Odysseus at Shabbat Dinner: Hospitality Ethics in Genesis and The Odyssey

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Abstract— The Hebrew Bible and Homer's Greek epics differ significantly in their attention to detail, among other significant literary aspects, but their uniquely massive size relative to other ancient works lends them particularly well to analysis. This investigation can yield deeper understandings of their moral stances. Within ancient Greek literature, hospitality stands alone as an unquestioned moral imperative, while the Hebrew Bible is filled with prescriptions for moral living. With this in mind, hospitality provides a valuable perspective for comparison between these two cultures. Genesis and The Odyssey each heavily feature hospitality, so comparing these two monumental works allows us to flesh out how differing hospitality expectations reflect each society's ethical emphases. My findings contradict and challenge the misconception that Greek hospitality is not concerned with a guest's identity, and shows how the hospitality ethics in Genesis and The Odyssey diverge with regards to their treatment of guests whose social class is ambiguous.

Comparisons between Greek epics and the Hebrew Bible are nothing new, but most of these comparisons do not try to parse out notable differences in the ethical concerns of each text. One main reason for this is the lack of explicit moralizing in Greek epic writing.[1] In fact, the Greek world's only universal value that parallels the moral imperatives found in the Hebrew Bible is to treat guests well. With this singular obsession in mind, it is fascinating to examine the examples of hospitality episodes that abound in both Genesis and The Odyssey, and determine whether the differences and similarities reveal a difference in values between each ancient culture. While Homer's poem centers its expectations of a host far more frontally than Genesis does, examining examples of hospitality in these two classics of Western literature helps key in on the ethical stances, or lack thereof, embedded in each work. By juxtaposing the plots of hospitality episodes in The Odyssey and Genesis I will attempt to show how the hospitality narratives in these works share a common hosting process, but differ in the extent to which the identity of the guests need be expressed, reflecting their contrasting views on the relevance of a guest's class for receiving hospitable treatment.

When comparing Genesis and the Odyssey, there are inherent difficulties resulting from the divergent stylistic choices of their authors. Genesis, similar to the rest of the Hebrew Bible, is marked by its ambiguity in its content. This ambiguity necessitates readers of the Hebrew Bible to choose how they read the narrative: to make interpretations in the text.[2] This, in turn, means that many plot-based comparisons of Genesis are reliant upon a specific interpretation of an individual or individuals, though one that is not inherently universally accepted. This

[1] John Taylor, *Classics and the Bible: Hospitality and Recognition* (Duckworth, 2007), 3.

[2] Eric Auerbach, ed., "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 3-23, 23.

interpretive model is an essential condition of the Jewish tradition — similarly found in other religious traditions that believe in the divinity of the Hebrew Bible — which promotes the diversity of opinion regarding the reading of the book. Genesis 18 details Abraham's encounter with guests as he recovers from his circumcision. Looking at this chapter, one can clearly see the difficulties that the Hebrew Bible's need for interpretation creates for plot-based analysis. In this popular episode, there is disagreement within the biblical exegesis; scholars specifically debate the divinity of the visitors. Though most commentators, including Rashi and Nahmanides, two highly regarded Jewish medieval commentators,[3] read Genesis 18 and see a visit from three angels,[4] Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor, a 12th-century French exegete, disagrees. In his commentary on Genesis, the Bekhor Shor points to the fact that the visitors eat and drink to show that they are not divine messengers, writing, "According to the simple understanding (p'shat), these are real people, for we do not find angels eating and drinking."[5] Naḥmanides argues with Bekhor Shor's argument for the visitors' mortality by claiming that the phrase "and he stood by them under the tree while they ate" refers to a form of angelic consumption in which the food simply disappears.[6] As such, Naḥmanides claims that the messengers are indeed divine.[7] Regardless of which understanding is most convincing, this scholarly disagreement stands as a cogent example of how the vague nature of plot details within Genesis and the Hebrew Bible as a whole creates a demand for interpretation. Noting this ambiguity when comparing Genesis with texts from outside of the Hebrew Bible that do not share the same features, such as The Odyssey, is essential to fully appreciating the editorial choices required for biblical analysis.

Classical literary scholars identify a Greek hospitality type-scene with the following format: A guest approaches, someone spots them, gets up, hurries to greet them, and brings them to a feast where they enjoy food and entertainment.[8] Looking directly at the text of hospitality narratives in Genesis and The Odyssey with the aforementioned interpretive limitations in mind, there are six stories that exhibit this common pattern of hospitality or show a negative textual bias when this pattern is violated, two in Genesis and four in The Odyssey. The Telemachus/Athena, Nestor/Telemachus, and Menelaus/Telemachus scenes closely adhere to the defined Greek structure, while the Polyphemus/Odysseus visit is undeniably meant as an example of the violation of normative behavior. The Abraham/Three Men story in Genesis 18 has historically been paralleled with the story of Athena's visit to Telemachus (disguised Odysseus's friend Mentes) in the first book of The Odyssey. This comparison is not new; classical and biblical scholars have made it since at least the times of the Jewish Hellenist Philo at the start of Common Era.[9] That said, this Abraham/Three Men episode and the Telemachus/Athena story are usually the only two stories used for Genesis-Odyssey hospitality comparisons. However, examining the Three Men's visit to Lot in Sodom,[10] Telemachus's visits to Nestor[11] and Menelaus[12], and Odysseus and his crew's fatal visit to Polyphemus[13] reveals a

[3] For more on Rashi and Nachmonidies's backgrounds see:

I. Twersky, "Rashi," Encyclopedia Britannica, July 9, 2021. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rashi ;

"Naḥmanides." Encyclopedia Britannica, January 1, 2021. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nahmanides.

[4] Rashi, *Rashi on Genesis*, Sefaria Edition, Gen 18:2.

[5] Joseph Isaac Bekhor Shor, *Bekhor Shor on Genesis* (Leipzig, 1856), Gen 18:2, translated by Y.Kurtz.

[6] Gen. 18:8 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible.*

[7] Naḥmanides, "Genesis" in *Commentary on the Torah by Ramban (Naḥmanides), Translated and Annotated with Index by Charles B. Chavel* (New York: Shilo Pub. House, 1976), Gen 18:2.

[8] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), 51.

[9] Taylor, *Classics and the Bible*, 6.

[10] Gen. 19.

[11] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Translated by Emily Wilson, (New York: Norton, 2018), 3:31-497.

structured pattern of similarities and differences, aside from the stylistic similarities between Homer and the Hebrew Bible that most casual readers of both texts notice. This pattern entails a similar manner of greeting, slightly different methods of how to send guests away, and radically dissimilar expectations regarding the degree to which guests are expected to reveal their identities.

The undeniable similarity between the initial greeting statements in these six scenes shows a common ethic shared by Homeric and Biblical hosting etiquette. In Genesis 18, Abraham sees the three visitors approaching him on a hot day and says:

> My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.[14]

This invitation is fairly similar to Telemachus's welcome to the then-disguised Athena. Telemachus sees Athena and says, "Good evening, stranger, and welcome. Be our guest, come share our dinner, and then tell us what you need."[15] Just after this invitation, Telemachus leads his visitor into the palace and begins washing her feet as a second step in the welcoming process. To compare, both hosts invite the visitor to be their guest, offer food, and offer foot washing (Telemachus implies foot-washing in addition to eating through his immediately ensuing actions), all before asking the visitors who they are or where they are from. The only noticeable difference between the greetings is in the speakers' tones when speaking. Specifically, Abraham's more humble tone as a "servant" is likely indicative of either his relatively greater knowledge of the divine nature of his visitors or his relatively lower social status. This deviation is notable for understanding each character's relationship with divinity in these examples, but is irrelevant to the expectations for hosting. So, with regards to hospitality practices, the similarity in greeting holds ground.

In Nestor and Telemachus' interaction, there is a similar pattern of greeting that also occurs before a full revelation of the guest's identity. Nestor first invites Telemachus to join him, offers a toast to Poseidon, then offers food to his visitors, keeping with the theme of a welcome followed by physical pleasure (eating, drinking, and washing) that we see in the other narratives.[16] This same process occurs in Telemachus and Pisistratus' (Nestor's son) visit to Menelaus, with Menelaus even explicitly describing this phenomenon. Menealus welcomes his guests by saying, "Help yourselves! Enjoy the food! When you have shared our meal, we will begin to ask who you are."[17] Overall, the greeting pattern established in the Odyssey, of a greeting, followed by deliverance of physical pleasures, generally fits well with Genesis-style greetings.

The two cases that notably differ from this established hospitality format are the Three Angels' visit to Lot in Sodom[18] and Odysseus and his crew's visit to Polyphemus the Cyclops.[19] Interestingly, each of these stories is meant to be read as a foil to one of the other hospitality stories in their respective books. Lot's story directly follows Abraham's in the Genesis narrative,

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[12] Ibid. 4:1-624.

[13] Ibid. 9:216-566.

[14] Gen. 18:4-6.

[15] Homer, *The Odyssey*, 1:123-125.

[16] Ibid. 3:31-68.

[17] Ibid. 4:59-61.

[18] Gen. 19.

[19] Homer, *The Odyssey*, 9:216-542.

and uses the same characters as well as language. As far as interpretative choices regarding ambiguous plot details go, as in Genesis 18, Bekhor Shor stands alone, this time as the only traditional commentator who claims that Lot's explicitly divine visitors are not the same men as those who came to Abraham.[20] This minority opinion (or daas yachid, to borrow from later Jewish Law vernacular) aside, it seems apparent that two of the three visitors that visit Abraham also visit Lot. To push the parallel past the characters, Genesis threads common language through both Abraham and Lot's hospitality narratives. For one, both Genesis 18 and 19 set the scene by noting the time of day and the location where the host is sitting. They also both fill in detail by stating that the hosts "bow to the ground" to meet their guests. See this parallel below:

(Gen 18:1-2):

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground.

(Gen 19:1):

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground.

The intentional juxtaposition of these two stories continues on for the next few verses in each chapter, as both Lot and Abraham offer their guests foot-washing and food; Lot has the added difficulty of defending his guests from assault by the Sodomite villagers. It is undeniable that Genesis intends for its readers to see these eerily similar stories and wonder about implications for hospitality, especially in light of the motif of moral imperatives found throughout the Hebrew Bible. On the other hand, Homer parallels Polyphemus's hospitality with Nestor's not through character overlap, but by using nearly identical language when each host asks their guests' identities. Nestor interrogates his guests with a line of questioning, asking, "Strangers, who are you? Where did you sail from? Are you on business, or just scouting round like pirates on the sea, who risk their lives to ravage foreign homes?"[21] The similarity to Polyphemus's language is staggering. Though Polyphemus is a far more aggressive character than Nestor, he still says, "Strangers! Who are you? Where did you come from across the watery depths? Are you on business, or roaming round without a goal, like pirates, who risk their lives at sea to bring disaster to other people?"[22] With these intratextual parallels established, it is possible to determine the expressed values that each deviation from classic hospitality intends, as well as how intertextual differences (between Genesis and The Odyssey) animate those values.

In Genesis 19, Lot's hosting scene, the primary hospitality-related criticism is directed towards Sodom itself, not Lot. The main criticism of Lot is due to his association with Sodom rather than any lack of hospitality. That Lot finds himself in the context of Sodom, not that he acts immorally is the problem with the hospitality in this scene. Furthering this point, Jewish tradition uses Sodom as the paradigm for poor hospitality throughout the Talmud, the primary text of Jewish theology.[23] Genesis 19 uses the Sodom context to implicitly criticize Lot, stating

[20] Bekhor Shor, *Bekhor Shor on Genesis*, Gen 19:1.

[21] Homer, *The Odyssey*, 3:71-74.

[22] Ibid. 9:252-258.

[23] For Aggada (non-legal Talmudic exegesis) regarding Sodom's propensity for poor hospitality see: B. Sanhedrin 109a and B. Sanhedrin 109b, https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.109a.12?lang=bi, https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.109b.6?lang=bi, https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.109b.9?lang=bi.

was "sitting in the gateway of Sodom"[24] as opposed to Abraham who "sat at the entrance of his tent."[25] Earlier textual evidence indicates that Sodom is to be thought of as morally corrupt, and that Lot sitting "in the gateway of Sodom" is thus a poor moral choice. For example, Genesis 14 details a battle between four kings and five kings, which ends with Abraham saving Lot from the war. When Genesis lists the names of the kings who participate in the war, the verse reads, "These kings made war with King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar)."[26] Rashi comments on this verse and points out that the names of these kings are meant to cast aspersions on their moral character. Rashi points out that the name of Sodom's king, "Bera," comes from the same Hebrew word root as the word for "evil."[27] Even more explicitly, Genesis 13:13 describes the despicable moral character of Sodom, stating, "Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD."[28] Apparently, in Genesis 19 Lot's actions actually fit the Genesis ideal of hospitality quite well, it is the Sodomite villagers whose actions do not. Their fault is that they seek to sexually assault Lot's guests, which seems to be as total a violation of hospitality imaginable. Of course, that is only true until Polyphemus enters the fold, who literally eats his guests rather than giving them food.[29] Polyphemus's relatively more subtle hospitality-related mistake is that he asks for Odysseus and his crew's identity without first offering food. This starts a cascade of bad faith between the two parties, including Polyphemus eating Odysseus's crew members, Odysseus stabbing Polyphemus through the eye with a flaming hot spear, Odysseus stealing Polyphemus's sheep, and Polyphemus hurling massive boulders at Odysseus's ship while beseeching Poseidon to curse him. All of this begins with Polyphemus uttering almost exactly the same words to his guests as Nestor does earlier in the epic (see comparison above). This indicates to the reader that it is not what Polyphemus says that is so offensive to Greek hospitality practices, but when Polyphemus says it. Even more interesting is that this essential distinction–that one should provide food before asking the visitors their identities–is not a factor in Genesis. In both the Abraham and Lot stories, the hosts feel no need to ever ask the guests their identity. This indicates the unimportance of knowing a guest's social status for the hospitality practices that Genesis advocates relative to those that The Odyssey does.

Critics of the conclusion that Greek hospitality emphasizes knowing the identity of one's visitors more than Genesis does may claim that Greek epics never seek to make ethical claims, and that trying to parse them out by comparing them with Genesis is unproductive. This criticism would be fair regarding any other category of human behavior aside from hospitality, but hospitality is the only quasi-religious ethical value in ancient Greek theology.[30] Another possible criticism for this conclusion is that The Odyssey's hospitality allows for questioning a guest's identity, but that the questioning is independent of the host's hospitality. However, this idea only partially holds true. While effective hospitality in The Odyssey does not require that the guests identity be totally revealed before they are welcomed, it does expect guests to be of high class in order to receive hospitality. For example, when Menelaus first greets Telemachus and Pisistratus, he does not explicitly ask their identity, but he does imply that they are only being served because they look high-class. Menelaus says, "Help yourselves! Enjoy the food! When you have shared our meal, we will begin to ask who you are. Your fathers must be

[24] Gen. 19:1.

[25] Gen. 18:1.

[26] Gen. 14:2.

[27] This Rashi was pointed out to me by my teacher, the Tanakh scholar Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, at a recent class given at Columbia University. See: Rashi, *Rashi on Genesis*, Sefaria Edition, Gen 14:2.

[28] Gen. 13:3.

[29] Homer, *The Odyssey*, 9:291-294.

[30] Taylor, *Classics and the Bible*, 3.

scepter-bearing kings; the sons of peasants do not look like you."[31] If Menelaus's hospitality is truly independent of class, there should be no reason for him to mention that his guests do not look like "sons of peasants." On the other hand, Abraham and Lot simply never mention their guests' identities, only referring to them as "master."[32] The most telling proof for this essential difference in class expectations comes from the wording of the Sodomite villagers' threat to Lot's guests. With Lot hosting the angels, the villagers slam on his door and shout: "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them."[33] In this verse, the word "know" is usually read with a sexual implication, but the Hebrew word used comes from the verb root for "knowledge." Perhaps the Sodomite villagers' sin was not (or not only) sexual assault, but their desire to "know" the strangers' identies before hosting them. This understanding explains the link between the destruction of Sodom and the previous chapter about Abraham's hospitality, the unusual word choice of "know," and implicitly criticizes hospitality practices that depend on full knowledge of the guests' identities.

To conclude, the critical difference between the ideal hospitality practices expressed in The Odyssey and Genesis is the level of information a host expects to know about their guest before hosting them. In The Odyssey, hosts do not always need to know exactly who their guests are, but they expect them to be a certain level of class before they host them. In contrast, Genesis's ideal host (with Abraham as the paradigm) does not need to know anything about their guest's identity before treating them hospitably. That said, the treatment that the guests receive in these two works is remarkably similar, expressing a common ethic of how guests should be treated across the ancient world.

[31] Homer, *The Odyssey*, 4:59-63.

[32] Gen. 18, Gen. 19.

[33] Ibid. 19:5.