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**The Rewards of Hospitality:
A Case Study of Gen 18:1-16a**

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Abstract

Hospitality is a value ingrained in all human beings. Ghanaians love to practice hospitality and it is common to hear foreigners mention "Ghanaian Hospitality." Unfortunately, this valuable gift seems to elude contemporary Ghanaians. The practice of hospitality has been taken advantage of by armed robbery, pretenders, and lazy people, so that a hospitable person becomes a victim of their attack. Instead of the rewards of hospitality, cheerful heart, smiles, joy, that perpetuates healthy life, sadness, grief, sorrow, sickness and sometimes death have become the result. Consequently, Ghanaians have become afraid and reluctant to practice this virtue. Engaging traditional Ewe wisdom with Gen 18:1-16a, the paper seeks to explore through exegetical and intercultural study the value of hospitality within the Ewe and the Hebrew cultures to propose a re-conversion towards 'hospitality' for contemporary Ghanaian Christians.

Key Words

Hospitality, The Ewe, Trust, Responsibility, Ghanaian Hospitality,
Gen 18:1-16a.

Introduction

Hospitality is the receptive quality, the act, and the openness to a guest.¹ In this understanding of Webster, hospitality is the act of friendly reception of a guest, showing kindness, giving comfort in entertainment, to enhance health, growth, and to ensure security of the guest (Gen 19:6-11). Acceptance of hospitality means accepting the person who offered hospitality and rejection of hospitality means rejecting the person who offered hospitality. The rejection of hospitality cast a slur on the person who rejected it and may have consequences on relationships because rejection will mean the supposed recipient has a mixed feeling about the offer.² But giving and accepting hospitality yield more benefit to the giver and the receiver because at the end, both the one who gives and the one who receives enhance their own health and life. Therefore, hospitality has mutual benefits and is demonstrated vividly in the story of Gen 18:1-16a: the guests, on one hand, had a fill of their stomach, relief from the scorching sun, and the energy to reach their destination; and Abraham and Sarah, on the other hand, had the benefit of deliverance from the distress of not having a child.³

There are diverse ways that hospitality is expressed, but more essentially in the following three areas: to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, and to shelter the homeless. Israel is always reminded of its former status as a stranger who was in need of hospitality (Lev 19:33-34; Acts 7:6).⁴ In the ancient Near East (ANE), hospitality is a necessity for survival and so demands that enemies reconcile in order to offer and to accept hospitality.⁵ Once a guest is accepted by a host, he or she becomes sacred and must be protected and shown love.⁶ No charge is made and no gift is accepted in return. The guest in return is supposed to live a worthy life not to mar the name of the host.⁷

¹ *Webster's New World Dictionary* (ed. in ch. David B. Guralnik, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1988), 653.

² John Kuada and Yao Chachah, *Ghana. Understanding the People and their Culture* (Accra: Woeli Publishing Service, 1999), 76.

³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36. A Continental Commentary* (transl. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 275.

⁴ Xavier Léon-Dufour, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (updated 2nd ed. transl. E. M. Stewart, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), 243.

⁵ L. T. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (London: Geoffrey Chapman Publication, 1995), 374.

⁶ Léon-Dufour, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 243.

⁷ McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 374.

Hospitality, as the essence of humanness, becomes complete in good relationship in which other human beings also enjoy some comfort of life. The implication is sacrifice, to the point of an inconvenience of oneself or of friends (Luke 11:5-8), just to make the guest happy and to feel at home. Abraham demonstrated this, Job prided over it (Job 31:31-32), and was approved by Jesus Christ (Luke 7:44-47); it is a fraternal charity that makes the Christian very much aware of his or her responsibility to others as humans (Rev 12:13; 13:8).⁸ In that regard, Slavcheva notes human personality is possible only when others also exist and partake in the fruits of the earth.⁹

Hospitality is a value ingrained in all human beings. Ghanaians love to practice hospitality and it is common to hear foreigners mention “Ghanaian Hospitality.” A guest is always a king, or a queen and he or she is given the best of everything. Abraham did just that by giving the best to his guest, which is noted of Ghanaians. Unfortunately, this valuable gift seems to elude contemporary Ghanaians. The practice of hospitality has been taken advantage of by armed robbery, pretenders, and lazy people, so that a hospitable person becomes a victim of their attack. Instead of the rewards of hospitality, cheerful heart, smiles, joy, that perpetuates healthy life, sadness, grief, sorrow, sickness and sometimes death have become the result. Consequently, Ghanaians have become afraid and reluctant to practice this virtue with a conscious disappearing of love of neighbour.¹⁰ Engaging traditional Ewe wisdom with exegetical analysis of Gen 18:1-16a in the intercultural perspective, the paper seeks to explore the value of hospitality in the Ewe and Biblical cultures to propose a re-conversion towards ‘hospitality’ for contemporary Ghanaian Christians.

This paper engages in exegetical and theological analysis of the text, the Ghanaian hospitality of a guest, the reasons why a contemporary Ghanaian will not want to offer hospitality, and finally the need to offer hospitality despite the abuses of hospitality today.

⁸ Léon-Dufour, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 243,

⁹ Kameliya Slavcheva, “Human Rights, Dignity and Freedom: An Orthodox Perspective,” *Baptistic Theologies* 3.2 (2011), 120.

¹⁰ Augustine Mensah, “The ‘Neighbour’ in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37)” *GJRT* 9.2 (2019).

The Analysis of Text

Background to the Text

In the ANE, hospitality is mostly seen in having a grand dinner or giving a bed to a friend for the night.¹¹ It means literally taking a stranger into one's home; and is a highly esteemed virtue, particularly in a nomadic society like that to which Abraham belonged. In the eyes of such a society, the guest is almost sacred, and any passing traveller, even a member of a hostile tribe, is entitled to become one.¹² The necessity of hospitality to a stranger is an essential part of the culture that there are motifs of common ancient literature that motivates and encourages the entertainment of strangers. Such stories exist to instill the spirit of hospitality among the people; but most especially, the idea of entertaining a divine guest, obliges them to offer hospitality.¹³ Such was the case in the life of Abraham.

A critical study of the text from vv. 1-8 gave the impression, as if, the son was a reward for having fulfilled the piety of hospitality demanded by custom (vv. 9-16a).¹⁴ In that sense, Abraham has passed the test of hospitality, but chaps. 15 and 17 made that assumption impossible because Abraham was already promised a child and the seemingly reward for hospitality was just to give the definite time of the long awaited child.¹⁵ Abraham later got to know that the visitors were divine, in conformity to the ancient stories.¹⁶ To buttress the fact that hospitality was an essential customary rite in the ANE; Lot, the nephew of Abraham (Gen 19:1-11) and the man of Gibeah (Judg 19:16-24) did likewise.

Vv. 1-2 The Encounter

The narrator made us aware that Yhwh appeared to Abraham at his home (v.1). But for Abraham, three men appeared to him, and it

¹¹ John C. L. Gibson, *Genesis. The Daily Study Bible Series*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 75.

¹² Gibson, *Genesis*, 76.

¹³ Cuthbert A. Simpson, "The Book of Genesis" in *The Interpreter's Bible vol. I* (ed. Nolan Harmon, New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 616.

¹⁴ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 274.

¹⁵ Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis" in *NIB. Vol. I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 462.

¹⁶ Similar divine visitations also occurred in the life of the following persons: Jacob (28:18); Gideon (Judg 6:22); Manoah and his wife (Judg 13:20-21).

was unexpected (v. 2).¹⁷ According to Westermann, the presence of the three men in front of Abraham is the oriental equivalent of knocking (see also Judg 19:15), which is done in the Ewe culture.¹⁸ The syntagm “entrance to his tent” in v. 2, is repeated in v. 10 to describe Sarah’s sitting position. The terebinth of Mamre reminds us of Gen 13:18.¹⁹ Fox linked the “three men” to the anthropomorphic character of Genesis; God’s messengers, he said have human appearance and are sometimes taken for God himself.²⁰ According to the Midrash, an angel performs only one role at a time; so, the reason for the three angels was for three specific roles.²¹ The first angel was to announce the birth of Isaac, the second to destroy Sodom, and the third to save Lot and family.²²

No name has been mentioned except “three men;” however, one of them became Yhwh in vv. 10 and 13.²³ Even, the name of Abraham was mentioned only in v. 6.²⁴ The narrator suggests a divine character to the three men, “and the Lord appeared,” but this knowledge is only to the reader, which still leaves Abraham in the dark about their divinity. In that sense, Abraham’s gesture of prostration, “bowed himself to the earth” was an oriental expression of self-deprecating courtesy and not as a homage to the

¹⁷ Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 462-463; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 277.

¹⁸ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 277.

¹⁹ Once again, it echoed Abraham, the sojourner and tent dweller, the man who is childless and who inhabits a homely house opened to the hospitality of the Bedawin. See Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis. A New Reading* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday company, 1977), 226; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 277.

²⁰ Everett Fox, *Genesis and Exodus: A New English Rendition with Commentary and Notes* (NY: Abingdon Press, 1990), 67. Read also the tale told by Ovid and Hyginus, of how Jupiter, Neptune, and Mercury (i.e., three visitors, as in Genesis), while travelling through Boeotia, came in disguise to Hyrieus, a childless peasant (or a prince) of Tanagra, and, in return for his hospitality, granted him the boon of a son, who became Orion. See Vawter, *On Genesis. A New Reading*, 227; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 275-276; Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 462. Linking Abraham’s story to the Greek story of manifestation of the gods, Westermann recounts “narratives of visits by gods to men are so widespread throughout the world that we must assume a long period of development and an abundance of variants. The motif as it appears in Gen 18:1-16a, therefore, cannot be explained directly as a parallel to the Greek narrative; it is to be traced back through its Near Eastern prehistory; no direct parallel to it has been found so far, though there are traces in Sumerian myths.” See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 276.

²¹ J. H. Hertz (ed), *Pentateuch & Haftorahs. Hebrew Text English Translation & Commentary* (London: Soncino Press, 1967), 63; Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 63.

²² Hertz (ed), *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 63.

²³ Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Commentary on the Holy Bible - Genesis to Esther* (Nashville, Tennessee: Royal Publishers, Inc, 1979), 52.

²⁴ Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” 462.

divine beings. Lot and others did likewise (Gen 19:1; see also Gen 23:7; 1 Sam 24:8; 2 Sam 14:4, 22; 1 Kgs 1:31).²⁵

The Abraham scenario seemed like an adaptation to the seminomadic episode of the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat (tablet V: 6-7) in which the childless Dan'el is visited by the god, Kothar.²⁶ These are the verbal links between the two stories: Dan'el was sitting at the entrance, overshadowed by a tree; he lifts up his eyes to see a divine visitor; he asked his wife to prepare a meal from the choice of the flock for the visitor; and a son was promised.²⁷

Vv. 3-4 Receptive Attitude

Abraham demonstrated an excellent attitude of hospitality in his reception by giving them a rest from the scorching sun.²⁸ The phrase "my Lord", yn"©doa] a vocative singular is misleading because the visitors were three. A shift occurred into the plural in v. 4 with the use of ~k,yleg>r:, "your feet" with second person masculine plural suffix.²⁹ Later in v. 10 and vv. 13-15, Abraham used yn"©doa in addressing the one who remained with him, while the other two head on to Sodom and Gomorrah.³⁰ It is inappropriate to read meaning into the story as if Abraham knew they were divine beings.

The statement "Let a little water be fetched" is in accord with the Jewish tradition. The first hospitality to a guest is to fetch water and wash the guest's feet³¹ and to "take a rest under the tree" is to pave way for the entertainment of food and drinks, which are essential requirements of hospitality for a guest. Here, Abraham is

²⁵ Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," 463.

²⁶ Robert Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 1997), 77; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 274.

²⁷ Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels. Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1997), 67-68; Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary*, 77.

²⁸ They needed comfort from the scorching Sun and Abraham saw through that. See also Josh 5:13; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 277.

²⁹ Vawter, *On Genesis. A New Reading*, 226-227. There are two possibilities here: the first is that someone read meaning into the story since Abraham addressed one of the three as God in vv. 10, 13-15; and the one he addressed as God remained with him after the two angels left to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18). The second possibility is that the text could be a fusion of two traditions, in which in one tradition, it is only one visitor to correspond with the story of Aqhat of Dan'el and the other tradition with a version that has three visitors, which will then explain the switch from singular to plural and unfortunately, it was not well taken care of by the editor.

³⁰ Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary*, 77; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 278.

³¹ See Gen 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 278.

figured as the exemplary dispenser of hospitality.³² Remember, the Hebrew culture revolves around Abraham and no doubt he is made to demonstrate it.

V. 5 The Acts of Hospitality

The mode of Abraham's invitation, his anxiety, and the haste are symbolisms of service to others.³³ There was no indication that they knew one another and in fact, there is no need for people to know one another before rendering or accepting services of hospitality.³⁴ The response "do as you have said" is an acceptance and a welcome of hospitality. In ancient tales, the greater person is succinct in utterance and the lesser person garrulous, which is evidenced in Abraham's plenty talk. Another good example, in the Bible is the case of Obadiah and Elijah (1Kgs 18:7-15).³⁵ A good host will always esteem his or her guests above himself or herself because he or she must be at their beck and call; Abraham has become their servant (v. 3). Hospitality is service, and rendering that service always placed the giver of hospitality lower in dignity than the recipient of hospitality. Abraham has become their servant, and his words and actions depicted a welcome attitude that enabled his guest felt at home and relaxed. They enjoyed some peace and rest before battling the blazing sun again to their destination.³⁶

Abraham's diplomacy is seen in his modest promises: "a little water" (v. 4) and "a morsel of bread," while he hastened to prepare a sumptuous feast, a big feast, the hall mark of a good hospitable person.

Vv. 6-8 Generosity, Key to Hospitality

Hospitality goes with generosity and service. Abraham's generosity is embedded in his hospitality, and this is expressed in the quantity of food that he prepared namely, "three measures of fine meal."³⁷ His act of service is seen in the following gestures: "please" three times; "runs" two times, "hurry" three times, and "fetch" four

³² Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary*, 78; Vawter, *On Genesis. A New Reading*, 226.

³³ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 277.

³⁴ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 277-278.

³⁵ Simpson, "The Book of Genesis," 618.

³⁶ Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," 463.

³⁷ Vawter, *On Genesis. A New Reading*, 226; This is not because of their number, 'three' but a generosity from the heart. The quantity of food was way too much to imagine. See also Simpson, "The Book of Genesis," 618.

times. Alter notes that “fetch” appears four times in rapid succession, “hurry” three times as indications of the flurry of hospitable activity.³⁸ Abraham stood by them because in the oriental custom, the host stood by to attend to the need of the guest.³⁹ This is the only place in the Bible that divine beings were mentioned to have eaten or appeared to do so (Tobit 12:19). It is always good to conform to the social habits of the people and the angels demonstrated it.⁴⁰

Vv. 9 - 10 The Benefits of Hospitality

Until now, there has not been any formal introduction. Surprisingly, in v. 9, one of the guests strangely mentioned the name of Sarah. Abraham, their host, should be startled at this revelation and this should have set the stage to inquire into their personality. Again, in v. 10, a child is promised. These are indicators that the three men were not ordinary human beings; an ordinary human being cannot promise a child. Eye brow is always raised at certain comments and to promise a child means there is a supernatural power at stake.⁴¹ In the case of Dan’el, El was the one who proposed a child after Dan’el had fed them.⁴² In case of Abraham, the fulfillment of Yhwh’s promise of a child (Gen 15:1-21; 17:1-27) was made definite to them after their acts of hospitality. A time frame has been given for the birth of the child and the child will be a son from a mother who is postmenopausal. Alter associates “at this very season” with the annunciation type-scene, which always involves barrenness, the promise of a son by God, angel or holy man, and fulfilment of the promise in conception and birth. This text is the first of its kind in the Bible.⁴³ A similar example is in 2 Kgs 4:8-11, 14-16, Elisha received hospitality as a holy man.⁴⁴ The narrator identifies the speaker to us as Yhwh (v. 10).

³⁸ Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary*, 78.

³⁹ Hertz (ed), *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 63.

⁴⁰ Hertz (ed), *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 64.

⁴¹ Vawter, *On Genesis. A New Reading*, 227.

⁴² Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 67-68.

⁴³ Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary*, 78.

⁴⁴ First, it was only food but later, they furnished a little room for him. In response, Elisha asked if something could be done for her as a reward for her good deeds. Gehazi answered, she has no son, and the husband is getting on in years. Call her said Elisha and when she came he made a promise to her “this time next year you will be fondling a baby son.”

Vv. 11 – 15 The Irresistible and the Limitless Power of Yhwh

These verses brought to fore human limitedness and God's limitless power over his creatures. The narrator identifies the speaker again as Yhwh (v.13), as he inquires about Sarah's laughter. Sarah should have known better. Here, it is Sarah's reaction that is important and not Abraham.⁴⁵ Sarah laughed, just as Abraham did in Gen 17:17, when God made the same promise of a son.⁴⁶ Sarah was in a tent far away, but the guest knew that she laughed; even though, the laughter was silent and was to herself.⁴⁷ Without prejudice, it could be possible that Sarah laughed because Abraham did not communicate the encounter of chaps. 15 and 17 to her.⁴⁸ If that is the case, it is possible she laughed because the promise is coming from "cheap men" who had eaten free food and drank free drinks and wanted to please their host with such a promise. In that sense, Sarah did not conceive the hand of Yhwh in this promise of the guest.

However, accepting that they were aware of the earlier promise, then the conception of the child could be describe in these words of Westermann "encounters not gratitude and joy, but skepticism and doubt."⁴⁹ This is because some considerable time had elapsed since the promise of a child was made known to Abraham; and now that human limitedness for all females had set in on Sarah, the fulfilment of the promise is announced. Here is a barren woman who has become postmenopausal.⁵⁰ Considering her age, her condition is stated clearly to show that conception is biologically impossible. Apart from that her husband is also old and frail, and sexual pleasure could be for Sarah and her husband a distant memory. These factors indeed usher in God's power that overcomes human weakness in the words of the guest.

The guest speaker quizzed "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?" (v. 14); a recall of God's attributes "the omniscient" and "the omnipotent." There is nothing the creator cannot do. This heightened the limited view of Sarah and Abraham and persuaded them to believe and cooperate to bring God's promise to a fulfilment.⁵¹ An indication that God needs human cooperation on

⁴⁵ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 281.

⁴⁶ Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," 463.

⁴⁷ Vawter, *On Genesis. A New Reading*, 227.

⁴⁸ Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," 463.

⁴⁹ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 274.

⁵⁰ Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary*, 78.

⁵¹ Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," 463.

earth to fulfil His will. God is not within time, He has His own time, but human beings are within time. "At the same time next year" (v. 14), the guest speaker promised "I shall return, and you shall have a son" (v.14). With that Sarah's period of "barrenness," "unproductivity," and "death" is over. Sarah's new life of "fruitfulness," "productivity," and "life" has begun with the gift of a son. The statement "shall have a son" stressed the authority of Yhwh. The promise was fulfilled with the gift of the son, Isaac in Gen 21:6-7.

Unbelief led Sarah to lie (v. 15). She became afraid when her laughter was made known to her and she lied, but God rejected her denial. The word "laughter" from the root *qxc* occurred in Gen 17:17 with Abraham and now with Sarah paving the way for the name of their son.⁵² After the child was born, Sarah was overjoyed that she cried out in great laughter that "God has made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me" (Gen 21:6), Yhwh has removed her reproach. But this stage of life is not always easy to reach, it demands perseverance in the face of God. Sometimes, those who would like to trust in God may be overawed by those who sit in the seat of the scornful and hence become disillusioned and lose their self-confidence and so meet their fresh opportunity with an embarrassed smirk instead of courage, hope, and fulfillment.⁵³ Or sometimes, they become scrupulous and surrender to the thought that the great opportunity is too good to be true. In that way, they become frustrated in their excitement and give in to disbelief that at the end they achieve nothing. However, in Sarah's case, God's promise was fulfilled despite Sarah's derisive skepticism.⁵⁴ God's promise will never fail.⁵⁵

Laughter, in Response to Hospitality

There are categories of laughter. There is a laughter that is kind and soothing for the one who laugh and to those who listen; and there is a laughter that is careless, carefree, loud, and coarse, that will amuse the one who laugh and to those who listen, but to those the laughter is intended, they will feel miserable within although, they might be smiling.⁵⁶ In the first case, it generates and enhances life. In the second case, it is a way of escape from themselves,

⁵² Vawter, *On Genesis. A New Reading*, 227; Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary*, 79.

⁵³ Walter Russell Bowie, "The Book of Genesis" in *The Interpreter's Bible vol. I* (ed. Nolan Harmon, New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 620.

⁵⁴ Bowie, "The Book of Genesis," 620.

⁵⁵ Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," 464.

⁵⁶ Bowie, "The Book of Genesis," 618.

knowing that the laughter is embedded with evil.⁵⁷ To laugh loud enough draws one's inner self out and gives a satisfying purpose. Now, if the purpose is positive, it enhances the inner self, but when the purpose is negative, it destroys the inner self.

In this regard, laughter can be termed as virtuous or vicious. The virtuous laughter is sincere and truthful. It is a laughter of blessedness, in which one rejoices in the goodness of God's creation, in a spirit of generosity and humility. It is within a heart sensitive to what are lovely, true, and of good repute. It is about something worth talking about and to extol in glorification and in gratification to God who created all human beings. The vicious laughter is consciously acted to be devoid of pain. Such a laughter is deliberate, evil, and result in sin and disaster. It is deliberate evil because it has won malignant victory over what is better than itself. The perpetrator has succeeded in evil and when people are suffering then he or she turns out to laugh at them. Evil laughter is common and does not have to be dramatic because it is something that is exhibited, either in a cruelled triumphant satisfaction of a rival's failure or in the discrediting of someone we do not like.⁵⁸

The laughter of Sarah and Abraham was that of disbelief.⁵⁹ One can be nominal in God's circle and not trust his power and grace, but another could believe and receive wonderful blessings. Our world does not help us to believe due to our own human frailty, untruthfulness, insincerity, insecurity, and insatiability. An earlier promise of a child has not been fulfilled, and how can this one be trusted to be true? The earlier promise did not come with a definite time, which they have forgotten; but their action is understood because human beings, sometimes promise without fulfilling their promises. The world has become unrealistic, faithless, deceptive, selfish, pretentious, which is deathly and so, human beings should not be afraid of being laughed at. So like Sarah, human beings may try to hide their most eager longings behind a laugh that tries to say, "Don't fool me."⁶⁰

The Price of Impatience Due to Faithlessness

Faithlessness did not allow Abraham and Sarah to be patient; instead, impatience and disobedience led them to recruit Hagar as a

⁵⁷ Bowie, "The Book of Genesis," 618-619.

⁵⁸ Bowie, "The Book of Genesis," 620.

⁵⁹ See more on disbelief in Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 281; Bowie, "The Book of Genesis," 619.

⁶⁰ Bowie, "The Book of Genesis," 620.

surrogate mother who gave birth to Ishmael as a son. Disobedience to God's Word comes with consequences and may end up in evil. The rivalry that ensued, the expulsion of Hagar and the son, God's intervention, and the rescue of an innocent child are lessons for humans to have trust in God. It was not the fault of the child, but the parents'.

V. 16a The Departure

A guest when received and taken care of must live; if not, he or she will no longer be considered a guest. Abraham's astute hospitality is seen in him accompanying them to see them off. A sign that a good friendly relationship has been established through hospitality.

Summary

Abraham welcomed the three men with seats, drinks, and food. Friendship was established. Abraham and Sarah were happy and satisfied that the guests accepted them, and the guests were also satisfied that they had a homely welcome. The guests, out of what could be a sign of gratitude for excellent hospitality revealed the fulfilment of God's age-old promise to their host.

The Ewe Hospitality

Cultures have norms and values that define the behaviour and history of their members.⁶¹ The Ewe entertains strangers. To receive a guest is one of the values and it goes with its norm. The various ethnic groups in Ghana have similar basic form of entertainment of a guest: seat, water, food, drink, and a place to sleep. To receive a guest is of prime importance because such a visit could be vital and of a decisive importance for the one who is visited or one who is visiting. So, each culture makes it a point to receive guests.⁶² It is a moral responsibility for a society to develop social responsibility, commitment, and a concern in the preservation of the welfare of the society and to maintain a standard that affords all human beings a right to life and happiness.⁶³ Within the sub-region of West Africa, the hospitality of the Igbo people of Nigeria differ considerably;

⁶¹ Kuada and Chachah, *Ghana. Understanding the People and their Culture*, 71.

⁶² Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 276-277.

⁶³ Rabiata Ammah, "Islam and Poverty Reduction Strategies Attempts at Dealing with Poverty in the Ghanaian Muslim Community," *GJRT vol. 2* (2007), 7 - 8.

they welcome their guests with kola nut and a mark of chalk as an identification on the guest.⁶⁴

Signs for A welcomed Guest

A guest who entered a house of an Ewe says “*agoo*” (knocking) and those in the house will respond “*ame* or *agoo ne nɔ mɔ nu ame ne ge de eme*” (yes or agoo should remain at the entrance and let human being enter).⁶⁵ The person in the house will come out to meet the guest. If the guest is welcomed then the host will say “*woe zɔ*” (welcome), or on a happier note it is “*woe zɔ loo!*”⁶⁶ But, if the guest is not welcomed, then the host will not say *woe zɔ*. It means the guest must leave. A guest who is welcomed is offered a seat and water to drink.⁶⁷ While the guest is drinking the water, the host will call few people around to receive the guest. When all the people have gathered and seated, then the process to receive the guest begins. One person is chosen as the linguist and the linguist is told to ask the guest if he or she is ready to greet them. If he or she is ready then he or she greets the people.⁶⁸ At any gathering, there

⁶⁴ Among the Igbos of Nigeria, Kola nut (*oji*) and white chalk (*nzu*) are two most prominent and frequently used substance in hospitality ceremonies. The two are regarded as having ritual power and facilitates communication between human beings and their gods. Kola hospitality is an offering, sharing, and eating, which blesses any proceedings and its participants before the event. The common maxim, ‘He who brings kola brings life’ gives the idea that without kola, life would not exist. This reinforces its countless use most especially, in ritual situations. In many social rites, it may include the use of chalk to mark certain parts of the body as a means of indicating one’s serious participation in a ceremony. The use or configurations of both kola and chalk address central ideas in aesthetics, numerology, and spiritual thought and even more than kola, chalk has mythical and medicinal properties, which make it an almost constant ingredient in healing and life-affirming medications. Chalk is, above all, whiteness, purity, beauty, and sanctity. Things are painted with white chalk to make them shine and glow, important aspects of aesthetic valuation that are tantamount to spiritual and moral purity. Chalk is rubbed on a pregnant woman’s abdomen and later on, on the newly born child to celebrate its arrival, a welcome hospitality. When a guest comes to a house he or she is given kola and he or she is smeared with chalk, so that all who see such a person will recognize the host of the guest.

⁶⁵ It is believed that a spirit will never say “*ago*,” but if it does, since it is not a human being it has no right to enter.

⁶⁶ This greeting from the host is to welcome the guest.

⁶⁷ Kuada and Chachah, *Ghana. Understanding the People and their Culture*, 75.

⁶⁸ The initial greeting from the host is just to usher in the guest. The guest is supposed to greet those who are in the house. The greeting among the Anlo of the Ewe is so long that it takes some time. The greeting demands you inquire about the wellbeing of spouse, children, family, kindred, friends, and people in the society. It can be overwhelming when one is pressed with time. The first person who says the first sentence becomes respondent to the one who answers that sentence. The respondent answers the questions in the greetings and when the questioner exhausted his or her questions then the respondent, who was the first person to start becomes the questioner and he or she will ask the same very questions as had asked him or her. Sometimes, it is done standing by the roadside

should be a greeting.⁶⁹ In the case of Abraham, Westermann noted that Abraham's invitation and acceptance of his visitors takes the place of his greetings.⁷⁰

Signs for Unwanted Guest

A person who is not welcomed will not be accorded the welcome reception that means the guest is unwanted. If there is no response to his or her greetings, or what follows is a retorted question like: *nuka dim nele?* (What do you want?), *nukae?* (What is it?) And if, no seat is offered, and no water is given then the guest must be on the run because these are clear indications that the guest is not welcomed and is unwanted. In case of Abraham, he spoke to them, bow to them and pleaded that they sit under a tree, and with his statements "a little water" and "little bread;" these are but polite languages to ease the tension of a larger feast.⁷¹ Such languages are uncommon these days.

Entertainment Constitutes Hospitality

After the ceremonial greetings and the hearing of the reason for the visit, if the guest is accepted, then food and drinks are offered to the guest apart from the initial water to cool his or her tongue. Food and drink are the entertainment for the guest, just as Abraham did. Now, if the guest is staying overnight a place of sleep is prepared. If the guest is coming to stay for period of days, then the host will visit the home of each neighbour within the locality with his or her guest introducing the guest to the neighbours in the community.

Other Hospitable Acts within the Ewe Community

Apart from entertaining visitors, neighbours take care of each other's children. Sometimes, they feed them while they await their parents to return from farm, market or any other place of work.

and can be a good sight. To just say Good Morning is not enough and not to greet is morally unaccepted. The greeting itself is therapeutic because it relieves oneself of stress and undue worries because the greeting addresses them. It promotes friendliness, and shows some care for one another. Those who do not know how to greet will say, "let us go by the short one" and that is "Good Morning" that means the person does not know the long greetings. Those who are pressed with time will sometimes go by the short one.

⁶⁹ Kuada and Chachah, *Ghana. Understanding the People and their Culture*, 75 - 76.

⁷⁰ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 275.

⁷¹ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 278.

This is because human beings have moral responsibilities and should act as one another's keeper, and this does not infringe on anybody's personal rights or freedom because humanity is inextricably bound up with obligations to be responsible.⁷²

With the notion of cultural hospitality, it is no shame to borrow personal belongings of others like handbags, shoes, clothes for church, parties, weddings, funerals, etc. The one who borrows is in need, but must appear elegant at a particular occasion, hence the borrowing. Some celebrants even borrow chairs, tables, cooking utensils, plates, silver wares to use for occasions. In the spirit of hospitality, community members, especially during weddings, birthdays and funerals, come together to help the celebrant. Neighbours, generously, erect canopies, carry and arrange seats for guests; they sweep and clean the ground of the celebration. They help in cooking to feed the guests. Apart from that, they donate food and drinks, in kind and cash towards the ceremony. Some donate chairs, tables, canopies, mattresses, plates, cups, silver wares, vehicles; those with empty rooms in their homes make them available for visitors; those with open space makes them available for the celebrants to use for the celebration.

The community is always aware of the needy within the society and they reach out to them. For instance: widows, orphans, and in some cases, it is a whole family that is poor and needy; and people within the community extend their help to them.⁷³ Sometimes, family members like uncles, aunties, nephews or nieces adopt some of the children and raised them up. Even in some cases neighbours do that. In some situations, people give them jobs to do to earn a living. During festive celebrations, it is not strange to see neighbours giving clothes, shoes, food, and drinks to these needy ones to be part of the festive celebration.

It is very common to see people give in to charity to beggars like the cripple, the blind, and the homeless on our streets. Many people attend to them and give them something, but mostly what is given to them suffice for a day and so, every day they are out on the street begging for help.

⁷² Kameliya Slavcheva, "Human Rights, Dignity and Freedom: An Orthodox Perspective," *Baptistic Theologies* 3.2 (2011), 122.

⁷³ Ammah, "Islam and Poverty Reduction Strategies," 10-11.

Repercussions of Inhospitable Behaviour

It is believed that wickedness to animals and plants can bring misfortune to people.⁷⁴ A woman who was alleged to have hit a goat in a gestation period, maiming the hind legs gave birth to three daughters crippled. An oracle is said to have attested to the act.⁷⁵ In another example, a woman experiences mental illness during full moon. It is said that the grandfather slashed a madman to death with a cutlass at night when it was full moon, because the madman used to make noise at night disturbing the community. After the death of the grandfather the son became mad, followed by his grandchild and now, this woman. The illness is being passed on due to their grandfather's ruthless and cruel action.⁷⁶

The Consequence of Hospitality Today

The blissful consequences of hospitality of health, smiles, joy, happiness, and peace have resulted in pain, sorrow, regret, and death for some who give to hospitality. The haste in trying to attend to visitors as seen in Abraham's story and as described among the Ewe has disappeared due to ungrateful human attitude. Westermann enlightens on Abraham:

... the invitation, the acceptance, the entertainment is an element of early civilization whose proper meaning is for the most part misunderstood. We understand civilization primarily in relation to objects (products of civilization); early civilization looks to people; civilization unfolds itself in human relationship. Secondly, hospitality in modern culture is practiced by and large within a chosen circle, whereas it is available in Gen. 18 to whomever needs it. The strangers are invited (see also Lk. 24:29) because they are weary from their journey, hungry and thirsty, and need Abraham's hospitality. So Abraham is completely at their service; hence his availability, haste, and concern.

⁷⁴ It is believed that wickedness to animals, plants and the vulnerable in society rewards the perpetrator with a similar effect. See Godson Ahorator, "Exploring the Intersection of Religion, Health and Disability in the Ghanaian Experience," *GJRT vol. 6*, (2016), 110-111.

⁷⁵ Ahorator, "Exploring the Intersection of Religion," 110.

⁷⁶ Ahorator, "Exploring the Intersection of Religion," 110.

This too is the context in which one is to understand Abraham's bowing down before the three men. Such a mark of honour is something quite outside our understanding of the situation. Abraham does not know who the strangers are, but he cannot and will not exclude the possibility that they are worthy of honour. One who comes as a stranger is honoured because a dignity may be his without there being need of any external sign thereof.⁷⁷

Today, it is pride, insensitivity, greed, selfishness, and 'who you know' that characterize human life and contribute to inhospitality. Without fear, in the spirit of hospitality, Abraham received three strong men, who were passing through in the heat of the sun; people, he did not know into his house.⁷⁸ He took them as ordinary men who happened to come by his way and he offered them his best hospitality.⁷⁹ The goodwill of Abraham led to a turnaround in his life and he gained happiness, joy, peace that contributed to his health and consequent long life. Such similar hospitality was heavily rewarded. First, for the widow of Zarephath, who at the command of Yhwh, Elijah became her guest and because she consented to Yhwh's command, the jar of oil never dried out of oil and the kerg of flour never run empty and above all, life was restored to her dead son (1 Kgs 17:7-24). Secondly, Elisha was accepted as a man of God and was shown hospitality by the couple; and because of their hospitality, they gave birth to a son and received him back to life after he died (2 Kgs 4:8-37).

It is unfortunate that the spirit that was in Abraham, the widow of Zarephath and the couple in Elisha's story no longer exist; and the generosity that came out of the hospitality to the angels, Elijah and Elisha are non-existent because human beings today do not allow themselves to be transformed by God as those holy men and women.⁸⁰ Today, both the giver and the receiver are corrupt and depraved. The examples given below are the outcome of conducted research, which involves interviews, observations,

⁷⁷ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 277-278.

⁷⁸ Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary*, 77.

⁷⁹ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 276.

⁸⁰ See Slavcheva's exposition on how human beings must understand and transform themselves in the image and likeness of God. Slavcheva, "Human Rights, Dignity and Freedom," 118.

investigations and interactions within the community on why “Ghanaian hospitality” is eluding Ghanaians.

Borrowers have become irresponsible and show signs of ingratitude. This is evident in the care they give to the borrowed items: they are either not returned, confiscated, or if damaged, they are returned without repairs. Sometimes, the borrowers ask the owners to come for their items themselves. When the owners questioned these attitudes, then tempers flare up. These borrowers lack deliberate conscience. Today, many people decide to rent chairs, tables, mattresses, and canopies for money; so that they can be replaced if they get spoilt. Some people even attached conditions that are binding on borrowers, just to make them responsible.

The love of money has made community members not to be generous to give the usual help that they used to offer to a neighbour in terms of donating canopy, chairs, mattresses, plates, cups and tables. Everything must be paid for today, only few people will give for free.

There is lack of trust in the community. There is fear in giving food to a neighbour’s child because one may be accused of poisoning the child. Yes, the fact cannot be denied because it is possible. Formerly, it is normal for parents to keep their child or children with their neighbours until they returned, but it is not easily done today.

Begging on the street has become an easy way of making money:⁸¹

- a. Some people faked to be crippled and sit on the ground asking for money.
- b. People without disability shelter the blind and the crippled in their homes and make money out of them. They bring them early in the morning unto the street and come for them in the evening. They give them room for the night, feed them and cloth them. They take any money they make during the day from them.
- c. It is interesting to see a fully grown man or woman leading or wheeling a blind or a cripple around begging for money. Such a person can work and look after the blind or the cripple but prefers to lead the blind or the cripple to beg.

⁸¹ Ammah, “Islam and Poverty Reduction Strategies,” 9, 11; See Begging as Work: a study of people with mobility difficulties, Kassah, 2005 at www.tandfonline.com accessed 1st July 2020; see also www.emerald.com accessed 1st July 2020.

Now, such wheelers do not go to school or learnt any trade and may become liability for the society in the future.

- d. Some “sound” human beings just decided to beg out of laziness because it is the easiest way to make money. They can work but they just decided to go begging.

The sudden surge of armed robbery in our society has limited how far one can be of help in public. Abraham will think twice today before inviting three strong unknown men into his house. There is fear to open one’s door for a guest to sleep overnight.

Some people who benefited from hospitality, return evil for good. The item of generosity from hospitality is used by the recipient to acquire the fortune of the giver. A mother has a daughter who is a teacher. She asked her for ₵5.00, which the daughter readily gave, and the mother took it to the fetish priest to perform ritual so that she will become the beneficiary of the daughter’s fortune.⁸² She succeeded in her evil deeds for so many months. Whenever the daughter received her salary at the end of the month, she did not know what she used the money for, until she shared her unfortunate plight with her friend who with other friends later put it into prayers. They prayed and fasted with her for some months. One day, at their prayer meeting the mother came in running and screaming into the church where they were praying, like someone being beaten all over, only to confess that she was responsible for her daughter’s plight.

There are generous people who are labelled as those who have and people flock to them for help, which at times become embarrassing especially, when they truly do not have to give to them. They are termed wicked, if they are unable to offer. Some took those titles during a generous contribution made in church or within the community. Hospitality has created enemies as people become jealous of those who give and make them their targets.

Some people are just mean and stingy and use today’s evil outcome of hospitality as cover up not to be hospitable. This is bad and these people need a change of heart. There are also others who think one must be rich to give; forgetting that the poor, out of his or her valuable, gives as a sign of goodwill.⁸³

⁸² This does not refer to the African Traditional Priests. The fetish priests are the bad ones who indulge in evil deeds and are demonic.

⁸³ Kuada and Chachah, *Ghana. Understanding the People and their Culture*, 76.

Conclusion

Every human being has elements of the divine. To entertain a fellow human being is to entertain God, the source of abundant life.⁸⁴ Good friendship, good cheers and smiles, feeling secure to welcome others, and to render service to others are factors that enhance health and guarantee life. Abraham entertained his guest unconditionally; it was wholeheartedly done, in what can be described as a ready liberality within an obliging manner of kindness. Abraham expressed his piety in hospitality and entertained divine beings (Heb 13:2). The effect was that he received a gift which was a fulfilment of a promise made long ago.⁸⁵ Through acts of hospitality, Paul and Barnabas were taken as gods (Acts 14:11; 28:1-6).

Today, people dread to help others for fear of being targeted by evil people. Some will not aid persons with disability, thinking they were cursed.⁸⁶ Others just abhor them because of their physical or mental conditions.⁸⁷ One who receives another human being with a warm heart and shows that person kindness is nearer to the divine (Matt 25:40).⁸⁸ A good use of wealth is a blessing to the benefactor and to the beneficiaries. The smiles, the cheers, the self-fulfilment that results from a hospitable act is the beauty of friendship that is established through generosity.⁸⁹ Friendship builds trust, dependability, and security among community members.

It is sad to see children loitering around and people looking on unconcerned. It was the case in Anlo-Ewe traditional communities that a child found loitering around was taken into custody and the custodian will look for the parents. If the parents cannot be found, then the child will be sent to the chief, who will authorize the *Gong Gong Beater* to publicly announce for the parents to come for their child.⁹⁰ There are poor and needy people among us and people are not touched. Some people seem to blame the inability to be hospitable on how people react evilly to hospitality,

⁸⁴ Human beings are godly people. Whatever is done, it is done in the name of God and for a godly person; and that is the desire of God and He rewards every good deed accordingly. Ammah, "Islam and Poverty Reduction Strategies," 6.

⁸⁵ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 275.

⁸⁶ Ahorator, "Exploring the Intersection of Religion," 112.

⁸⁷ Ahorator, "Exploring the Intersection of Religion," 113.

⁸⁸ Bowie, "The Book of Genesis," 616- 617.

⁸⁹ Kuada and Chachah, *Ghana. Understanding the People and their Culture*, 76.

⁹⁰ The *Gong Gong Beater* is the person who announces any event in the village. The sound "gong," "gong" comes from the hitting of the metallic instrument with the rod.

it is a lean way for some to be stingy. Others blame their inability to be hospitable on urbanization and development, but urbanization has its own form of hospitality. There are no obstacles to prevent anyone anywhere from practicing hospitality. The following are some recommendations:

1. The hospitality of giving a seat, water, food, a place to rest, and even the culture of greetings must be encouraged by parents to our contemporary Ghanaians. People pass by without greeting or if someone greets them, they do not respond. It is the self-centeredness that has taken hold of us that we lost consciousness of the presence of a neighbour. We need to go back and take our abandoned and forgotten value.
2. Greed and jealousy that make people to cheat, steal, and arrogantly incite evil against hospitable people should be stopped. Integrity must be key in relating with others. We must develop trust and present ourselves to be trusted, to be one another's keeper. The lazy ones who pretend to be handicapped and dupe people are indeed to desist from that so that the genuine people are attended to and not neglected.
3. People should not be hospitable with the view of receiving rewards. Abraham did what he has to do without expecting reward. Jesus said, when you have done everything just say, we have just done what we were supposed to do (Luke 17:10). Hospitality must be genuine. The seven-corporal works of mercy are the Christian obligation of charity (Matt 25:31-46). In the Bible, the Israelites were obliged to be hospitable and so also, Muslims are obliged to give alms to the needy.