblical theology aims to see the big picture but to get there from an account of the details of exegesis of the biblical text.’<sup>17</sup> Before attempting to construct an Old Testament theology around hospitality, the remainder of this article seeks to discern a definition and understanding of this value from within the biblical text itself.

## 4. Defining Hospitality

### 4.1 Historical Context

Garwood Anderson, in his entry on ‘hospitality’ in *The Lexham Theological Wordbook*, begins with an important note on anachronism, saying ‘biblical notions of hospitality overlap only partly with the idea of hospitality in modern Western cultures, where it is frequently viewed as the recreational sharing of fellowship, lodging, and provisions among friends and relatives’; conversely, ‘[i]n the Bible (as in the ancient world in general), hospitality involves receiving strangers – especially travelers, who then become guests or are treated as friends – rather than merely reinforcing pre-existing friendships

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16. By using hospitality to organise an OT theology, I anticipate some similarities with OT and biblical theologies focused on communion and kingdom (e.g. Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, 2nd ed. (Newton, MA: Charles T. Branford, 1970), trans. of *Hoofdlijnen der theologie van het Oude Testament* (Wageningen: Veenman & Zonen, 1949); Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. Leo G. Perdue, 2 vols, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995, 1996); Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Vaughan Roberts, *God’s Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002); Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006)). It will also inevitably overlap with Craig Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

17. Mark W. Elliott, introduction to *Biblical Theology: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Carey Walsh and Mark W. Elliott (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), x.

or bonds of affection.<sup>18</sup> The pertinent Old Testament language of ‘stranger’ – גֵּר (*ger*) – needs further clarification. It does not mean simply ‘a person or thing that is unknown or with whom one is unacquainted’, but specifically a ‘sojourner, resident alien’ (see further below).<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, in the ancient Near East, hospitality was an essential social obligation due to the fact that

Not only were public accommodations generally lacking, but the geographical and climatic conditions of many areas made it practically impossible for visitors to try to subsist for any length of time without some form of protection and help – at the very least provision of water and food – from the local population. Wild animals and marauders combined with an often hostile physical environment to make survival outside the confines of normal society difficult, to say the least ... [Thus g]uests are scarcely mentioned in the Bible without a concomitant rehearsal and delineation of the nature and quality of hospitality they receive. One’s treatment of a wayfarer subtly enhances or detracts from one’s or one’s fellow-citizen’s honor, even when such an evaluation is not included.<sup>20</sup>

Examining these practices in more detail is then necessary, since there exists no single Hebrew equivalent term for hospitality.

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18. Garwood P. Anderson, ‘Hospitality’ in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. D. Mangum et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014), Logos edition.

19. Lee Roy Martin, ‘Old Testament Foundations for Christian Hospitality’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35:1 (2014): 1–9 (2), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i1.752>, with reference to *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, ed. David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 70. The term גֵּר (*zar*) would be used for ‘stranger’ in the sense of unknown or unacquainted – the participial form from זָרַח (‘to be a stranger’) either to a family (i.e. of another household), person, land, or law (meaning against one’s expectation for the laws of nature) (see BDB זָרַח Qal, Pt., p. 266). Cf. נֹכְרִי (*nokri*), ‘foreigner’, from the second definition for נֹכַר, which directly opposes its first definition as the one recognised, or with which one is acquainted (see BDB נֹכַר II substantive adj., p. 648).

20. Weston Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah: History and Motif in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1997), 54–55. See further for broader anthropological work on hospitality in Mediterranean societies as it applies to the Hebrew Bible: Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, ‘Invitation to Murder: Hospitality and violence in the Hebrew Bible’, *ST* 73:1 (2019): 89–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2019.1596979>, who helpfully draws on the works of Julian Pitt-Rivers, the most relevant of which is ‘The Law of Hospitality’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2:1 (2012): 501–517, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau2.1.022>.

## 4.2 Textual Context

What becomes clear from surveying multiple Old Testament texts regarding host and guest is that hosting entails two key components: provision and protection.<sup>21</sup> Douglas Wilson reiterates these aspects in the details of the following chart.<sup>22</sup> He explains that

In the Old Testament, historical narratives provide a glimpse into hospitality practices, by way of both positive and negative examples (Gen 14:18-24; 18; 19; 23:1-20; 24:10-49; 43:32; Josh 2:1-21; 6:22-25; Judg 4:19; 1 Sam 25:2-38; Neh 5:14-17). These sometimes illustrate a pattern of hospitality extended both to known guests and strangers that featured:

- a greeting with bow or kiss (Gen 18:2; 19:1)
- a welcome for the guest to come in (Gen 24:31)
- an invitation to rest (Gen 18:4; Judg 4:19)
- an opportunity to wash (Gen 18:4; 19:2; 24:32)<sup>23</sup>
- a provision of food and drink (Judg 4:19; 19:5)<sup>24</sup>
- an invitation to converse (Gen 24:33)
- a provision of security (Gen 19:8)

To this list, Wilson adds a provision of a place to lodge (Gen 19:2; 24:23; Judg 19:4-15), and provision for the guest's journey should also be added (see, for example, Gen 42:25; 44:1).<sup>25</sup> Thus, it often involves a 'willingness to be generous to others (the other), and to welcome them into one's own space'.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, this necessitated an 'alliance between the guest and the host'<sup>27</sup> in that '[t]he host protects the guest from the numerous perils to which he

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21. Andrew E. Arterbury's definition of hospitality for the broader ancient Mediterranean world identifies these two elements (*Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting*, New Testament Monographs 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 132).

22. Douglas K. Wilson, 'Hospitality', *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), Logos edition.

23. The following examples could also be added: Gen 43:24; Judg 19:21; 1 Sam 25:41; 2 Sam 11:8.

24. This provision is for both guest(s) and their animals. For Judg 19, see esp. vv. 4-6, 21. See also Gen 18:4-5; 19:3; 24:32; Exod 2:20. Anderson, 'Hospitality'.

25. Joseph's framing of his brother with a silver cup is made possible due to the expected practice of provision for a journey.

26. Yitzhak (Itzik) Peleg, 'Was Lot a Good Host? Was Lot Saved from Sodom as a Reward for His Hospitality?' in *Universalism and Particularism at Sodom and Gomorrah: Essays in Memory of Ron Pirson*, ed. Diana Lipton, *Ancient Israel and Its Literature* 11 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 129-156 (131), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt32bz0d.16>.

27. Friday S. Kassa, 'A Home for All: The Story of the Inversion of Hospitality in Genesis 19', *In die Skriflig* 53:1, a2493 (2019): 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i1.2493>.

or she is exposed in his precarious status and guarantees his livelihood for a limited span of time; the guest accepts hospitality without exploiting the host.<sup>28</sup> Through the practices of hospitality, then, a stranger or ‘the other’ is turned into a ‘guest’, or even a ‘friend’.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, and of importance, is the sociological impact of showing hospitality, which ‘enhances the host’s publicly recognized honor’.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the nature and practices of this Old Testament value can be discerned, even though it has no single term for it.

### 4.3 Terminology

It follows that collocated terms must be examined as well. Based on the narrative scenes of hospitality and the instructions for practice, the centrality of the term *גֵר* (*ger*) becomes apparent, as the type of person most often seen to be hosted. While *גֵר* can be translated as ‘stranger’ in contexts where a ‘sojourner’ is newly arrived to a region, it is also translated as ‘resident alien’, because even if a *גֵר* settles in the new territory, the term is still frequently applied.<sup>31</sup>

Anderson’s discussion of New Testament vocabulary of hospitality is clarifying here. Of the four main lexical groupings of New Testament vocabulary pertaining to hospitality, the first is the most pertinent for its connection with *גֵר* in the Old Testament. Derived from the Greek root *ξεν-*, it includes *ξένος* (*xenos*), meaning ‘stranger’, ‘foreigner’, ‘outsider’, or, alternatively, ‘host’.<sup>32</sup> The most direct translation of ‘hospitality’ from the Greek comes from this group, *φιλοξενία* (*philoxenia*), more literally rendered as ‘love of outsider’.<sup>33</sup> The fourth group is also relevant, made up of the actions of hospitality – ‘eating, providing lodging, foot-washing, serving, equipping for further travels’, etc. – since it shares significant overlap with the Old Testament conception, as demonstrated

28. Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, ‘Hospitality, I. History of Religion’, *RPP* 6: 260–261 (esp. 260).

29. Joshua W. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 2.

30. T. R. Hobbs, ‘Hospitality in the First Testament and the “Teleological Fallacy”’, *JSOT* 95:1 (2001): 3–30 (28), <https://doi.org/10.1177/030908920102600101>.

31. See Hobbs, ‘Hospitality in the First Testament’, 20.

32. Anderson, ‘Hospitality’.

33. This first group also includes *φιλόξενος* (*philoxenos*, “hospitable”); *ξενίζω* (*xenizō*, “to entertain”); and *ξενοδοχέω* (*xenodocheō*, “to practice hospitality”). Second, there is the language of welcome and reception, derived from *δέχομαι* (*dechomai*, “to receive”) and *λαμβάνω* (*lambanō*, “to receive”). These words often imply a more holistic tending to strangers and guests. Third, since ancient hospitality customs also involved aiding and equipping travelers, the complete fulfillment of hospitality customs also involved sending off (*προπέμπω*, *propempō*) the traveler’ (Anderson, ‘Hospitality’).



by Wilson's list of practices above.<sup>34</sup> Due to this confluence of cultural values and practices, most Bible dictionaries offer a single definition of hospitality for both Testaments.

#### 4.4 Working Definition

Wilson defines biblical hospitality as '[t]he generous and gracious treatment of guests'<sup>35</sup> whereas Anderson says it is 'the welcome and care of guests, especially those who are travelers or strangers to the family or community'.<sup>36</sup> Martin follows Vogels' 'basic definition that hospitality means to change the Other, "the unknown friend, into a guest"'.<sup>37</sup> As it has already been determined that the practices of hospitality essentially oblige the offer of provision and protection, both of which entail cost, I suggest the best definition is simply 'the costly welcome of an other'.

The point made earlier about the alliance or exchange involved in hospitality between guest and host is helpful to recall here, since my definition leaves room for the blurring or reversal of roles. As far as it is possible, the one being provided for will be referred to as 'guest', while the one providing will be called 'host'. With this definition, however, it becomes clear that the distinction between host and guest is at times blurred, since costly welcome and/or provision can be extended by either, which we will see sometimes happens throughout the course of biblical narratives of hospitality.

#### 4.5 Old Testament Bases

With this working definition it is fitting to explore the Old Testament bases for it, which I have organised into three key aspects, namely foundational text, foundational experience, and theological foundation. Abraham hosting the three divine visitors, in Genesis 18:1-8, is widely agreed upon as the foundational Old Testament text for hospitality, by both ancient and modern interpreters.<sup>38</sup> It is also well attested that the following chapter, in which Lot hosts two of the divine messengers in Sodom, provides a parallel or counterexample.<sup>39</sup>

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34. Anderson, 'Hospitality', who also mentions their metonymic function, at times, for hospitality in the NT.

35. Wilson, 'Hospitality'.

36. Anderson, 'Hospitality'.

37. Martin, 'Old Testament Foundations', 5, citing W. Vogels, 'Hospitality in Biblical Perspective', *Liturgical Ministry* 11 (2002): 172.

38. See citations given at the beginning of §5 below and Jipp (*Saved by Faith*, 169), who refers to Abraham as 'a paragon of hospitality'.

39. See citations given at the beginning of §5.3 below.

Therefore, these two chapters will be examined in detail, following a brief introduction to the foundational experience and theological foundation.

The story of the Exodus of the Hebrew people out of Egypt recurs throughout the Old Testament (e.g. Jer 2:6; Ps 81:11 (Eng. v. 10)), demonstrating the depth of its significance. As it pertains to hospitality, it is clear that the instructions concerning Israel's treatment of strangers are cast as being founded upon their own experience as strangers. As Wilson explains,

The Mosaic law records significant guidance in the treatment of neighbors and strangers living among the tribes of Israel. The Israelites were commanded to treat foreigners well because of their own background as foreigners in Egypt (Exod 22:21; Lev 19:33-34). They were to welcome their poor fellow Israelites into their homes (Lev 23:35). They were to celebrate festivals along with aliens who were living among them (Deut 16:11,14). Lack of hospitality in other nations was condemned (Num 20:14-21; Deut 23:3-4). Mosaic plans for cities of refuge (Num 35; Deut 4:41-43; 19:1-10) add to the evidence that hospitality included the provision of sanctuary throughout Old Testament history.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the texts cited above, Deuteronomy 10:17-19 draws together clearly the theological foundation undergirding the foundational experience:

<sup>17</sup>For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, <sup>18</sup>who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers [גֵּר], providing them [lit. 'to him'] food and clothing. <sup>19</sup>You shall also love the stranger [הַגֵּר], for you were strangers [גֵּרִים] in the land of Egypt.<sup>41</sup>

Thus we hear that God is committed to 'strangers', providing clothing and food for them, and protecting them by executing justice. Israel is instructed to emulate this, remembering their experience as strangers in Egypt, which implicitly reasons that God hosted them in Egypt, providing for them during times of 'famine, slavery, and exploitation' as well as providing deliverance from it.<sup>42</sup>

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40. Wilson, 'Hospitality'.

41. Cf. Lev 19:34. Scripture quotations are from Michael D. Coogan (ed.), *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), New Revised Standard Version Bible with the Apocrypha, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, with additions in square brackets.

42. Manfred Oeming, "'Clear as God's Words?': Dealing with Ambiguities in the Bible", *Crosscurrents* (2017): 696-704 (698), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cro.2017.a783489>.

Beyond this significant event, there is a wide range of other Old Testament texts that speak to the theological foundation of God as host. Katharine Dell's survey of such is particularly insightful for its inclusion of multiple genres from all three sections of the tripartite Hebrew canon. She writes

Just as God provided for them manna in the wilderness (Exod. 16) and offered them tenancy of the promised land (Lev. 25:23), so should they provide for those in need. God is the guarantor of Israel and we find imagery of partaking of a sacrificial feast with God on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:9-11). God was Israel's host, the one who will provide nurture and refuge to his people in troubled times. So the author of Psalm 23 looks forward to a time when God will provide permanent hospitality in contrast to human hospitality which is always temporary. Likewise Psalm 104 portrays God as feeding and sustaining the entire creation on a daily basis. We find in the prophets also sentiments of hope of God as a bountiful host at the end of time by entertaining Israel at an endless feast (Amos 9:13-15; Joel 3:18; Isaiah 25:6-8).<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, God is said to characterise himself not only as the host and creator of a 'good' habitat for all of humanity (Gen 1-2), but for all of creation, as the provider for even the wasteland and most wild of animals (Job 38-39). Of course, the tension that God is at times described as inhospitable (especially in lament texts) will have to be addressed. In addition to connections with a breadth of Old Testament material, this survey shows in a cursory way how hospitality is entangled with various streams or traditions of the Old Testament, as it touches on theologies of creation, covenant, and even an eschatological undercurrent.

Moreover, it becomes clearer how using a biblical value to organise the vast and differentiated material lends further flexibility to the endeavour than merely using a biblical metaphor. Here I mean to recall Brueggemann's organising metaphor of the courtroom, which helpfully allows for countertestimony alongside core testimony. In like manner, an Old Testament theology of hospitality is able to address a fuller range of texts by considering its counterpart, texts of inhospitality, as well as their interaction. Additionally, the domain of hospitality also has more natural touch points with various texts, since very few books lack the elements of household, foreigner, table, rest, and sojourning. This biblical metaphor for household encompasses both the familial aspects of relationship to God and God's people (whether Father-son/

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43. Pre-published version of Katharine Dell, 'Hospitality, IV. Old Testament', *RPP* 6: 261-262 (262).

children or marriage metaphors), as well as aspects of host–guest relationship with God’s people and the nations.

Indeed, the household not only grounded Old Testament theology in Israel’s social reality but also became the primary lens through which to view the character and activity of God, the identity and self-understanding of Israel in its relationship to God, the value and meaning of the land as the *naḥālāh* [inheritance] God gives to Israel, and Israel’s relationship to the nations.<sup>44</sup>

Before expanding any further on the outworking of this biblical theme, I want to examine it in greater detail in Genesis 18–19, as several have done before, because this is the foundational Old Testament text for understanding the conception for hospitality.

### 5. Examining (In)Hospitality in Genesis 18–19

Genesis 18 and 19 will be examined to illustrate their significance, as these chapters intentionally juxtapose paradigmatic examples of hospitality and inhospitality and God’s response to each.

Genesis 18:1–8 has been cited ‘as the exemplar of biblical hospitality ... repeatedly in Jewish and Christian literature, including Jubilees, Philo, Josephus, 1 Clement, Testament of Abraham, Apocalypse of Paul, Origen, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Genesis Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud’, and probably also in Hebrews 13:2.<sup>45</sup> Its ancient parallels, such as the visit of the three gods in the Odyssey, further bolster the centrality and primacy of hospitality.<sup>46</sup> It is also the case that Genesis 19:1–28 is regarded frequently in modern scholarship as a direct parallel or counter text to Genesis 18:1–8. The justification for reading these chapters together has been argued on an

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44. Leo G. Perdue, ‘The Household, Old Testament Theology, and Contemporary Hermeneutics’, in *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Perdue et al., Family, Religion, and Culture (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 223–257 (225–226).

45. Martin (‘Old Testament Foundations’, 1–2 n. 2) notes ‘The text in Hebrews does not specifically mention Abraham. It is possible, therefore, that the author alludes instead to Tobit 7–10, where a similar scenario to Genesis 18 plays out’, citing also Andrew E. Arterbury, ‘Abraham’s Hospitality among Jewish and Early Christian Writers: A Tradition History of Genesis 18:1–16 and its Relevance for the Study of the New Testament’, *PRSt* 30 (2003): 359–376.

46. See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 205. See further examples in Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis: übersetzt und erklärt*, 5th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922), 193–194.

historical-critical basis, with Genesis 18:1-19:28 credited to the Yahwist by many, supported by the following elements:

The episodes share some of the same characters – Yahweh, the divine men, and Abraham – and they narrate events in a tight temporal sequence: mid-day in Mamre, evening and the next morning in Sodom (18.1; 19.1, 15, 23, 27). Furthermore, they both begin with pictures of hospitality for divine visitors (18.1-8 and 19.1-9), and both end with downward gazes upon Sodom, before and after its destruction (18.16a and 19.28).<sup>47</sup>

More could even be added to this list, as John Van Seters argues for no less than seventeen shared elements, to which Hamilton adds yet another.<sup>48</sup> John Goldingay points to the textual justification for reading 18:1-19:38 as a single ‘unit’, based upon its formulation as one paragraph in the MT, as well as the events occurring mostly within a twenty-four-hour period.<sup>49</sup> We will proceed, however, with a synchronic narratival reading, in order to attend to the aspects of hospitality, similar to the brief treatment of Friday Kassa, who reads Genesis 19 as a ‘story of the inversion of hospitality’, beginning with the observation that Genesis 18-19 ‘presents two parallel and similar stories in which divine beings are hosted’.<sup>50</sup> These chapters flow straight from one to the other and are nestled within the larger literary section commonly referred to as the Abrahamic cycle, running from Genesis 12 to 25, which concerns itself chiefly with the promise of land and prosperity. The focus on hospitality in these chapters is significantly connected to its theological message related to the covenantal emphases of land and provision.<sup>51</sup>

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47. Stuart A. Irvine, “‘Is Anything Too Hard for Yahweh?’: Fulfillment of Promise and Threat in Genesis 18-19”, *JSOT* 42:3 (2018): 285-302 (286), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089216690381>. See further Robert I. Letellier, *Day in Mamre, Night in Sodom: Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18-19*, *BibInt* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 32-70. For support of an unbroken Yahwistic unit, even up to 19:38, see for example von Rad, *Genesis*, 204, 222.

48. John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 215-216; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, *NICOT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 30 n. 16.

49. John Goldingay, *Genesis*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 292.

50. Kassa, ‘A Home for All’, 2.

51. *Contra* John H. Walton, who concludes thus, ‘the *ger* (resident alien) element is prominent in the narrative not to emphasize the hospitality issues but to emphasize the impact issue. It is not the treatment of the *ger* (hospitality) that is important but the impact a *ger* can have that matters. Lot as a *ger* has no impact. Abraham’s family, as *gerim*, is expected to have extensive impact on the world’ (*Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 483-484).

## 5.1 Genesis 18

### Genesis 18 begins

<sup>1</sup>[And t]he LORD appeared to Abraham [lit. ‘him’] by the [terebinths] of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup>He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup>He said, ‘My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup>Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup>Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh [lit. sustain (with food)]<sup>52</sup> yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said.’ <sup>6</sup>And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ <sup>7</sup>Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup>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.

Even in the first three verses of chapter 18, the ambiguity surrounding God in the visit to Abraham is apparent. In verse 1, we hear that YHWH ‘appeared’, but in verse 2 Abraham beholds ‘three men standing near him’; yet in verse 3 Abraham directly addresses one person, saying ‘My lord’ (אֲדֹנָי – *adonai*).<sup>53</sup> Thus, while the divine nature of Abraham’s guests is announced from the outset, centuries of debate have surrounded their identity, and so we will set this issue to one side in order to retain focus on the aspects more directly related to hospitality.<sup>54</sup> Importantly, since the divine identity of the guests is unknown to Abraham at the time of their arrival, he demonstrates ‘his usual response when guests appear to his doorstep’, even if it is seen to be exemplary.<sup>55</sup>

52. A textual note from Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 3 n. 4.

53. Robert Alter takes note of the Masoretic vocalisation in the plural, ‘my lords’, but makes clear that plural verbs do not occur until verse 4 (*Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 77), whereas Bruce K. Waltke takes the Hebrew vocalisation and the *Qere* to be confirmation of the divine name and regards ‘my LORD’ to be the better translation, following HALOT, 13, B.2 (with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 267). For further explanation, see Goldingay, *Genesis*, 287. Hamilton provides a helpful chart of singular and plural occurrences throughout ch. 18 (*Genesis 18–50*, 6 n. 19).

54. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 158.

55. Hemmer Gudme, ‘Invitation to Murder’, 93, drawing on Esther J. Hamori, ‘When Gods Were Men’: *The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110206715>.

Of the elements of hospitality noted above, we first see Abraham bow down to greet his guests (in v. 2) before inviting them to rest, wash, drink, and eat (in vv. 4-5). These offers are then acted upon in haste, evidenced by “Fetch” [לָקַח] appear[ing] four times in rapid succession [vv. 4,5,7,8] “hurry” [מַהֵר] three times [vv. 6(2x),7], as indices of the flurry of hospitable activity.<sup>56</sup> Further, Abraham utilises those in his household – both Sarah, his wife, and his servant – to participate in hosting, as was customary. This reiterates the communal nature of hospitality, even if it is on a small scale. It is also clear that the food provided is the best he can provide, thus generous and uncustomary, and ‘greatly exceed[ing] the modest offer (“a little water and a morsel of bread”)’ offered in verse 5.<sup>57</sup> Abraham’s generosity is demonstrated in the quantity and quality of the provision. Three *seahs* of flour yields far more than three humans could consume, as determined by comparison with 1 Samuel 25:18 and 1 Kings 18:32.<sup>58</sup> We are told that he asks Sarah to use ‘choice’ or finely ground flour (סֶלֶת) – *soleth*) in making the cakes/loaves (elsewhere included in lists of luxuries (Ezek 16:13,19) fit for a king (2 Kgs 5:2) or as an offering (e.g. 1 Chron 9:29)). Abraham selects a ‘tender and good (רַךְ וְטוֹב) – *rak watov*) calf’, not the typical kid of a goat (Gen 27:9; Judg 6:19; 13:15), in addition to ‘curds and milk’, side dishes to enhance the taste of the meat and quench thirst.<sup>59</sup> Lastly, regarding the provision of food, meat was the most generous and unconventional for everyday eating.<sup>60</sup>

In the midst of their meal or just following it, they share conversation (vv. 9-15), first with Abraham and then with Sarah as well, during which it is revealed by the divine guests that Sarah will bear a son by the time one of the guests returns later that season (v. 10; see also v. 14). To this announcement, Sarah responds with laughter and is rebuked. Brueggemann notes the narrative pace slows in this latter part of the scene and that ‘[t]he initiative has passed to the “stranger(s)”’.<sup>61</sup> Some understand the provision of a son as the guests’ reciprocal reward for Abraham’s hospitality,<sup>62</sup> but of course this had already been promised earlier in the narrative account (15:4; 17:16-19). In 17:21, even

56. Alter, *Genesis*, 78 n. 4, following the early Midrash of *Abot di Rabbi Nathan*.

57. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 206. Walton notes that to exceed one’s first offer is customary (*Genesis*, 452).

58. Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 11.

59. Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 11.

60. Walton, *Genesis*, 452. He also notes the similarities of this meal to Danel hosting Kothar-wa-Hasis in the Ugaritic Epic of Aqhat. See further, Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 9-11.

61. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 158. Cf. Waltke, *Genesis*, 267.

62. Brueggemann rules out the possibility that Abraham and Sarah are being rewarded for belief, as this scene highlights their disbelief (*Genesis*, 158-159). 1 Clement

the specific timing is made known to Abraham. Perhaps the reassurance of the timing, now a year on, is a reward, or it might be a reward to Sarah, allowing her to overhear the pronouncement this time, but certainly the conversational exchange demonstrates a significant aspect of the guests participating in hospitality. The final aspect of Abraham's hospitality in this scene is to see his guests off on their way, accompanying them as they start to journey toward Sodom (v. 16).

In the next scene, which runs to the end of chapter 18 (vv. 17-33), we find God considering and then holding back on continuing conversation with Abraham concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. This passage serves as a transition between the two divine visits, first to Abraham then to Sodom. In my reading, these two visits are recounted like a landlord checking in on his tenants, evaluating their character and management of allotments; after all, these were the lands, delineated by Lot and then Abraham in Genesis 13, given by the Lord to Abraham in 12:7 (see also 15:19; 17:8). And in another prior scene, we see that Abraham acknowledges God not only as the giver of land, but 'Maker of heaven and earth' in his dealings with the king of Sodom (Gen 14:22). These texts reiterate God as the rightful Creator, 'Judge of all the earth' (18:25), and Host to all lands (of Canaan), justifying the destruction of city, Sodom, on the basis of his judgement/justice (מִשְׁפָּט – *mishpat*).<sup>63</sup> Here the connection between hospitality and justice should be recalled (Deut 10:17-19), but in this case justice requires the opposite, inhospitality, just as it did for the inhospitable Egyptians. It is tediously confirmed, as Abraham pleads with God to spare the righteous, that even if there are found as few as ten righteous inhabitants of the city it will not be destroyed. And, as Nathan MacDonald argues, 'The divine pedagogy proceeds in an unusual manner as YHWH teaches Abraham his way through a conversation that moves backwards and forwards with Abraham never plumbing the depths of God's generosity. [Thus t]hrough

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10:6-7, however, makes this connection explicitly: 'Abraham ... Because of his faith and hospitality, a son was given to him in his old age ...' (Ehrman, LCL, 53).

63. Von Rad speaks of God in this scene 'as the protector of justice in all lands' based upon God's response to the 'outcry' (18:20), which 'is a technical legal term and designates the cry for help which one who suffers a great injustice screams' (Genesis, 211). Hamilton clarifies that זְעָאָה (*zeaqah*; v. 20) and תְּעָאָה (*tseaqah*; v. 21) are 'interchangeable' (Genesis 18-50, 20, see further n. 17). For more on 'Divine ownership' of the land in the Abraham cycle, see Norman C. Habel, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 115-133 (ch. 7, 'Land as Host Country: An Immigrant Ideology').



this conversation YHWH instills the values that are to characterize Abraham's descendants (18:17–19).<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, it is not only God who is reiterated as host in this section, but also Abraham, who is to 'become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him' (18:18) as 'his children and his household after him ... keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice' (18:19). Beyond Abraham hosting the visitors in the prior scene, even in the continued conversation there is a textual element that suggests Abraham as host and God as guest, attested by the early reading 'Yahweh stood before Abraham' rather than the current reading of 18:22, 'Abraham stood before the LORD'.<sup>65</sup> Further on in the Genesis narrative, we find the partial fulfilment of blessing for the nations through Joseph's wise preparations for the famine, ironically outside of the promised land. In other words, Abraham's descendant hosts the surrounding nations from Egypt. Within the literary context of these two chapters, it has been argued that 'righteousness and justice' of Abraham are in fact displayed in his hospitality, while the wickedness of Sodom is epitomised by its inhospitality, to which we now turn.<sup>66</sup>

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64. Nathan MacDonald, 'Hospitality and Hostility: Reading Genesis 19 in light of 2 Samuel 10 (and Vice Versa)', in *Universalism and Particularism*, 179–189 (185), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt32bz0d.18>, citing Nathan MacDonald. 'Listening to Abraham – Listening to YHWH: Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18.16–33', *CBQ* 66 (2004): 25–43.

65. Brueggemann (*Genesis*, 168) notes this, referring to the text critical note in BHS concerning a scribal emendation (*tiqqûnê sôferîm*) of this phrase: 'Tiq soph, lect orig אברהם ... וייהוה', in which the subject is reversed. For further explanation see Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 23–24, along with n. 23 and n. 24.

66. Kassa, 'A Home for All', 3; citing also E. Noort, 'For the Sake of Righteousness: Abraham's Negotiations with YHWH as Prologue to the Sodom Narrative: Genesis 18:16–33' in *Sodom's Sin and its Interpretations*, ed. E. Noort and E. Tigchelaar (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 1–15 (5, including n. 4), [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047413936\\_005](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047413936_005): 'The language of the story (Gn 18–19) reveals contrasting motifs between the two hospitality stories. One could deduce that the incident, which is described as evil (*rā'ā*) in ... (Gn 9:7), shows contrast to righteousness (*ṣedāqāh*) and justice (*mišpāt*) [in Gen 18:19], the demand[s] of the covenant responsibility. Ultimately the contrast shows the fate of the righteous and of the wicked in the world – exemplified by the survival of the two hospitable families (Abraham's and Lot's), contrasted with the destruction of [the] inhospitable people of Sodom and their fertile planes [*sic*]' (i.e. 'It shows Abraham's hospitality as a righteous act and the lack of hospitality as wickedness'). Von Rad even postulates that 'Perhaps an ancient narrative, well known in Israel, about a frightful violation of the law of hospitality was connected only secondarily with Sodom as the seat of all sin' (*Genesis*, 218). See also Randall C. Bailey, 'Why Do Readers Believe Lot? Genesis 19 Reconsidered', *OTE* 23:3 (2010): 519–548 (542 n. 71).

## 5.2 Genesis 19

Genesis 19 opens with the two divine messengers arriving in Sodom in the evening. Lot shows mirrored hospitality to that of Abraham in the previous chapter, by bowing down to greet the guests and inviting them to wash at his house (vv. 1-2).<sup>67</sup> As it is evening, he also offers for them to lodge for the night before continuing on their journey (v. 2). After urging them not to refuse his offer and stay in the city square – perhaps a ‘warning’ or ‘foreshadowing’ of inhospitality (cf. Judg 19:18-20)<sup>68</sup> – they go to his house, where Lot has prepared a meal (lit. a ‘feast’ or ‘banquet’ with drinking, מִשְׁתֶּה – *mishteh*)<sup>69</sup> and ‘baked unleavened bread’ (v. 3).<sup>70</sup> Waltke contends ‘Like Abraham, Lot extends gracious hospitality to his visitors; however, in the narrator’s descriptions of the two events, Lot’s feast and acts of hospitality cannot measure up to Abraham’s lavish meal and generous service.’<sup>71</sup> While this is true, up to this point in the story, further nuance will become necessary.

It is then revealed that the provision of safety inside Lot’s house was necessary when all the men of city surround the house demanding for the guests to be brought out for them to ‘know them’ (vv. 4-5). Within the wider Old Testament corpus the double entendre of this verb is well attested, but it has yet to be revealed in the narrative. Lot demonstrates hospitable protection by risking his own safety to step outside the door and keep it shut with the guests inside (v. 6), begging the men of the city to not ‘act so wickedly’ (v. 7). At this point, their wickedness is most clearly seen in their inhospitality, and only as the narrative unfolds does it become more pointedly associated with sexual sin.<sup>72</sup> It should be noted that this does not undermine the argument that their wickedness is inhospitality, as much as it demonstrates the degree of inhospitality to the point of hostile behaviour.<sup>73</sup> In verse 8, Lot even offers up

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67. For more on the ‘mirror-narrative’ aspects of Genesis 18:1-16 and 19:1-14, see Jonathan D. Safren ‘Hospitality Compared: Abraham and Lot as Hosts’, in *Universalism and Particularism*, 157–178, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt32bz0d.17>.

68. Victor H. Matthews, ‘Hospitality and Hostility in Genesis 19 and Judges 19’, *BTB* 22 (1992): 3–11 (4), <https://doi.org/10.1177/014610799202200102>.

69. R. H. O’Connell, ‘šṭh’, *NIDOTTE* 4: 260–262.

70. Safren convincingly argues, following Kimhi on Gen 19:3, that ‘the time of day and the circumstances determine the type of meal and the extent of the preparations of each narrative’ (‘Hospitality Compared’, 170).

71. Waltke, *Genesis*, 275–276.

72. Cf. Waltke (*Genesis*, 276), who insists on both and separates the issues: ‘The city is guilty here of two crimes: violation of guests and unnatural lust.’

73. Nathan MacDonald argues of Gen 19, based on his comparison with 1 Sam 10, that ‘the writers of Genesis connect the wickedness of the men of Sodom much more to

his two daughters in a desperate and distorted attempt to protect his guests, saying ‘only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof’. Dell suggests this reflects ‘the strength of the tradition of hospitality in the Old Testament’ – Lot is willing to sacrifice his own family members ‘to strangers rather than expose his guests to ill treatment (Gen 19:1-18)’.<sup>74</sup> The narrative seems to be convincing the reader of the depth of Sodom’s depravity, even though many, especially recent, readers cannot help but also question Lot’s judgement.<sup>75</sup> Setting aside modern notions, it is not even clear that they are his to offer, as 19:14 asserts Lot’s daughters are pledged to be married.<sup>76</sup> Then the men of Sodom mock Lot for being a ‘stranger, sojourner’ (inf. cs. גֵּר) among them (though many have noted the irony of the *ger* being the only willing host in Sodom).<sup>77</sup> Next, the men ‘pressed hard against’ Lot and ‘reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door’ (vv. 9-10), making clear the cost, even risk, of hosting. MacDonald notes that ‘[i]t is only after the men of Sodom attempt to force their way into Lot’s house that the messengers announce the imminent destruction of the city.’<sup>78</sup> In other words, God does not announce their sure condemnation until they commit

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their hostility expressed toward the stranger and their lack of hospitality’ than to sexual desire or humiliation, concluding ‘the abuse of Lot’s guests is an extreme expression of the Sodomites’ inhospitality’ which aligns with the tradition of characterising the non-Israelites of the Transjordanian region this way over against Israel’s identity as ‘generous and hospitable’ (‘Hospitality and Hostility’, 184–185). Cf. Boswell (1980), Matthews (1992), and Fields (1997) for ‘view[ing] inhospitality as the main sin of the people of Sodom’ and Blenkinsopp (2015, 132ff.) who sees ‘sexual abuse of strangers [as] ... a particularly heinous and gross violation of hospitality’, in contrast to the interpretation of wickedness as lust by Gunkel (1917), von Rad (1972), Westermann (1985), and Towner (2001) (all noted by Kassa, ‘A Home for All’, 4 n. 8).

74. Dell, ‘Hospitality’. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 218: ‘The surprising offer of his daughters must not be judged simply by our Western ideas. That Lot intends under no circumstances to violate his hospitality, that his guests were more untouchable than his own daughters, must have gripped the ancient reader, who knew whom Lot intended to protect in this way. But on the other hand, this procedure to which Lot resorted scarcely suited the sensibility of the ancient Israelite. Our narrator would be misunderstood if we did not give him credit for expecting his readers to judge a very complicated situation. Lot did attempt to preserve the sacredness of hospitality by means of an extreme measure, but was it not a compromise?’

75. Bailey, ‘Why Do Readers?’.

76. See further, Waltke, *Genesis*, 277. George Athas even argues they are already married (‘Has Lot Lost the Plot? Detailed Omission and a Reconsideration of Genesis 19’, *JHebS* 16:5 (2016): 1–18 (15), <https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2016.v16.a5>).

77. See, e.g., Anderson below.

78. MacDonald, ‘Hospitality and Hostility’, 184 n. 16, referring to his earlier chapter on Gen 18:16-33 ‘Listening to Abraham’.

utter ‘inhospitality’,<sup>79</sup> forced entry void of invitation, to take rather than receive.

‘As is the case of 18.1–8, the main issue here is hospitality to secretly divine visitors’; however, in 19:1–11 ‘the sanctity of hospitality is threatened by *the men of the city* who wish to rape (*know*) the guests (cf. Judg 19.22–30). The primary point ... is how this threat by the townspeople violates the value of hospitality’ as depicted throughout the first half of chapter 18.<sup>80</sup> This interpretation accords with a passage alluding to Genesis 19:11 from the Wisdom of Solomon (19:14–17), which reads:

<sup>14</sup>Others had refused to receive strangers when they came to them,  
but these made slaves of guests who were their benefactors [alluding to  
the beginning of Exodus].

<sup>15</sup>And not only so – but, while punishment of some sort will come upon the  
former

for having received strangers with hostility,

<sup>16</sup>the latter, having first received them with festal celebrations,  
afterward afflicted with terrible sufferings  
those who had already shared the same rights.

<sup>17</sup>They were stricken also with loss of sight –  
just as were those at the door of the righteous man –  
when, surrounded by yawning darkness,  
all of them tried to find the way through their own doors.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, this aligns with Jesus’s mention of Sodom in Luke 10:1–12 ‘when giving instructions to his disciples preparing to embark on a missionary

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79. MacDonald, ‘Hospitality and Hostility’, 184–185.

80. *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, note on Gen 19:1–11. Brueggemann clarifies that ‘the Bible gives considerable evidence that the sin of Sodom was not specifically sexual, but a general disorder of a society organized against God. Thus in Isa. 1:10; 3:9, the reference is to injustice; in Jer. 23:14, to a variety of irresponsible acts which are named; and in Ezek. 16:49 the sin of pride, excessive food, and indifference to the needy [cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 218] ... The use of the term “outcry” in 18:20–21; 19:13 argues in the direction of a general abuse of justice. (Cf. Isa. 5:7 without any explicit indictment. Cf. also Luke 10:8–12)’ (*Genesis*, 164).

81. Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis*, Belief Commentary Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 193, also quoting a similar passage from the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 109a): ‘Our Rabbis taught: The men of Sodom waxed haughty only on account of the good which the Holy One, blessed be He, had lavished upon them ... They said: Since there cometh forth bread out of [our] earth, and it hath the dust of gold, why should we suffer wayfarers, who come to us only to deplete our wealth. Come, let us abolish the practice of travelling in our land’.

journey'; he says 'that those cities that refused them hospitality would face a worse fate than Sodom', as rendered by De La Torre.<sup>82</sup>

Regardless of the exact nature of their intended acts, the men of Sodom threaten to do worse to Lot and become forcibly hostile (v. 9), 'requiring the guests to protect their host (vv. 10–11)'.<sup>83</sup> At verse 11, the 'guests' cryptically and ironically switch roles and play 'hosts', when the divine messengers protect Lot and his whole household from the men of Sodom by striking all of them blind, before offering Lot's family aid to escape the city before they will destroy it (vv. 12–13).<sup>84</sup> Peleg points out that while Lot attempted to protect the guests once from the men of Sodom, 'the guests save Lot twice: once from the men of the city and then from the destruction of the city'.<sup>85</sup> Brueggemann implicitly suggests that Lot is rescued because he is deemed 'hospitable'.<sup>86</sup> They even urge them – before insisting – that he, his wife, and his two daughters be taken outside the city, because of 'the LORD being merciful to him' (vv. 15–16). God, as merciful host, has spared Lot, his wife, and his daughters, and 'he' (meaning God, even though the English typically supplies 'they') tells them to flee far from the danger and not look back, lest they be consumed (v. 17). Here, God as host (for the second person singular resumes in 19:19) has tried to ensure the safety of those he is now harbouring, but Lot, after admitting the 'great kindness in saving [his] life' refuses divine instruction. Lot proposes going not to the hills as God suggested, but to a little city; God concedes, waiting to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah until he had arrived safely there (vv. 19–23). However, it is reported that Lot later settles in the hills with his two daughters because he later came to fear the little city, Zoar (v. 30). God, as local landlord, overthrows a wicked city, but 'remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow' (v. 29) – the very ones who had hosted God and the divine messengers. This reveals the reciprocal nature or expectation of hospitality: those who are hosted become in some sense guest as well as host.

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82. De La Torre, *Genesis*, 195.

83. *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, note on Gen 19:1–11.

84. Cf. von Rad (*Genesis*, 219): 'It is therefore a bit comical when this heroic gesture quickly collapses and the one who intended to protect the heavenly beings is himself protected when they quickly draw him back into the house and strike his assailants with a miraculous blindness.' See similarly De La Torre, *Genesis*, 196; Safren, 'Hospitality Compared', 158.

85. Peleg, 'Was Lot a Good Host?', 134 n. 15.

86. See his table contrasting 'destruction' for the 'guilty' Sodom (*Genesis*, 167). See also Waltke (*Genesis*, 273), who regards hospitality as 'indicative of the righteousness that saves Lot'.

### 5.3 Comparing Genesis 18 and 19

When comparing the two chapters, commentators, both ancient and modern, regularly compare the hospitality of Abraham to Lot.<sup>87</sup> The latter certainly pales in comparison,<sup>88</sup> but Lot is not meant to serve as the direct counterpart; rather, in the words of Hamilton, ‘a blatant contrast [is made] between how Abraham hosted his visitors (ch. 18) and how the Sodomites hosted the same delegation (ch. 19)’.<sup>89</sup> This is supported by the first verse of each chapter, which announces to whom the visitors directly appear. Chapter 18 begins ‘The Lord appeared to Abraham’ (v. 1) and chapter 19 begins ‘The two angels came to Sodom’ (v. 1). Further, ‘Sodom ... contrast[s] with the perfect host Abraham’, Waltke suggests, based on

[t]he word play between Abraham’s righteousness and justice (*ṣ‘dāqâ/ mišpāṭ*) and the outcry (*ṣ‘āqâ*) of violence and injustice in Sodom that reaches God [18:21] ... Whereas Abraham extended himself to serve his guests, the Sodomites try to consume their guests in service of themselves.<sup>90</sup>

MacDonald bolsters the case by recalling the ‘surly’ behaviour of the king of Sodom in Genesis 14 as a foreshadow.<sup>91</sup> Anderson asserts ‘The irony of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is that it was Lot, a *gēr* himself (Gen 19:9), who showed hospitality [however distorted], not the native inhabitants of the city.’<sup>92</sup> Alexander argues further that Lot’s hospitality is in fact the ‘key’ for why early interpreters view him in a positive light.<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, Lot and Abraham are

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87. Kassa, ‘A Home for All’, 3; see further, on evaluating the hospitality of Lot, Safren (‘Hospitality Compared’, 163ff.) and Peleg (‘Was Lot a Good Host?’); Stuart Lasine, ‘Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot’s Hospitality in an Inverted World’, *JSOT* 29 (1984): 37–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030908928400902903>; T. Desmond Alexander, ‘Lot’s Hospitality: A Clue to His Righteousness’, *JBL* 104:2 (1985): 289–291, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260968>. I regard Lot’s actions as sufficiently customary whereas Abraham’s are held up as ideal.

88. Cf. R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 186: ‘not so much the antithesis of Abraham as a pale and failed imitation’. See also Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, 103–104. Some are harsher in their judgement, regarding him as a ‘bungler and buffoon’ and a ‘fumbling failure’ compared with Abraham (Waltke, *Genesis*, 273–274, drawing from George W. Coats, ‘Lot: A Foil in the Abraham Saga’, in *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honour of Bernhard W. Anderson*, ed. James T. Butler et al., *JSOTSup* 37 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 113–132 (128)). See, further, my understanding of Lot as hospitable to a fault.

89. Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 5.

90. Waltke, *Genesis*, 274.

91. MacDonald, ‘Hospitality and Hostility’, 186.

92. Anderson, ‘Hospitality’.

93. Alexander, ‘Lot’s Hospitality’, 289.

rewarded with life and lineage,<sup>94</sup> while Sodom is destroyed.<sup>95</sup> This accords with the ancient Near Eastern ‘plot-motif’, identified by Irvin, that ‘Gods in disguise reward hospitality and punish inhospitality.’<sup>96</sup> Therefore, the direct contrast is being made between the treatment of the guests by Abraham and the men of Sodom. MacDonald adds further support by pushing the comparison forward to the future behaviour of their descendants, observing that Lot’s descendants become increasingly inhospitable due to the influence of Sodom whereas Abraham’s descendants persist in hospitality.<sup>97</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

By the end of these two chapters, however, the reader has encountered not only two inverse examples but four models related to hospitality, defined as ‘the costly welcome of an other’: (1) Abraham hosts with generosity;<sup>98</sup> (2) Lot is arguably hospitable to a fault, at the moment that he offers his daughters to the men of Sodom;<sup>99</sup> (3) divine hospitality, in which the messengers risk the threat of visiting a wicked city; and (4) the inhospitality of the city of Sodom to the point of hostility. Throughout these chapters, hosting has had a cost, whether it be loss of provision (for Abraham and Lot), loss of home (for Lot and the Sodomites), or suffering hostility in one’s own land (on the part of God and Lot). Therefore, across the two chapters, I would argue, we are invited to examine God as host and guest to hospitable and inhospitable

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94. Safren uses the language of them both being rewarded for righteousness/ generosity (‘Hospitality Compared’, 175–176). See also Frank Polak, *Biblical Narrative: Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994), 196. Cf. Peleg (‘Was Lot a Good Host?’, 135): ‘The story of Lot’s hospitality is thus built on the principle of “measure for measure”: Lot is saved from the destruction visited on Sodom as a reward for protecting his guests, while the men of Sodom are punished for their evil.’ However, he later complicates this reading by claiming the impetus was in fact Abraham within the wider context of the narrative.

95. Kassa explicitly argues that the narrative across the two chapters ‘shows Abraham’s hospitality, as a righteous act and the lack of hospitality as wickedness’ (‘A Home for All’, 3 n. 4)

96. D. Irvin, *Mytharion: The Comparison of Tales from the Old Testament and Ancient Near East*, ed. K. Bergehof, M. Dietrich, and O. Loretz, AOAT 32 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 22, cited in Weston Fields, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 54.

97. MacDonald, ‘Hospitality and Hostility’, 185–186.

98. Cf. von Rad (*Genesis*, 209), who uses ‘exemplary’.

99. Lasine’s intertextual reading with Judg 19 supports this point. He interprets thus: ‘The words and actions of the old host are almost identical to those of Lot at this point, but their effect is to invert Lot’s overblown hospitality into inhospitality’ (‘Guest and Host’, 39).



people. God says he will continue hosting the Sodomites on behalf of as little as ten righteous among them (18:32), but as a good host God cannot allow the wicked to dwell near the righteous, arguably because of the threat that they pose to the righteous/covenanted family of Abraham whom God has promised to preserve. In other words, God will not be hospitable to a fault, more properly understood as to the perversion of justice, as Lot was depicted in his willingness to offer the righteous to satisfy the desires of the wicked. Rather, God shows his intention to dwell among the righteous (by visiting Abraham), which necessitates protecting them from the wicked (Sodomites).

This observation of God as host and guest to hospitable and inhospitable people warrants further exploration, certainly in texts with God as cosmic host, as well as temple texts where God has come to dwell among his people and invites worship at his house (בַּיִת), which involves many practices of hospitality – washing, sometimes eating, and so on. And, of course, there is the underlying ancient Near Eastern notion that the presence of God offers protection. But this is all for further study. Initial observations from Genesis 18–19 also have prompted further examination of passages where hospitality is a marker of being in covenant or simply righteous living (like Job 31:32 and much of the Mosaic law) and the inverse where wickedness has to do with inhospitality (e.g. in Judg 19). There is an interesting, related observation about who shows hospitality – often those who were themselves strangers or outsiders.

I will briefly mention two further lines of enquiry for future study. The first is pursuing more clarity on what I and others have observed in hospitality texts of role reciprocation – when host becomes guest – as well as the mutuality or exchange that inevitably occurs. Second, more work needs to be done on the interplay or representational nature of household hospitality and communal justice. In these two chapters, this question arose from the possibility that Lot might have been the only one sitting at the city gate to receive the messengers, and/or this might also imply that he was the only one concerned about matters of justice, as the city gate was the proper place of legal dealings.<sup>100</sup> Waltke similarly notes Lot's solitary concern for the community's wellbeing.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, a number of aspects relevant to understanding ancient hospitality have arisen for further study. Pursuing these will inform a primary question of an Old Testament theology of hospitality, which Amos Yong has already posed

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100. Matthews, 'Hospitality and Hostility', 4.

101. Waltke, *Genesis*, 275.



and started to answer: 'What happens when we revisit the history of ancient Israel through the lens of hospitality?'<sup>102</sup>

Though many responses have been offered to assuage the crisis of biblical theology, of which Childs, Brueggemann, and Goldingay are especially notable for contributions in English,<sup>103</sup> the plurality of recent decades has defined the field more than anything it has produced. What I am proposing is that we proceed at the crossroads of the discipline from the biblical value of hospitality to construct a comprehensive biblical theology that attends to the dynamic relationship between God, his people, and the world, which at times is in tension with experiences of inhospitality. This naturally flows into an ethical discussion, which is not tangential but core to the Old Testament, 'since the distinction between oneself and the other, and the difficulty of living as stranger in an often hostile culture are – without exaggeration – the key problems in the history of Israel and the theology and ethics of the OT.'<sup>104</sup> As such, it is an expansive and highly nuanced topic for ethical reflection, one which necessitates careful discernment and consideration rather than direct points of application simply based on the practices displayed in the text. I am not presuming to have found some undiscovered thread to tie up neatly every biblical passage, or supplant past key elements of coherence, be it creation, covenant, or *Heilsgeschichte*. What I am proposing is a fresh articulation of the biblical material organised around the pervasive value of hospitality, along with its adjacent elements (e.g. household, table fellowship, etc.). Again, this call is not made on the basis of a unifying theme, since the text is not ideologically singular, but for the sake of conceptualisation and praxis in contemporary communities of faith.

This is also fitting because a helpful biblical theology coherently renders the biblical material with the concerns of the contemporary world in mind. This has been characteristic of biblical theology, as we can hear from Brueggemann's description of 'the two major syntheses of Old Testament theology in the twentieth century', from Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad, who '[i]n their shared Christian context ... asserted that faith from ancient Israel, without excessively trimming that faith to Christian conviction, was important to the faithfulness and vitality of the church in their time and place.' Ours is one of unprecedented speed and globalisation, in which transience,

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102. Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 85, see further esp. ch. 4.

103. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 3 vols (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003–2009).

104. Oeming, "'Clear as God's Words?'" , 698.

isolation, superficial and virtual relationships are epidemic, which has left many longing for home and hospitality.<sup>105</sup>

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105. Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life: Five Transformative Values to Root Us in the Way of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2020); Jen Pollock Michel, *Keeping Place: Reflections on the Meaning of Home* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017). Willie James Jennings articulates this notion with the language of searching for 'belonging' (*After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020)).

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