

Holy, Horrid, and Hilarious Meals of the Bible
Part 2: Entertaining Angels
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes
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Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15; Luke 14:7-14; Hebrews 13:2

I. Entertaining Angels

“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby, some have entertained angels unawares.” So advises the author of the Book of Hebrews. Guess where the author got that idea? From our story today about Abraham and Sarah entertaining angels unawares!

When we covered this story recently, we focused on Sarah’s laughter (Gen 18), and that of Abraham (Gen 17) over the promise that Sarah would give birth to a son.¹ Now, our focus is on the hospitality that gave rise to the reference in Hebrews about entertaining angels unawares. It’s a story that offers helpful insight for us today as we wrestle with issues regarding our own welcome – or lack thereof – of outsiders.

Abraham’s welcome of the three angels was extravagant if nothing else. After spotting their approach, he runs out and offers them an immediate invitation:

“If I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.⁸ 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.

Notice how much running Abraham does. He’s really eager to please his guests. Of course, wouldn’t you, if angels stopped by *your* house? Only, the story does not say that Abraham knew these three individuals were angels. That’s how it goes in the Hebrew Scriptures. They have no wings. They do not fly. Angels appear as ordinary mortals. Only in hindsight are they recognized as angels.

Abraham shows this extraordinary hospitality not because he knows these strangers are *angels*, but because he knows them to be *strangers*. While his hospitality seems a bit over-the-top to modern ears, this story really gives us a window into hospitality that was

¹ “Living With Courage and Resilience, Part 3: Abraham and Sarah (Faith),” by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes, April 22, 2018.

quite common not only in ancient Israel, but the ancient Near East in general – and not only in ancient times, but throughout most of history up until the last century or so.

Let me take you back just a couple of centuries to describe a scene that would be quite typical in the 19th Century or nearly any other century before it.² The scene opens on a small, Bedouin encampment – a tent village – somewhere in the Negev desert region of southern Palestine. Sitting in front of one of these tents is a man named Abijah. He is grinding coffee using a mortar and pestle. You can tell when Abijah is making coffee, as opposed to other men of his community, because every villager has their own, distinctive pattern to grind the beans with their pestle. Abijah’s sounds like this: Da-da. Da. // Da-da. Da. // Da-da. Da. //

When the villagers hear that pattern, as opposed perhaps to something like, “Da. Da-da-da // Da. Da-da-da //”, they know two things for certain: Abijah is grinding coffee, and Abijah has *visitors*. Coffee is precious enough among the Bedouins that it is reserved for special occasions, and there are few occasions as special as when visitors arrive. Visitors carry news from the outside world. In a world where there was no CNN, internet, or even telegraph or newspaper, people relied on travelers to give them a sense of what was going on in the world around them.

So when the villagers in Abijah’s encampment hear that distinctive, “Da-da. Da. // Da-da. Da,” they come straight over. We’ll get to what happens once they arrive at Abijah’s tent in a moment. First, let’s back up a couple of steps to the arrival of the visitors themselves.

Throughout most of the ancient world, there was a strong tradition of offering hospitality to strangers not only because strangers bring news from far off places, but because travelers were particularly vulnerable. There were no Motel 6’s leaving the lights on for them. No convenience stores or supermarkets. And in an arid climate like southern Palestine, “watering holes” were literally holes dug in the ground where residents could capture runoff into cisterns for later use. They were few and far between. So travelers had to rely mostly on whatever they carried with them to eat or drink. If their supplies ran out, they could die within days.

Consequently, if you were travelling on one of these ancient roads as a stranger in the land and someone like Abijah spotted your approach, you could expect the following little “dance” to take place that was all meant to help you preserve your dignity in case you were in dire need but were too embarrassed to show it.

Abijah would rush out and greet you, insisting you take a load off your feet. “Won’t you please come and rest and refresh yourselves here. Your camels could use a bit of water, couldn’t they? And why don’t you enjoy a morsel or two of food while they’re being watered? We have plenty here to eat – too much, even.”

² Coffee had not been invented in Abraham and Sarah’s time, but the sensibility behind the coffee-grinding ritual illustrates a pattern of hospitality and connectivity with those who lived nearby that would have been quite familiar in their day.

Abijah would also be duty-bound to offer you a place to stay for the night. “Look at my tents, why don’t you. I not only have too much food around here, but too much space. You would do me a great honor if you would spend the night here. I’ve been meaning to open a skin of delicious wine from the next village, too. It’ll help you sleep well tonight.”

As an ancient traveler, you would know this “dance” Abijah is doing and would know how to respond with your own dance steps. You’d say something like, “You are most kind, but we really don’t want to impose on you. Besides, that sandstorm a couple days ago put us behind schedule so we really must be pressing on. Thank you, though, for your kind offer. Clearly, you are a most generous man.”

Your protest would do nothing to dissuade Abijah from his invitation. In fact, he’d double-down on it. “Why don’t I let you in on a little secret? Don’t tell my wife this, but she prepared way too much pita bread and a mountain of hummus for our evening meal and I have no idea how we are going to eat the half of it. I also promised my son we’d slaughter a lamb tonight to celebrate his big win at the slingshot competition. That big fat one over there is the one he chose. You can see by the look of him that we’ll be lucky to finish half of him off before the meat starts to turn on us. So you would not only be honoring me, but doing me a great favor if you’d stay and enjoy our hospitality.”

This little dance would continue until you literally started walking away while praising and thanking Abijah for his generous offer, promising to take him up on it next time you passed by, or you relented.

If you relented, that’s when the coffee-grinding would begin. That’s also when the neighbors would hear Abijah’s “Da-da. Da. Da-da. Da.” and come running with high expectations of hearing the latest news from the road and perhaps even being invited in for dinner.

Since Abijah already made such a big deal about how much extra food he had, he would be obligated to invite his fellow villagers in whether he actually had this extra food or not, in which case a villager or two would be conscripted to quietly bring a little something from their place to add to the banquet.

Incidentally, the whole seating arrangement around the carpet would be as carefully orchestrated as the meal itself. As the most highly honored guest (since you were from out of town), you and those with you would sit at the head of the table next to the host. In their day, the patriarch of the household ate with the guests while the women and children prepared and served the food. Next to you, Abijah’s fellow villagers would all be carefully arranged according to the level of honor – or shame – that Abijah ascribed to them.

This honor-shame arrangement is what kept people from stealing each other’s goats and other property. For the next twenty years, you’d be sitting at the bottom of everyone’s

table as The Goat Stealer. Against this context, you can see why Jesus advises his disciples not to sit at the high end of the table, lest you suffer embarrassment if the host comes over and says, “Friend, would you mind moving down a few places.” Instead Jesus advises you to sit at the low end of the table – the goat-stealing end. That way, if you’re moved at all, you’re moved to a higher place of honor. As a representative of the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus is essentially saying, “God’s would-be angels would sit at the lowest end of the table if they were invited to dinner. That’s where you should sit, too, until or unless someone recognizes something angelic about you.”

II. Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?

Our little vignette from Abijah’s village of the 19th Century gives us a bit fuller view of the context in which Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality takes place, as it remained essentially unchanged over the centuries. While we might think Abraham and Sarah were being extravagant with their guests, they were simply doing what anyone would be expected to do in that area of the world.

One of the great benefits of this ancient way of doing things is that, whether the guests turned out to be angels coming down from the heavens or mere mortals coming in from afar, they could be counted on to bring interesting news. They might even shift how you perceive the world, or the lens through which you view world events. In so doing, they might even change your life.

We’ve “come so far” from those “primitive” times, haven’t we? Now, if you are a stranger trying to enter our country from, say, Syria – where they still very much practice hospitality toward the stranger, especially in the rural areas – you will not find yourself welcomed with open arms but funneled into a cue that allows in only a fraction of the people who are seeking refuge. If you are Mexican or from Central or South America, now you are apparently as likely to have your children taken from you as you are to receive welcome. Or if you simply have dark skin and want to use the restroom in a coffeehouse, you are as likely to find yourself arrested as you are to find relief. I wonder how many “angels” we turn away – or arrest – in our more “advanced” way of living. I wonder how many of these folks might just change our way of seeing the world if we gave them a chance, thereby changing our lives.

To be sure, there are people coming to this country who seek to do us harm. And there are some who want to freeload. But what I have to ask myself is, “How many people who are fleeing their land because of very legitimate threats to their safety, security, or sustenance, would I be willing to turn away for every one person who enters for less noble reasons, or even criminal intent?”

When I was in high school, my minister at the time, Rev. Bruce Van Blair, offered a word of advice I have never forgotten. I think it contains ancient wisdom from the time of Abraham and Sarah, and it pertains to any situation we find ourselves in where we are faced with people who may be in significant need, foreign or domestic.

Living on Mercer Island, a wealthy suburb of Seattle, we didn't have many people living below the poverty line. Yet Bruce was approached regularly by strangers who would appear at the church office with some hard-luck story. Bruce knew that pretty much 100% of these people weren't locals, and to get to Mercer Island, they had likely spent the better part of the morning or afternoon getting to the church on public transportation.

Despite the level of con men and freeloaders who would visit my Mercer Island church to ask for a "loan" or other assistance, once in awhile I'd hear of Bruce quietly letting someone essentially camp out in the church for a couple of weeks while they looked for a job, or paying for someone's job training out of the Pastor's Discretionary Fund, or even making a no-interest loan for a thousand dollars or more to get someone through a crisis.

Once, I asked Bruce, "Don't you ever get burned by any of these people you help?"

Bruce didn't hesitate. I remember him saying to the effect of: "Of course I do! But if I didn't get burned at least once in awhile, I'd be too hard-hearted. If you get burned all the time, you're too soft, but if you're never willing to take a risk on someone and get burned, what kind of person are you? Do you think a generous and compassionate God will pat you on the back for never losing a dime of your money or God's in an effort to help someone in crisis? According to Jesus, when you help someone in need you may not just be 'entertaining angels,' but Jesus himself. You never know when Jesus may be knocking at your door."

We live in a day and age where we can't always act like Abraham and Sarah, urging every stranger to eat with us and spend the night. But we can ask ourselves how often we're willing to take a risk on someone – and what kind of someone we're willing to take a risk on (are they all like us or are they different in any significant way?). And we can gauge how soft- or hard-hearted we may be by how often we've been burned.