Arterbury, Andrew

Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting

New Testament Monographs 8


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Recent Ph.D.’s in New Testament will be glad for the rebirth of a publishing outlet for their theses in Sheffield out of the ashes of Sheffield Academic Press (notwithstanding the continuation of the old Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series under the auspices of T&T Clark, now an imprint of Continuum, under the label of Library of New Testament Studies). This volume began as a Baylor dissertation; the author is now an Assistant Professor of Religion at that university. The stimulus for the research was Arterbury’s perception of widespread confusion in the guild between hospitality and table fellowship.

Arterbury’s thesis models clarity and simplicity. Throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, hospitality (in Greek, xenia) “referred to the act of assisting one or more travelers for a limited amount of time. This assistance essentially consisted of provisions and protection” (6). Most commonly, the host provided water for the guest to wash his feet, a meal or meals, lodging for one or a few nights, and some provisions for the continuation of his journey. At mealtime, the host would inquire about the identity of the guest, leading to decisions about if and how the relationship would continue. At the end of the book, Arterbury applies this model to Acts 10–11, arguing that the narrative of Peter and Cornelius is best interpreted as reflecting three successive experiences of hospitality, all
of which combine to demonstrate that God was now offering hospitality to Gentiles in Christ.

The first main part, occupying two-thirds of the volume, surveys “Mediterranean Hospitality in Antiquity. Three detailed chapters explore the Greco-Roman, Jewish, and early Christian worlds, respectively. The bulk of each of these chapters comprises Arterbury’s summaries and excerpts of a wide swath of relevant literature from Homer to the Hellenistic age, from the Greek novels to Dio Chrysostom’s The Hunter, from the Hebrew Scriptures (with special attention to Abraham in Gen 18 and subsequent Jewish traditions of Abraham’s hospitality) to the Second Temple Jewish literature, and from the New Testament to noncanonical Christian texts. Arterbury provides enough detail for readers unfamiliar with a particular narrative to understand the gist of the story and to see why he is using the account to illustrate hospitality, but not enough context to help one determine if he has missed something that might call his interpretations into question at any point.

Four features characterized Greco-Roman hospitality, in addition to the common elements of all ancient Mediterranean practice already noted: (1) there were both temporary and permanent forms of hospitality, the latter often leading to elaborate processes of gift-giving and expectations of reciprocity; (2) hospitality was both a relation and a quality; (3) a clear distinction existed between public and private forms; and (4) at least five motives can be delineated for extending hospitality: (a) warding off potential “magic” that might otherwise be used against a person; (b) believing that the gods might visit a person in human form; (c) believing that it was what the gods desired people do; (d) recognizing the personal benefits that might accrue from “contractual” (reciprocal) forms of hospitality; and (e) acting out of pure altruism. Arterbury also observes a recurring cluster of Greek terms, in addition to the xen-root, in descriptions of hospitality: ἄσπαζομαι for greetings, καλέω for inviting, δέχομαι for welcoming, ἀγω or ἔρχομαι plus εἰς τὸν οἶκον for entering the house, μένω for staying there, καταλύω for spending the night, and πρόερχόμαι for being sent on with provisions when the guest departs.

In Jewish hospitality, travelers’ stays tended to be shorter, much less emphasis was placed on gift-giving, and hospitality was a particular function of the synagogue and its officials, frequently extended to traveling pairs of teachers. Otherwise, most of the features noted in the Greco-Roman world remained quite similar. Akin to its convictions to be the uniquely elect people of God, however, Jews were more likely to extend hospitality only to a co-religionist than to a total stranger from some Gentile background. On the other hand, “whereas in ancient Greece only men took prominent roles in this social convention, at times in ancient Israel women were major participants (85–86). Even more strikingly, at times the Jewish sources describe Yahweh himself as the ideal host.
Because all the first Christians were Jews, and the next round primarily Greeks or Romans, it causes no surprise to see most of the elements surveyed already recurring in early Christianity. Particularly important was the practice of extending hospitality to traveling missionaries—a boon to the recipients in a world without consistently safe, wholesome forms of public lodging but potentially a drain on the church’s resources, especially when itinerants overstayed their welcome. Without this background, it remains harder to understand Paul’s recurring requests for hospitality for himself and his representative or to make sense of Didache’s criterion of length of stay by a visitor for determining if he or she was a true or false prophet! A rereading of John 4 on the assumption that Jesus was asking for hospitality from the Samaritan woman discloses several new insights not regularly rehearsed in the standard expositions. The same may be said on a smaller scale of 2 John, while Matt 10:14 and 42, like Matt 25:31–46, make more sense once it is recognized that “the host’s extension of hospitality to a traveling teacher was an indication that the host accepted or agreed with the teaching of the traveling teacher” (123). By the third century, however, Christian practice underwent a dramatic shift as hospitality was placed under the authority of bishops and hospitality “morphed” into a charitable service performed by entire congregations and supported by treasuries of funds to which they donated.

Part 2 seeks to apply all this background material. “The Custom of Hospitality in Luke’s Writings” is combined “with a Focus on Acts 10–11” in one large chapter preceding the conclusion. Enough examples appear under the former headings, reinforcing the patterns already detected, to make Arterbury’s interpretation of the Cornelius narrative plausible. While Simon Peter is receiving hospitality from the probably ritually impure Simon the tanner, he himself receives the representatives of Cornelius’s household in a context of hospitality and in turn is received by Cornelius in a similar context. Peter’s encounter with three strangers at noontime makes one think of Abraham’s similar experience in Gen 18. But the climactic focus of the passage is not on the hospitality that Peter either receives or extends but on that which God is offering to the Gentiles, with Cornelius’s household as their representatives and Peter’s ministry as God incognito. That he gives the gift of the Holy Spirit shows that this is permanent hospitality and that there is no way the Gentiles can (or can be expected to) repay God. Indeed it is God, not Zeus (often viewed as a god of hospitality), who reveals himself here as the true source of this virtue. Christians of both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds would recognize the need to follow God’s model and extend the influence of the gospel in their missionary work through a ministry of hospitality.

Arterbury has certainly canvassed enough background material and identified sufficiently common elements with Acts 10–11 to make his thesis essentially persuasive. Perhaps the biggest disappointment in the volume is that, with all this wonderful cultural and
exegetical background, the only detailed New Testament application is to this one passage, and the discussion occupies less than thirty pages of the entire book. The door remains wide open for either Arterbury or someone else to build on this study with numerous further applications to the distinctively Christian Scriptures.

Other quibbles are all minor. There are a few typos, particularly with the reproduction of the Greek and other things spellcheckers do not catch (“descendents,” “Calwar,” and unrevised page references—“pp. 3–7” on p. 170 should be “pp. 17–21”). There are a few curious sources—Brenton’s uncritical edition of the Septuagint, study notes from the Oxford Annotated Bible—or omissions (D. Macdonald’s works on Homer and the New Testament or the Hermeneia commentary on the Didache). Many of the references to ancient sources in the summary sections are actually new ones, never previously introduced or discussed. The so-called technical terms for hospitality are among some of the most common and ordinary words in the Greek language—“greet,” “go,” “receive,” “send on,” “remain,” “lead,” or “in the house”—that one wonders what activities of people coming and going from each other’s homes would not employ such terminology! Indeed, the lack of any foil or example, discussed in any detail, showing what does not constitute hospitality stands out somewhat. Nevertheless, the author has accomplished his comparatively modest exegetical objectives, for which scholars may be grateful. If we learn nothing strikingly new about the New Testament, the sheer breadth of background texts assembled and surveyed in one slim volume forms a collection of material for which we can be grateful.