

Hospitality in the Book of Mormon

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A notable feature of many ancient societies was the set of customs related to hospitality. Hosts often had an obligation to give comfort, friendship, and protection to wandering strangers, while guests often had an obligation to give gifts, gratitude, and proper respect to their hosts. In addition, the ethic of hospitality was often linked to religion and divine commands. In ancient Greek literature, for example, Zeus himself oversees the treatment of strangers, and the theme of *xenia* or “guest friendship” pervades Greek mythology and the Homeric epics. The Trojan War, as partially described in Homer’s *Iliad*, begins with a violation of the hospitality ethic (as a guest of Menelaus, Paris transgresses *xenia* by kidnapping his host’s wife, Helen), while the *Odyssey* is an extended consideration of the behavior of guests and hosts. Hospitality also plays a key role in some of the most memorable stories in the Old Testament, and, as we will see, it is connected in important ways to Israelite religious understanding. This article will examine hospitality as it is found in the Book of Mormon. We will look at instances when a person (or group) invites an outsider (or group of outsiders) into the home or community, making note of how the hospitality is exercised, what motivates it, what role it plays in the Book of Mormon narrative, and what spiritual or religious dimensions it is assigned. Paying particular attention to hospitality as a process by which “an outsider’s status is changed from stranger to guest,”¹ we will examine how the theme of hospitality is present in the book’s stories, themes, sermons, and metaphors.

Old Testament Hospitality

It will be useful to review instances of hospitality in biblical literature, particularly the Old Testament, since this forms the setting

in which the Book of Mormon is placed. In the Hebrew Bible, there are numerous examples of hospitality. Abraham is approached on a summer afternoon by three strangers. He “ran” to meet these strangers, bowing to them with respect, urging them to stay, saying, “Pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant.” He does not ask them any questions about who they are or what their business is. Instead, he puts Sarah to work making bread, he picks out the best of his calves to offer to them, and he gives them butter and milk to eat (Genesis 18:1–8). After they are fed, these holy men promise Abraham and Sarah that they will have a child. Shortly thereafter, Abraham’s nephew, Lot, demonstrates hospitality to perhaps an outrageous extreme, offering his own daughters to the men of Sodom, either as sexual bribery or, as Scott Morschauser convincingly argues,² as a legalistic hostage exchange, to protect the guests under his care (Genesis 19:1–9). Here again, like Abraham, Lot offers to shelter them and to wash their feet, without asking any questions of them. These initial examples of hospitality are multiplied throughout the Old Testament: Elijah is commanded by the Lord to rely on the meals and shelter of a poor widow, but he returns the favor to her by providing a continuous supply of food and oil and by raising her son from the dead (1 Kings 17:9–23). Elisha is offered sustenance and a place to stay by a woman who is unable to have children. After the woman assists Elisha, she and her husband also welcome a child (2 Kings 4:8–17). In the Hebrew Bible, the hospitality ethic encourages a willingness to impart of one’s means, no matter how meager. God will facilitate the hospitality by providing blessings to those who offer it.³ In all of these stories, the guest-host relationships become inverted through divine sanction, as the guest turns out to be the one who blesses the host.

The hospitable encounter between a guest and host becomes an image that defines Israelite self-understanding. As God’s chosen people, the Israelites have themselves been wanderers and see their own story in the plight of peripatetic strangers (Exodus 23:9). As a wandering people, they have empathy for those without a home and care for strangers as they themselves have been sustained by God, acting as their generous hosts. The Israelites, in fact, are reminded that they are strangers even in their own land, since it is, in the end, God’s land, and they are his guests (Leviticus 25:23). The Lord tells the Israelites that they should treat strangers as they would their

own family (Leviticus 19:34). Taking in all these considerations, Christine Pohl concludes, “The teachings of the Law, the warnings of punishment for disobedience, and the promise of blessing on obedience reinforced Israelite hospitality toward strangers, as did the individual hospitality stories: guests might be angels, messengers from God, bringing divine promise or provision.”⁴

Scholars have identified some things that typically happen as part of an act of biblical hospitality.⁵ The host goes out to meet the stranger, not asking any questions until the basic needs have been satisfied (Genesis 18, 19, and 24:33), provides a meal, and washes the guest’s feet (Genesis 18:4, 19:2, 24:25). It is the host’s responsibility to protect the guest (Genesis 19:8; Joshua 2:2-4; Judges 19:22-24). The invitation to hospitality often includes a time span, stipulating how long a guest can stay (Genesis 18:5; Judges 19:5, 20). The hospitality relationship sometimes includes a covenant between the guest and the host (Genesis 26:31). Once the invitation is accepted, Victor H. Matthews describes biblical customs surrounding hospitality in this way: (a) the guest should not ask for anything or insult the host; (b) the host should protect the guest, provide the best provisions he has available, and should not insult the guest; and (c) the guest should accept what is offered with gratitude and praise.⁶ While these elements are not universal across all the stories, they are common enough to form recognizable patterns and type-scenes. Hospitality, then, plays an important role in Hebrew scripture. It drives biblical narratives forward and contributes to Israelite self-understanding. There are some common elements to the stories of hospitality that give them a recognizable structure. Given this Old Testament background, we should expect hospitality, then, to play some role in the Book of Mormon. We shall see that it does, but also that the Book of Mormon has its own emphasis relating to hospitality.

Hospitality in Book of Mormon Narratives

Nephi and Zoram

The first example of hospitality involves Nephi and his invitation to Zoram to join the Lehite family exodus. So long as he serves in Laban’s household, it is important to note that Zoram remains unnamed; he is referred to only as “the servant of Laban.” Although

he has obviously been given substantial authority within the household, we first seem to encounter this servant as a *thing*, a mere possession of Laban. Whatever identity this servant may have had in the household of Laban does not seem to be recognized by the narrator: We are given no lineage or family history, no background, not even a name. The servant seems at first to be a minor figure, hidden in the larger drama surrounding the brass plates, a mere tool in the hands of more powerful men, first as a tool of Laban and then as a tool of Nephi. As Nephi and this nameless servant walk to the city walls of Jerusalem after acquiring the brass plates, there is the scattered record of their conversation. The servant talks of the “elders of the Jews”; his clear emphasis on “of the Jews” (repeated twice) suggests his status as a stranger, as if he were on the outside of the covenant community looking in. As far as the narrator is concerned, Zoram is initially a person without a name or place, lost in the stories of others.

From the perspective of the reader, particularly, Zoram is in a precarious position. His master is dead and he has unwittingly participated with Nephi in stealing the brass plates. He will be subject to suspicion when Laban’s household finds out what is done—who would believe his story, after all, that he did not recognize Nephi under Laban’s clothes? He is obviously fearful that Nephi and his brothers will do him harm—they would seem like violent, murderous men to him. Also, it is important to remember that Zoram is living in a doomed city, Jerusalem, a place that will be destroyed in a matter of years. Zoram is in a more precarious position than perhaps even he himself realizes.

After leaving Jerusalem, Nephi promises to this unnamed outsider by “an oath” that “he need not fear; that he should be a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us” (1 Nephi 4:33). Significantly, Nephi promises to the unnamed servant that he should “have place with us” (1 Nephi 4:34). It is only after this invitation that Laban’s servant is finally named in the narrative as “Zoram.” In Nephi’s promises to have a place and to be free, the Book of Mormon links both identity (as the narrator finally gives the reader Zoram’s name) and freedom to hospitality. With Lehi’s family, Zoram, a formerly unnamed servant without place, is eventually given a family (a wife) and friendship (with Nephi) within the covenant community. Nephi is extending his kin, making Zoram

part of his circle. Nephi has turned, as Matthews argues, a threat into an ally,⁷ and he has done this through hospitality. The enduring relationships go beyond hospitality, but hospitality has made them possible.

Compare the experience of Zoram to the process of hospitality that Pohl outlines in her work, where strangers without connections are given place within a web of relationships:

Strangers, in the strict sense, are those who are disconnected from the basic relationships that give persons a secure place in the world. The most vulnerable strangers are detached from family, community, church, work, and polity. . . . When we offer hospitality to strangers, we welcome them into a place to which we are somehow connected—a space that has meaning and value to us. . . . In hospitality, the stranger is welcomed into a safe, personal, and comfortable place, a place of respect and acceptance and friendship. Even if only briefly, the stranger is included in a life-giving and life-sustaining network of relations.⁸

Through the act of hospitality, Zoram not only achieves the safety of leaving the city that will soon be destroyed, but also begins to form the protective connections that come with ties to family and community. The invitation to be part of Lehi's family is received by oath, emphasizing that Zoram has become part of the web of covenant relationships. Zoram's connection to Lehi brings him into a family that is itself a part of multiple covenants—the covenants between Israel and its God, and between Lehi and the Lord (1 Nephi 2:20) relating to their journey to the Promised Land. The notion that hospitality creates covenant relationships connects to the biblical typology of hospitality. Somewhat mysteriously, Nephi's justification for inviting Zoram is this: "Surely the Lord hath commanded us to do this thing; and shall we not be diligent in keeping the commandments of the Lord?" (1 Nephi 4:34). The commandment Nephi refers to is designated "this thing" and is left ambiguous. The thing that is commanded is connected logically (with a "therefore" statement) to the act of giving a place to Zoram: "Therefore, if thou wilt go down into the wilderness to my father thou shalt have place with us." Nephi is offering Zoram a place with his family because, in some sense, it is related to the thing that he has been commanded to do. It is unclear why the specific commandment

to retrieve the plates should also imply that Nephi needs to invite Zoram to have place with them. Of course, silencing Zoram would be important for the success of Nephi's escape (verse 36), but this could have been accomplished in ways other than making Zoram part of the family—he could have been taken prisoner or enslaved, or (using the same reasoning behind the killing of Laban) simply dispatched. Perhaps Nephi, in talking about “this thing,” is referring to the commandment to leave Jerusalem and find safety in the promised land, with the retrieval of the plates being only one part of the larger commandment. Nephi may be connecting the hospitality that God offers to Lehi's family, and the place of safety they have been offered in the promised land, with his own offer of a “place” to Zoram. At first glance, the story of hospitality toward Zoram is somewhat different from other ancient stories in the biblical material. For instance, there is no household to speak of. And yet, the tent of Lehi is repeatedly affirmed as Lehi's place of dwelling, and the story ends as Nephi and Zoram depart for this place of dwelling, “the tent of our father” (1 Nephi 4:38). Those offering the hospitality, Nephi and his brothers, are vulnerable and in danger here, at least as much as the recipient of the invitation. Zoram, in fact, constitutes a threat to them since he alone of the household knows what happened to Laban. This introduces a theme that seems to be emphasized in the Book of Mormon, the theme of dangerous hospitality. Hospitality is offered even when it places the host at great risk. Another difference from the biblical typology is that the offer from Nephi to Zoram involves an indefinite length of stay rather than a specific time period. Indeed, the offer of hospitality is not simply to stay and be temporarily protected; instead, it is to become part of the fugitive family. In this moment, the Book of Mormon seems to broaden the scope of hospitality in several ways. It is not about temporary protection but about permanent change of identity. It suggests that hospitality is not simply about offering room and board, but that it involves forming enduring relationships.

Alma and Amulek, Ammon and Aaron

Chapters 5–35 in the book of Alma detail the ministry of Alma, the sons of Mosiah, and the subsequent aftermath. There is an underlying theme of hospitality driving the structure of these chapters. Consider first the story of Alma and Amulek. After Alma's suc-

cessful visits to Zarahemla, Gideon, and Melek, he finds himself in Ammonihah. The people of Ammonihah cast him out of their city but Alma returns to the city, hungry (Alma 8:19). One commenter suggests that Alma's hunger may be at least partially attributable to a lack of hospitality on the part of the wicked communities that he visited.⁹ Amulek, though, takes in the holy stranger and offers him food, drink, and protection. Consistent with biblical hospitality, Alma does not give a full account of himself until after the meal, and Amulek does not ask questions of Alma beyond what he has learned from the angel (Alma 8:23).

Hospitality to strangers is particularly important in biblical narratives because wanderers sometimes turn out to be holy messengers, either angels or prophets. Whether the occasion is Abraham hosting the three holy men or the widow of Zarephath giving her sustenance to Elijah, strangers can bear important spiritual messages, offer blessings, and can themselves be significant figures. It is not within temples or tabernacles, synagogues or holy mountains that some lessons are to be given and received, but within the confines of individual households. This message is consistent with what we find in the Book of Mormon, particularly in this part of the book of Alma, where the question of how prophets are received by communities is a major theme.

The events surrounding the meeting of Alma and Amulek are discussed twice in the Book of Mormon, once by the narrator (Alma 8) and once again by Amulek himself (Alma 10). In both accounts, the site of the interaction between Alma and Amulek, the household, is repeated. In Alma 8:18–22, Amulek speaks through the narrator, inviting Alma “into [his] house” and awaiting the promised blessings that will come to “[his] house.” The narrator follows up relating that Alma did indeed bless “Amulek and his house.” Thus, the location of the hospitality, “his house,” is stressed three times by the narrator. In Amulek's own account of his initial encounter with Alma, the location of the events as his house is emphasized even more emphatically. Amulek says that an angel told him to return to his “own house” where he would meet a “holy man,” a person whom he should receive “into [his] house and feed him.” If Amulek did this, he was told twice that the stranger would bless him and his house (Alma 10:7). It is remarkable that the location of the household as the setting for the encounter is repeated eight times. Clearly,

Alma's invitation into Amulek's house is not a trivial or incidental detail; rather, it is the essential part of the story that Amulek wanted to tell. By emphasizing the hospitality of Amulek's household, the underlying contrast seems to be with the city Ammonihah. Instead of rejecting the prophet, the people of Ammonihah should have welcomed the prophet into their homes and communities, just as Amulek has done.

The angelic command to Amulek to offer hospitality to Alma plays several roles within the story. First, the idea that Amulek's hospitality is to contrast with that of Ammonihah is underscored by Amulek's story of the angel. As we said, the Hebrew tradition encouraged hospitality because of the possibility of hidden prophets and angels disguised as wandering strangers. Here, the stranger is fully unmasked as God's messenger, making the condemnation of Ammonihah's continuing lack of hospitality more thorough and complete. The status of outsider has been recognized by one of the city's own citizens. With the angel's introduction, Alma's identity as a divine messenger is revealed to Amulek and subsequently to the Ammonihah community, and the city is left without excuse. Second, the angel's involvement in this act of hospitality also serves to introduce another theme within Book of Mormon hospitality, that of guided hospitality. This is the idea that the Lord is actively involved in setting up guest and host relationships, arranging them to accomplish his purposes. In the Bible, particularly after the book of Genesis, the hand of God can be inferred in hospitality relationships, but in the Book of Mormon that involvement is front and center.

In the story of Alma and Amulek, hospitality is linked to spiritual blessings. Being instructed by an angel to take care of the prophet, Amulek receives Alma into his house warmly: "Therefore, go with me into my house and I will impart unto thee of my food" (Alma 8:20). Similar to other biblical accounts of hospitality to men of God, the act of hospitality given by Amulek, "a chosen man of God" (Alma 10:7), brings "blessings" to both himself and to his family (Alma 8:22). Amulek testifies that the prophet "hath blessed mine house, he hath blessed me, and my women, and my children, and my father and my kinsfolk; yea, even all my kindred hath he blessed. And the blessing of the Lord hath rested upon us according to the words which he spake" (Alma 10:11). Amulek describes not only the

angelic visit but also the events of the household as he talks with his fellow citizens. As the wandering guest becomes the source of blessings, we see the inversion theme of hospitality in biblical material. As Waldemar Janzen writes of the “Jesus Paradigm” of hospitality, “The guest who is offered hospitality turns into the host from whose blessing the hosts-turned-guests can continue to live a new life.”¹⁰ As Alma blesses Amulek, he becomes the host-turned-guest, offering spiritual rebirth (Alma 10:6, 11) to Amulek just as Amulek has before offered him physical sustenance.

A complicating factor in this story of “blessings” is, of course, the grim fate of Amulek’s household. From one perspective, Amulek hardly seems blessed, even being forsaken by some of his family (Alma 15:16). Yet Amulek himself continues to honor the teachings of Alma, indicating their continued meaning for him after the destruction of his former life.

The story of Alma and Amulek is usefully compared with the story of Lot and the men of Sodom. In both stories, angels are involved in the act of hospitality. In the case of Lot, the guests were angels themselves; in the case of Alma, the guest was introduced by an angel. In both stories, the respective cities are being condemned partly because of their lack of hospitality. In both stories, one home opens up to the outsiders and provides them with protections, and these acts of hospitality come at great potential cost to the host: Lot must offer to sacrifice his daughters to the mob; Amulek seems to lose his family and household completely. And, finally, although both inhospitable cities are thereafter destroyed, the charitable host is able to escape the destruction. In both cases, inhospitality is used to expose the moral corruption of the cities. As Pohl writes, “Deliberate acts of inhospitality, such as seen in the stories of the men of Sodom . . . exposed foolish, evil, or corrupted character.” She continues, “The contrast between hospitality and inhospitality in Genesis 19 . . . highlights the utter lawlessness and degradation of the communities.”¹¹ This dynamic holds true with Ammonihah, a city that would let Alma go hungry. In the story of Alma and Amulek, the community’s inhospitality is emphasized and, as with Sodom, the degradation of the community is exposed. What is noteworthy in this story of Amulek’s hospitality to Alma is that Amulek does not simply remain a host who serves a prophet by caring for his temporal needs. Through hospitality to a holy man, Amulek him-

self becomes a holy messenger, becoming, in other words, the type of person whom he had previously served. Through hospitality, two strangers, Alma and Amulek, turn into allies in a very literal sense. As the story continues, we learn that Alma “tarried many days with Amulek before he began to preach unto the people” (Alma 8:27). During this stay, Amulek becomes convinced by Alma’s teachings. In his defense of Alma before the people of Ammonihah, Amulek declares: “I know that the things whereof he hath testified are true; for behold I say unto you, as the Lord liveth, even so has he sent his angel to make these things manifest unto me; and this he has done while this Alma hath *dwelt at my house*” (Alma 10:10; emphasis added). In this passage, the emphasis on the location “in my house” seems to strengthen Amulek’s argument: people who live together, who share meals and sleep under the same roof know one another in an intimate way, and thus are better able to judge character. Hospitality, in this sense, strengthens Amulek’s witness of Alma’s teachings. Living in the same household allowed Amulek to feel Alma’s sincerity and spiritual power. When Amulek’s words were finished, the people of Ammonihah “began to be astonished” because of what they heard and saw, especially the fact that there was “more than one witness” who called them to repentance and shared things to come (Alma 10:12). Amulek serves Alma, the hungry traveling minister, with his generous hospitality but also comes to play an important role in advancing God’s work: He defends the wandering prophet as a good host would do and also becomes a holy man of God himself.

The subsequent story of Ammonihah continues, with the theme of hospitality always in the background. The people in Ammonihah who had believed Alma, we read, fled into the land of Sidom (Alma 15:1). There, it seems that many of the outcasts from Ammonihah had received refuge, sheltered in the houses of the Nephites who were living there. At least we know that Zeezrom, who had led the arguments against Amulek, was being cared for in the house of one of the unnamed inhabitants. Alma goes “in unto the house unto Zeezrom” (Alma 15:5) to visit his former adversary. Someone had apparently taken in this sick and sorrowful refugee. This appears to be the first instance in what will shortly become a common feature of the Book of Mormon: a community opening itself up to care for religious refugees. This act of community hospitality again appears

to function as a way of revealing the character of the community. In this case, the revelation is positive. In turn, the people of Sidom respond well to Alma's message and the church is established among them (Alma 15:12–13).

The story of Alma and Amulek reaches its most poignant moment as the setting of the household is mentioned one last time in connection to their companionship. Alma "took Amulek to his own house, and did administer unto him in his tribulations" (Alma 15:18). Just as Amulek had taken in and comforted Alma, now Alma takes in Amulek. After all that has happened to Amulek, we can understand why some healing might be necessary. Hospitality remains central to the story of Alma and Amulek to the end. It plays a role in our evaluation of entire cities but also reveals the contours of their friendship.

Immediately after the revelation of Sidom as a welcoming city, we are told of the downfall of Ammonihah, and the attention of the Book of Mormon turns to additional encounters between communities (this time Lamanite cities) and prophet/missionaries (Ammon and Aaron). While the Lamanite rulers are initially suspicious of these new messengers, in contrast to the people of Ammonihah they are able to welcome them into their homes and communities, benefiting spiritually from their message. Ultimately, where the people of Ammonihah suffer annihilation, the converts of Ammon and Aaron receive protection and comfort.

The story of Ammon and King Lamoni is interesting, not so much because it exemplifies the characteristics of good hosts and guests, but because it initially does the opposite, at least if we take seriously the elements of biblical hospitality described earlier. Not only does King Lamoni break the rules of hospitality with his rough treatment of Ammon (Alma 17:20), but the narrator informs us that Lamoni immediately begins questioning Ammon about his plans (Alma 17:22). Rather than offering an invitation that includes a prescribed length of stay, Lamoni suspiciously asks how long Ammon intends to stay. For his part, Ammon apparently sees no need to follow the rules of the guest. When Lamoni offers Ammon his daughter, Ammon refuses, thus rejecting what has been offered to him (a breach of protocol on the part of a guest; see Alma 17:24–25). Perhaps all of this heightens the dramatic tension. We know that Ammonihah had rejected the prophet, while Sidom had not.

The inhospitable initial encounter and explicit play of elements of hospitality make the reader wonder what will happen in this new city.

Whatever failures there might have been here (and it is not clear whether Ammon and Lamoni would have known about or have felt compelled to follow any ritual practices of hospitality), the initial awkwardness is overcome as Ammon actively and repeatedly degrades his own social status. Hospitality in the ancient world often demanded that the gifts of the host be equal to the status of the guest. It is possible, as Peter J. Sorensen suggests, that Ammon rejects the daughter because he believes that the gift is not commensurate with the status of a lowly “servant” that he wishes to adopt. His rejection of the gift may not have been a rejection of the hospitality protocol but a gentle correction to Lamoni’s misreading of the demands of hospitality in that instance.¹² His desire to “dwell among” the Lamanites, possibly until the day of his death, signifies a willingness to leave behind his Nephite heritage and adopt a new identity among the Lamanites. Despite this, it seems that Lamoni has taken Ammon as a guest under his protection, since we subsequently learn that Lamoni protects Ammon from the attack of his father in Alma 20:13–18.

Ammon’s self-degradation here, his lowering of his own social status, allows King Lamoni to accept Ammon into his household. As we saw with Alma and Amulek, an underlying message of these chapters is the power of letting a messenger of God into one’s home. Amulek was impressed by what he received from or through Alma as Alma was living in his household. Similarly, once Ammon is allowed into the royal household, he is able to perform the miracles that so greatly impress King Lamoni, beginning with the miraculous protection of the king’s flocks. Hospitality, allowing God’s servants inside one’s home, sets the stage for the workings of God’s spirit. Hospitality, the Book of Mormon implies, gives the foothold the Spirit needs to convert hearts and minds.

The pattern repeats with King Lamoni’s unnamed father, who is king of all the Lamanites. The father of Lamoni had been prepared by his encounter with Ammon earlier (Alma 20:8–27). Unlike the people of Ammonihah, he opens up his house to a traveling missionary, this time Aaron, who teaches by the Spirit, working miracles within the king’s home—most notably curing the king of his

spiritual coma in front of the queen and the other members of the household (Alma 22). After converting, the king proclaims a type of religious freedom that enshrines hospitality into law: “Yea, he sent a decree among them, that they should not lay their hands on them to bind them, or to cast them into prison; neither should they spit upon them, nor smite them, nor cast them out of their synagogues, nor scourge them; neither should they cast stones at them, but that they should *have free access to their houses*, and also their temples, and their sanctuaries” (Alma 23:2). Interestingly, the king does not require religious conversion, but he does require that the people receive the messengers into their most intimate places—a policy that seems quite successful as many convert to the church.

The Nephite-Ammonite-Zoramite Hospitality Cycle

In the Book of Mormon, stories of hospitality are not simply about individuals hosting individuals, but also about communities hosting communities. We have already seen how the people of Sidom took the refugees from Ammonihah into their homes. Earlier, during the reign of King Mosiah, the Nephite community had received two groups of wandering refugees. He welcomed first the people of Limhi into the Nephite community “with joy” (Mosiah 22:14); later, the group led by Alma was also received “with joy” (Mosiah 24:25). The parallel references to Mosiah’s emotional response highlight a celebratory attitude toward hospitality, a joyful openness to others. It is true that the people of Limhi were kinfolk to the Nephites, but the hospitality should not be discounted for this reason, particularly given the Book of Mormon background in which brothers quickly became strangers and enemies to each other.¹³ These wanderers are welcomed, not only as people in need, but also as people with sacred records and stories to tell. As Thomas Ogletree writes in his influential study of Christian hospitality, “Hospitality designates occasions of potential discovery which can open up our narrow, provincial worlds. Strangers have stories to tell which we have never heard before, stories which can redirect our seeing and stimulate our imaginations.”¹⁴ Similarly, as the people of Nephi hear the stories of these strangers and read their records, they are “struck with wonder and amazement” and “knew not what to think,” being torn by emotions of “exceedingly great joy” on the one hand and “many tears of sorrow” on the other (Mosiah 25:7–9).

Clearly, the stories of these wanderers stimulated the imagination of Nephites. They had access to those stories through their hospitality.

Perhaps the most impressive examples of communal hospitality to strangers in the Book of Mormon narrative begin where we left off with the Lamanite converts of Ammon and the sons of Mosiah, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. In their story, we find repeated acts of large-scale hospitality offered to destitute groups that seemingly have little to offer to the host community. The people who are eventually converted through Ammon's efforts later become politico-religious refugees, no longer welcome among the Lamanite/Amalekite communities. They seek and, in another act of dangerous hospitality, receive refuge and a place among the Nephite people in the land of Jershon (Alma 27). A few details make this act of hospitality particularly impressive. First, the name Jershon may be linked to the Hebrew root *yʾrō*, meaning "to inherit." If this is accurate, it amplifies the invitation of the Nephites that this would be an inheritance, that is, it was not simply a temporary arrangement until a better situation could be found. As with Zoram, the Nephite offer is one of permanent refuge, not temporary shelter. Second, the offer of hospitality is what we might call a grass-roots decision, with a "voice" of the people vowing to take in the Ammonites (Alma 27:22). This contrasts with other communities, such as Ammonihah, where the popular sentiment seemed to go against hospitality. Third, the offer of hospitality brings with it a new identity for the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, signified in a new name, the "people of Ammon" (Alma 27:26). The Anti-Nephi-Lehi identity is constituted by their role as generous hosts to Ammon and Aaron, while the people of Ammon's identity is constituted by their role as guests to the generous Nephites. Hospitality is again linked to the deepest sense of identity, just as it is in the story of Zoram, where groups or individuals are given a new name as they receive hospitality. Fourth, as in the case of Amulek, we have an instance of guided hospitality (see Alma 27:12), with the Lord playing a role connecting community with community and homes with those who are wandering.

Unfortunately, the Amalekites had angrily turned the people of Ammon into cultural scapegoats (Alma 27:3); and, in taking them in, the Nephites commit what the Lamanites interpret as an act of war. The people of Ammon refuse to participate in armed conflict, however, even though their presence is itself the cause of "tremen-

dous slaughter” among the Nephites who defend them (Alma 28:1–3). Thus, taking in this group gives no strategic advantage to the Nephites and instead causes them to endure tragic losses—an act of dangerous hospitality, a decision fraught with peril and tragic political implications. Here again we see a theme we found in the initial encounter of Nephi and Zoram. Each time hospitality comes up in the Book of Mormon, the consequences of the hospitality become more and more dire.

This pattern of dangerous hospitality is quickly repeated as the people of Ammon themselves offer protection to poverty-stricken refugees from the Zoramite community: “They did receive all the poor of the Zoramites that came over unto them, and did clothe them, and did give unto them lands for their inheritance; and they did administer unto them according to their wants” (Alma 35:9). We are told little about these refugees, other than that they were “many.” We know that these refugees were expelled based on a secret plot (Alma 35:3–6) driven by the Zoramite elite (Alma 35:3–6), the elite expulsion contrasting with the welcoming hospitality of popular “voice” of the people toward the people of Ammon. The narrative closely parallels what happened earlier when the people of Ammon themselves had been taken in as refugees. Now, however, it is *their* act of hospitality that causes the problem: threats are issued against the people of Ammon for accepting the Zoramite poor and another war is initiated (Alma 35:8–11). Here, the results of the dangerous hospitality become catastrophic. This conflict, in fact, ignites the series of bloody wars detailed in the remainder of the book of Alma. The saga of the people of Ammon, who act as both needy guests and generous hosts, does not give the impression that hospitality is safe or convenient—quite the opposite.

Throughout Alma 5–35, then, we are presented with a series of comparisons among individuals and cities, all involving hospitality to outsiders. Amulek’s hospitality is contrasted with the city of Ammonihah, while Ammonihah is also contrasted with Sidom. King Lamoni and his father, after initially going against the biblical typology, turn toward hospitality, as does the “voice” of the Nephite people. In the later chapters of this Alma, we see the final comparison as the Zoramites are contrasted with the people of Ammon. While the people of Ammon demonstrate reciprocity, providing hospitality as they had been given it, their contemporaries, the Zoramites, show an

extreme lack of hospitality. Indeed, there is a distinct hostility shown by the wealthy Zoramites toward their poor, powerless, and needy. We read that the poor were not permitted to cross the threshold into the Zoramite communities of worship: “They were not permitted to enter into the synagogues to worship God, being esteemed filthiness; therefore they were poor; yea, therefore they were esteemed by their brethren as dross” (Alma 32:3). As we will see, this lack of congregational hospitality will come under severe condemnation in many Book of Mormon sermons.

Hospitality in Book of Mormon Homily

Given that communities are judged by their hospitality in the book of Alma, it is no surprise that many Book of Mormon sermons condemn inhospitable treatment and use the imagery of hospitality to convey their ideas. Sorensen writes that this is certainly the case with Abinidi’s sermon before the greedy king Noah: “The prophet is reminding Noah that his people are beggars in the promised land, and that Jehovah will tolerate neither inhumanity nor arrogance.”¹⁵ We should note that it also plays a role in Jesus’s sermons to the Nephites. Whereas the wealthy Zoramites had cast out the poor from their meetings, Jesus commands that even unrepentant sinners should not be cast off: “Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out of your synagogues, or your places of worship, for unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them” (3 Nephi 18:32).

In Book of Mormon sermons, this hospitality within communities and congregations of worship mirrors God’s open invitation to his children. Just as congregations should open their arms to sinners and strangers, so God offers an open invitation to his people to come unto him. God is portrayed as the welcoming host in Nephi’s sermon in 2 Nephi 26:25–33, as he offers to share food with those who come unto him:

Behold, doth he cry unto any, saying: Depart from me? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; but he saith: Come unto me all ye ends of the earth, buy milk and honey, without money and without price. Behold, hath he commanded any that they should depart out of the synagogues, or out of the houses of worship? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. Behold, hath the

Lord commanded any that they should not partake of his goodness? Behold I say unto you, Nay; but all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden.

Perhaps the most interesting sermon relating to hospitality in the Book of Mormon can be found in the King Benjamin homily at the beginning of the book of Mosiah. In this address, Benjamin implores his people, saying, “And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish” (Mosiah 4:16). The physical imagery of “turning him out” or being “turned away” describes a failure of hospitality. The language of “turning him out” suggests that the beggars in question are homeless wanderers, who belong within the household or community in at least one sense. The language of “turning him away” also has overtones of a lack of hospitality. This language is used specifically with reference to strangers in 3 Nephi 24:5, where the resurrected Jesus, quoting Malachi, says that the Lord will frown upon those that “turn aside the stranger,” explicitly connecting the language of “turning away” with a failure of hospitality. Turning away implies a face-to-face encounter, as the poor are met, possibly at the threshold of home and community. The poor are portrayed as seeking entry into the lives of the community. At the door, the needy request entrance, are denied, and are physically turned away from the threshold or turned out of the community. Benjamin urges his people to grant the poor entrance into their homes, or otherwise give them help and sustenance, rather than turning them out in this way.

This call to hospitality through the physical imagery of turning away or turning out coheres with the larger rhetorical and theological context of the sermon. A major goal of the sermon seems to be to explain why people should not be turned out in this way. King Benjamin sets up his reasons for service, including acts of hospitality, with reminders of his people’s political and theological equality. All are beggars in need of aid, and all need to be taken in—that is, all are in need of hospitality (beggars, recall, are those that in Mosiah 4:16 have been “turned out”). People are equal theologically, first, because of their equal dependence on God for *continuing* life and sustenance (Mosiah 2:21–24) and second, because of their equal indebtedness in that they

were all created *initially* from the “dust of the earth” (verse 25). Such initial and continuing dependence, he says, makes it impossible for his people to claim self-sufficiency, to boast, and to make distinctions of what they *deserve* among themselves (verses 24–25). Since one cannot claim to have *earned* one’s belongings, one should not refuse to share one’s belongings (or, it follows, one’s household) with others. True, individuals are unequal in their material possessions and social status, but the theological equality prevents the wealthy from rationalizing away their inhospitable treatment.

King Benjamin uses this theological equality of neediness as a justification for a notion of political equality, saying, “For I am no better than ye yourselves are; for I am also of the dust.” Even kings, in other words, cannot escape the basic theology of equality. Earlier, his statements reflecting his political positions—his forbidding of slavery, his desire to earn a living through contributing to the work of the community—are prefaced by his affirmation of equality: “I am like as yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind.” Benjamin undercuts all claims that people have earned wealth and privilege, including any claim he himself might make. He stresses, “None shall be found blameless” (Mosiah 3:21) and asks, “Are we not all beggars?” (Mosiah 4:19).

Benjamin not only undercuts the boasting of the wealthy and powerful, invalidating their rationalizations about what they think they deserve, but he also dignifies the suffering of the poor and sorrowful. Indeed, he relates the message of an angel, describing the future Messiah figure as one who suffers—he shall “suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue” (Mosiah 3:7). One thing Benjamin is asserting is that people who are hungry and thirsty are not to be despised, since that is how the Messiah himself would live. The word “fatigue” specifically implies a wanderer without a place to rest, without a home. It is the image of Christ as a suffering person, without a place to rest, an image present in parts of the New Testament, which dominates King Benjamin’s sermon. In a world divided between the rich and poor, Benjamin places the Messiah himself within the circle of the homeless beggars. How can the poor *deserve* to suffer, Benjamin seems to ask, if Christ himself was a poor wanderer? How can we then turn out the poor from our homes and communities?

After the affirmation of theological and political equality, the

humbling of the rich and the exaltation of the poor, Benjamin launches into the specifics of his social ethic, which is centered on the care of the needy and suffering. All are beggars before God; and, in this sense, turning away the poor is a denial of one's own dependence on God—it is an act of willful self-deception concerning the realities of one's own existence. People should not turn away the needy when God does not turn away from them. Not only is it an act of pride, but turning away the poor is also an affront to the coming Messiah, who himself will wander poor, hungry, and homeless.

The logic of the sermon involves linking knowledge with service. Benjamin first equates serving others with serving God (Mosiah 2:17) and then stipulates that serving God is the only way to know him (Mosiah 5:13). This leads to the conclusion that serving others brings knowledge of God, and it is no accident that this connection follows the detailed account of his ethic of service. As individuals turn away strangers and beggars, they become strangers to God; we fail to know him. "For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served," Benjamin probes, "and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?" This is another Book of Mormon example of Ogletree's linkage of hospitality, knowledge, and interpersonal discovery: As people engage in hospitality, they learn about each other and from each other.

Mormon excoriates the Nephites who turn their backs on the poor (Alma 4:12–13). He asks, "Yea, and will you persist in turning your backs upon the poor, and the needy, and in withholding your substance from them?" (Alma 5:55). Amulek warns the Zoramites that they will not be redeemed if they turn away the needy and naked (Alma 34:28). Mormon laments that the Gadianton robbers "did trample under their feet and smite and rend and turn their backs upon the poor and the meek" (Helaman 6:39). When Moroni was without living family or friend, he exclaimed, "Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not?" (Mormon 8:39). This very physical imagery, "turning away," "turning aside," or letting the poor "pass by" suggests not only caring from the poor from a safe distance, but also encountering the poor in their embodied presence, meeting them face to face, eyes looking into eyes, hands clasping hands. The connection of this imagery to acts of hospitality is strengthened

when we recognize in the biblical literature the link that is made between charity and hospitality (e.g., Isaiah 58:7). The household was the place where food was prepared, where clothes were made, and where shelter was given. There were few other institutions that supplied these material needs. To talk about charity, in many cases, was at the same time to talk about hospitality—welcoming the needy into one’s space and community.

Hospitality in the Book of Mormon: God as Host to Strangers in the Promised Land

Another way hospitality is shown in the Book of Mormon is through the imagery of Lehi’s family, a wandering branch of Israel, being taken in by God in a promised land. The ancient Israelites saw themselves as strangers who were being shown God’s hospitality in the land of promise. The ethic of hospitality was derived theologically from this understanding of God: God had been hospitable to Israel, therefore Israel should be hospitable to strangers (Deuteronomy. 10:19). Pohl writes that the Israelites “were to view themselves as aliens in their own land, for God owned the land and they were to be its stewards and caretakers, living in it by God’s permission and grace. They were the chosen people—chosen, yet still aliens.”¹⁶

The image of God as a gracious host to aliens in the land of promise is echoed in the Book of Mormon. It seems that the children of Lehi think of themselves as strangers in a foreign land, feeling acutely the need of a generous host: “Yea, blessed is the name of my God, who has been mindful of this people, who are a branch of the tree of Israel, and has been lost from its body in a strange land; yea, I say, blessed be the name of my God, who has been mindful of us, wanderers in a strange land” (Alma 26:36). God, like an ancient host, protects his wandering people. Likewise, Jacob describes his people as “a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness” (Jacob 7:26; see also Alma 13:23). Clearly, the Lehites sometimes understood themselves as strangers in a strange land, wanderers, outcasts in need of protection.

These strangers recognize that their continued survival is dependent on their host, who receives them mercifully: “Wherefore, I, Lehi, have obtained a promise, that inasmuch as those whom the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his

commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations . . . and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance; and they shall dwell safely forever” (2 Nephi 1:9). The guests are told they can stay in the Lord’s promised land if they abide by the terms of the covenant. It is not an unreasonable interpretation of the narrative sweep of the Book of Mormon to posit that the decline of the Nephite and Lamanite civilizations comes about through violations of the hospitality covenant. Hospitality is not only found in stories and homilies but may also be central to understanding the larger story of the rise and fall of civilizations.

But what part of hospitality have the Nephites violated, exactly? The terms by which the children of Lehi are allowed to stay in the Promised Land, it could be said, mirror the terms of the hospitality relationship in the ancient world. Once hospitality is offered and accepted, the participants must abide by the rules of hospitality. The guest may violate the terms of hospitality in various ways, as T. R. Hobbs explains: “As a guest, the stranger is in a liminal phase, and may infringe upon the guest/host relationship: by insulting the host through hostility or rivalry; by usurping the role of the host; by refusing what is offered.”¹⁷ Although all of these violations may apply, it is this last condition that the Nephites seem to have broken most prominently. God states they have rejected his offer of gathering them to him. He laments, “How oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not” (3 Nephi 10:5). The guests have, in other words, refused what had been offered by the generous host. The protection of the host is thereby lost.

Conclusion and Implications

The ethos of hospitality in the Book of Mormon reveals itself in the stories, homilies, themes, and imagery that pervade the text. In many ways, its hospitality ethic parallels the ethic of hospitality in the ancient world. As in the Bible, hospitality in the Book of Mormon is a standard by which entire communities are judged. A community’s hospitality, in short, reveals its character. Of particular interest in the Book of Mormon is how prophets and missionaries are treated, which echo themes from the Bible as “holy men” are taken into homes through hospitality. As in the Old Testament, strangers like Zoram are turned into allies, and kin relationships are expand-

ed through acts of hospitality. In the Book of Mormon, hospitality also seems to involve a set of mutual expectations on the part of the host and the guest, just as it did in the ancient world. God hosts Lehi's family in the Promised Land on terms established by covenant, and Nephi hosts Zoram on similar terms. The image of God as a generous host to guests who abide by the rules of hospitality connects the themes of the Book of Mormon to the Old Testament.

The Book of Mormon also seems to contain some new points of emphasis. It highlights the need for hospitality not only in households but also in congregations and communities. Indeed, the Book of Mormon seems to expand the scope of hospitality. Hospitality should be offered not simply when one is safe and comfortable, but also in dangerous circumstances. Hospitality involves not just supplying food and shelter but also providing enduring relationships and community connections. These connections have the potential to fundamentally change one's identity, signified in the Book of Mormon by the assignment of new group names. In addition to dangerous hospitality, the Book of Mormon also emphasizes the idea of guided hospitality, where God directly arranges meetings of guests and hosts through revelation. Finally, the Book of Mormon, in looking at Amulek, Lamoni, and Lamoni's father, emphasizes the role of hospitality in connecting individuals to moments of spiritual power. As characters let each other into their intimate spaces, spiritual miracles ensue.

The Book of Mormon, by expanding hospitality and framing it as community inclusion based on equality, may speak to the current debate about how hospitality should be lived in the modern world. Travel is no longer as dangerous as it was anciently, so the sociological conditions driving the ancient practice are virtually non-existent today. For these reasons, writers such as T. R. Hobbs have complained that ancient hospitality had little to do with "being kind to strangers" and that "indiscriminate use of this ancient material"¹⁸ commits what he calls the "teleological fallacy," which is using ancient documents as a "springboard for modern polemic."¹⁹

In contrast, other writers have pointed to contemporary conditions that mirror ancient conditions and that thus serve to make hospitality relevant. Pohl writes:

We struggle to find better ways to respond to homeless people, people

with disabilities, immigrants and refugees. Questions about diversity and inclusion, boundaries and community challenge us daily. We search for more personal ways to respond to youth who are detached and alienated from family, school, and church. In many cases, we feel as if we are strangers ourselves, even in our own families and churches, and we long for bonds that give life and meaning.²⁰

Waldemar Janzen seems to concur with this assessment, and argues that certain contemporary conditions are analogous to what was faced by the ancients, and that these conditions call for renewed attention to hospitality in the modern world. Janzen writes:

It may help us remember that travel, in the ancient world, was only undertaken for grave reasons, often negative in nature, such as flight from persecution or search for food and survival. Hospitality, under those circumstances, has little to do with modern tourism, but embraces the biblical equivalent of our policies regarding refugees, immigration, welfare, and social security.²¹

The emphasis in the Book of Mormon, we suggest, directs readers in this interpretive direction rather than the direction suggested by Hobbs. Hospitality in the Book of Mormon emphasizes the more expansive aspects of hospitality hinted at in the Old Testament—hospitality tied not just to personal honor, as Hobbs suggests, but also to understandings of human and divine communities. Hospitality in the Book of Mormon is not just a host increasing his honor by being generous to a potential enemy under his roof; it is also an opportunity to act as God acts toward others, with kindness and mercy, offering up one's home as a place of safety and protection. In this case, the Book of Mormon highlights the need for a greater sense of face-to-face hospitality in contemporary life, a hospitality extended to strangers and to the poor, a hospitality offered to immigrants, sinners, and refugees, a hospitality where individuals see in others the image of the God they serve, a hospitality that reminds the readers of their equal dependency and vulnerability. It is a hospitality that is required even when it is inconvenient or risky. It is the same hospitality that human beings seek as they yearn for the presence of a generous God.

Notes

1. Bruce J. Malina, "The Received View and What It Cannot Do: III John and Hospitality," *Semia Studies* 35 (1986): 181.

2. Scott Morschauser, “‘Hospitality,’ Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19.1–9,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (2003): 461–85.

3. Other examples from the Hebrew Bible include Genesis 24, 29; Exodus 2; Joshua 2:1–21; and Judges 1.

4. Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 29.

5. See Victor H. Matthews, “Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21 (1991): 13–21; Bob Stallman, “Divine Hospitality in the Pentateuch: A Metaphorical Perspective on God as Host” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary [Philadelphia, Pa.], 1999); Malina, 171–86; T. R. Hobbs, “Hospitality in the First Testament and the ‘Teleological Fallacy,’” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26 (2001): 3–29; R. A. Wright, “The Establishing of Hospitality in the Old Testament” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1989).

6. For specific New Testament examples of this ethic of hospitality, see Malina, “The Recieved View,” 184–85.

7. Matthews, “Hospitality and Hostility,” 14.

8. Pohl, *Making Room*, 13.

9. Peter J. Sorensen, “The Lost Commandments: The Sacred Rites of Hospitality,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 21.

10. Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 208.

11. Pohl, *Making Room*, 26.

12. Sorensen, “The Lost Commandments,” 22–23.

13. We would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful input. One reviewer points out that most of the references to “strangers” in the Book of Mormon come from the brass plates. Perhaps this is because the Lehighites saw themselves as a family, and the concept of a stranger therefore did not therefore apply in their new environment.

14. Thomas W. Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 2–3.

15. Sorensen, “The Lost Commandments,” 22.

16. Pohl, *Making Room*, 27.

17. Hobbs, “Hospitality in the First Testament,” 11.

18. *Ibid.*, 29.

19. *Ibid.*, 5.

20. Pohl, *Making Room*, 7.

21. Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*, 43.