Was David Overreacting?

An Analysis of Ancient Near East Hospitality Code in 1 Samuel 25

A paper presented at the Bible Faculty Summit
Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary, Ankeny, Iowa
July 28, 2021

L. Jared Garcia[1]

Abstract

Located in between the two similar narratives of David sparing Saul's life (cf. 1 Samuel 25 and 26), 1 Samuel 25 finds a different David, who without hesitation plans to kill Nabal and his entire household. Was refusing to give food for six hundred people such a terrible wrong that David would be justified in seeking vengeance by killing Nabal's whole family and his servants? Did David simply overreact? This paper demonstrates that an acquaintance with the hospitality code of the Ancient Near East (ANE) aids in understanding the events of 1 Samuel 25. The approach to explain David's actions involves two stages. First, Part 1 analyzes the hospitality code in the ANE, demonstrating its basic practices. It examines literature from the ANE, including typical scenes of hospitality along with observations from social anthropologists who study Mediterranean culture. Part 2 exhibits how the hospitality code analyzed in the first section answers the questions raised from the narrative in 1 Samuel 25. The study of ANE hospitality serves to illuminate the details of the biblical text as opposed to altering the biblical text to accommodate the data found in the historical-cultural background.

***

In 1 Samuel 25, David sends ten of his men to request food from Nabal to feed six hundred men since it was a festive time of sheepshearing in Nabal's household and David's men had been protecting Nabal's shepherds and animals in the wilderness (vv. 4–9).[2] Yet Nabal responds severely, insulting David, and refusing

---

[1] L. Jared Garcia is a Ph.D. candidate at BJU Seminary in Greenville, SC.

[2] Shearing sheep is a "good day" (יוֹם טוֹב) or a season of celebration as described in 1 Samuel 25:8. Ronald F. Youngblood, "1 & 2 Samuel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Rev. ed., vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 243.

to provide food and water. With no hesitation, David retaliates, calling 400 men to take their swords and kill the entire household of Nabal (25:22, 34).

1 Samuel 25 is sandwiched by two narratives where David spares Saul's life (cf. 1 Samuel 24 and 26), so why was he uncharacteristically rash on setting himself to attack Nabal and his entire household in this narrative? Granted, Nabal was a harsh and evil man, but was not a refusal to provide meals for others Nabal's prerogative? Was not David asking too much from Nabal when he asked for food for *six hundred* men? Was not Nabal's reasoning legitimate? He said, "Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?" (1 Samuel 25:11).[3] How can one explain David's rash and violent reaction against Nabal and his household?

One view explains that David was running a protection racket. David promised not to harm Nabal in exchange for protection money.[4] Baruch Halpern posits that

> David himself soon almost succumbs to the outlaw ethic of his subordinates. 1 Sam. 25 finds him extorting payment from Nabal of Carmel, a gentleman in the wilderness of Judah. David is working a protection racket. His claim is that he has refrained from preying on Nabal's sheep. Nabal refuses to pay, and David angrily disclaims his intention to kill Nabal.[5]

This view reads more than what was written in the biblical text.

A slightly different view suggests that Nabal cheated David of his wages. In turn, David plans to kill Nabal and his entire household. According to Firth, "David's

---

[3] All Scripture quotations in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are from the English Standard Version, 2011.

[4] Jon D. Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (January 1978): 14–16.

[5] Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 21–22. He further comments, "David plies the 'protection' racket and demands premiums from Nabal of Carmel for his vigilance with Nabal's shepherds and flocks. This is where he acquires Abigail, his second wife, who shares the name of his own sister" (ibid., 284)

claim is that the service he rendered is worthy of payment, perhaps as something for which Nabal should have prepared."[6] Bergen proposes that Nabal was "withholding due payment for services."[7] This explanation addresses David's rashness for vengeance and Abigail's sense of urgency. Nabal has done David wrong by not providing proper wages for David's protective services. Several indications, however, point the fact that no prior agreement existed for David to provide protection for Nabal's shepherds and animals. First, David sent an envoy to ask for provision because there was a feast at Nabal's house, implying that he would not have asked on an ordinary day. Second, David's men had to explain to Nabal what they had done on his behalf. Such explanation would not be necessary if Nabal had already hired David to protect his men. Lastly, Nabal claims not to know who David was, which would be unlikely if a prior arrangement had taken place.[8] What David was expecting from Nabal was evident in his soliloquy: "Surely in vain have I guarded all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him, and he has returned me evil for good" (v. 21). David felt that his kind gesture was not reciprocated, not that he was cheated on his wages.

The third view explains that Nabal's insults provoked David to overreact and to plan a violent massacre against an entire household.[9] Tsumura suggests that David indeed was wrong for reacting too strongly against Nabal. He observes,

---

[6] David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel,* Apollos Old Testament (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 267.

[7] Robert D. Bergen, *1 & 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary, vol. 7 (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1996), 243.

[8] Nabal most likely knew who David was; his denial of knowing David implies Nabal's belittling David's significance. See A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel,* The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 295.

[9] According to this viewpoint, in David's mind the harshness and rudeness of Nabal deserved the death of his entire household. See Henry Preserved Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel,* ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1951), 222; Mary J. Evans, *The Message of Samuel*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 140; Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart,* Focus on the

> This is probably David's overreaction toward Nabal. In 1 Sam. 24:7, when he had an opportunity to take revenge against Saul, David avoided appealing to a human method and entrusted the matter to God's hand. Now, however, he seems to have lost control over his feelings and behavior. Even David needs God's gracious intervention on such occasions. God sent Abigail to him at the right time.[10]

Tsumura's answer is not necessarily wrong; David uncharacteristically acted rashly (vv. 33–34).[11] Certainly, Abigail prevented David from committing bloodshed and taking vengeance in his own hand. Seeking vengeance, however, implies that David was greatly wronged by Nabal. Was Nabal's insult and refusal to give food such a great wrong that it provoked David to kill an *entire household*? Furthermore, why did Nabal's servant and Abigail expect David to return with a vengeance against the *entire household*? Abigail knew that Nabal's household was in trouble because with haste and a sense of urgency she gathered food, met David, and apologized for Nabal's response (25:25–28). But how did she know that David would be coming back?

The first two views attempt to make David's plans for massacre more justifiable than an overreaction to a fool's insults, but these views have details that seem to be inconsistent with the biblical text. While the final view seems to take the biblical text straightforwardly—that David simply overreacted against Nabal—a few questions from the narrative remain unanswered.

Perhaps David's violent reaction can be explained another way. An often-overlooked factor in interpreting 1 Samuel 25 lies in an understanding of the Ancient Near East (ANE) practice of hospitality, a practice which is assumed in the

---

Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 256–260; Francesca Aran Murphy, *1 Samuel,* Brazos Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 239; Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel,* NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 343–348; Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 177; R. Kyle McCarter, Jr. *1 Samuel*, Anchor Yale Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 401; and Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel,* WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 250.

[10] David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 585.

[11] Gehrke adds that "Nabal's response is marked not only by base ingratitude and brutal insults, but more important, by a complete lack of understanding for David's position and destiny." Ralph David Gehrke, *1-2 Samuel,* Concordia (London: Concordia, 1968), 195.

text and made sense for an original reader. This paper demonstrates that an acquaintance with the hospitality code aids in the understanding of the events in 1 Samuel 25. The approach in this study is in two stages. Part 1 analyzes the hospitality code in the ANE, demonstrating its basic practices. Part 2, then, demonstrates how the ANE hospitality code provides the fitting historical context to understand 1 Samuel 25.

Part 1: An Analysis of the ANE Hospitality Code

In the ANE, hospitality was a common practice, and it was essential for survival. Travelers in the Middle East relied on hospitality among locals for food, water, and lodging as they journeyed through the desert and arid land. Three main sources provide key insight on the ANE hospitality code.[12] First, literature from the ANE provides stories, poems, and epics that include typical scenes of hospitality, reflecting their own culture.[13] Second, social anthropologists who study Mediterranean culture attest to the nonwestern hospitality practiced in the Near

---

[12] While not all hospitality practices in the ANE are identical between tribes and people groups, enough similarity can be observed pertinent to understanding the narrative in 1 Samuel 25. For further discussion on ANE hospitality protocol, see Victor H. Matthews, "Herem versus Hospitality in the Story of Rahab," in *The Genre of Biblical Commentary Essays in Honor of John E. Hartley on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. Timothy D. Finlay and William Yarchin (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 217–221. See also Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250–587 BCE* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 82–87.

[13] For example, one of the tablets in the *Archives Royale de Mari* (ARM), provides a few details of guest-host relationship. It tells of an episode in which Ibni-Addu, a friend of King Zimri-Lim of Mari, learns about a spy in the palace while being a guest of Kunnam in Šubbat-Enlil. Wolfgang Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari: A New Translation, with Historical Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 295. Mari, a city on the west bank of the Euphrates River, was destroyed by King Hammurabi (or Hammurapi) of Babylon in 1760–1757 BC. In 1933 Bedouin found antiquities at Mari to the French colonial government of Syria. Between 1933–1938, archaeologist André Parrot excavated 15,000 tablets mostly at the royal palace of Mari. These tablets are known as *Archives Royal de Mari* or ARM.

East.[14] Third, the most overlooked source for the hospitality code in the ANE is the Bible as a historical document.[15]

The Relationship of the Host to the Guest

In the ANE, hosts were expected to take in guests. Hospitality was a cultural expectation. Hospitality could be initiated by either the host or the guest, depending on who spoke first.[16] In Genesis 18, Abraham, the host, offered hospitality, while in 1 Kings 17:11–12, Elijah asked for hospitality. When the act of hospitality is received, either the guest or the host typically bows down and greets the other with a blessing.[17] When a host extends hospitality to his guests, he is expected to greet his guests, wash their feet, and pour oil on their heads. An Egyptian proverb written in a

---

[14] Speaking about the Al Murrah, a Bedouin tribe, Sociologist Edward Cole observes, "The household in Al Murrah culture and society is especially associated with three aspects of their life—hospitality, herding, and the special domain of Al Murrah women. Generous hospitality is one of the strongest of Al Murrah values." Donald Powell Cole, *Nomads of the Nomads: The Al Murrah Bedouin of the Empty Quarter* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1988), 67.

[15] The Old Testament Scripture records extant writings of narratives, laws, and poems that reflect the culture of the ANE. Several passages depict hospitality as it was practiced in the ANE, including, but not limited to: Abraham's hospitality to the angels (Genesis 18); Lot's hospitality to the men who warned him about Sodom's imminent destruction (Genesis 19); hospitality laws regarding relations with foreigners in the Torah (Deuteronomy 10:17–19); the hospitality of the father-in-law towards the Levite (Judges 19:3–10) and the old man in Gibeah towards the same Levite (19:16–26); the hospitality of the prophet towards the man of God (1 Kings 13:11–23); the hospitality of a widow of Zarephath towards Elijah (1 Kings 17); and the hospitality of the Shunamite woman towards Elisha (2 Kings 4:8–10).

[16] For a comprehensive treatment on the initiation of hospitality using speech act theory, see Rebecca Abts Wright, "Establishing Hospitality in the Old Testament: Testing the Tool of Linguistic Pragmatics" (Ph.D. Diss, Yale University, 1989), 112–147.

[17] "When a guest is received into an Oriental home, bowing between the guests and host is quite apt to take place. In Western lands such bowing would be of the head only, but in the East there is more expressive custom of saluting with the head erect and the body a little inclined forward, by raising the hand to the heart, mouth, and forehead." Fred Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), 72–73.

manuscript from 1200 BC says, "Do not neglect a stranger with your oil jar, that it [income] be doubled before your brethren."[18]

The host's obligation includes providing meals and lodging to wandering sojourners. Genesis 18:3–8 captures Abraham's sense of urgency in preparing a meal for his guests:

> "My Lord," [Abraham] said, "if it pleases you, stop here for a while. Rest in the shade of this tree while water is brought to wash your feet. And since you've honored your servant with this visit, let me prepare some food to refresh you before you continue to your journey." "All right," they said. "Do as you have said." Abraham *ran* back to the tenant and said to Sarah, "*Hurry*! Get three large measures of your best flour, knead it into dough, and bake some bread." Then Abraham *ran* out to the herd and chose a tender calf and gave it to his servant, who *quickly* prepared it. When the food was ready, Abraham took some yogurt and milk and the roasted meat, and he served it to the men. As they ate, Abraham waited on them in the shade of the trees.[19]

Depending on their economic status, hosts may provide lavish preparations for their guests. Such extravagance is expected in an honor–shame culture where honor is esteemed above anything else.[20] The grander the accommodation, the more honor the host receives. In *The Banquet of Ashurnasirpal II*, for example, an inscription records a grand celebration by Ashurnasirpal II, the high priest of Calah. The Assyrian high priest received 69,574 guests from various places and from all walks of life. The end of the inscription describes the hosts' pride in satisfying his guests: "I (furthermore) provided them with the means to clean and anoint

---

[18] A proverb found in chapter 28 of *Instruction of Amenemope*. See Bill T. Arnold and Bryan Beyer, eds., "Instruction of Amenemope," in *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study*, Encounter Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 189.

[19] *New Living Translation*, 2007. Emphasis mine.

[20] For further discussion on how the eastern honor/shame culture differs from the western right/wrong culture, see David A. de Silva, *Honor, Patronage, Kingship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000); Johanna Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible: The Prophetic Contribution*, JSOT 346 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); and Brandon J. O'Brien and E. Randolph Richards (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2012), 113–136.

themselves. I did them due honors and sent them back, healthy, and happy, to their own countries."[21]

In the ANE, an extension of hospitality is expected even more from men of high stature. Ahmed Abou-Zeid observes that men with great wealth have a place of prominence and political power in a society. They are often invited to settle disputes among the people in the civilization.[22] Men with such prominence, however, are also responsible for practicing hospitality. Ahmed further states that a wealthy and prominent person

> is also likely to offer hospitality to others, thus rallying adherents and clients both round himself and round his kin-group. It is a fact that generosity and hospitality have always been accorded a supreme value in Bedouin society and many persons have established their fame and prestige, and consequently those of their respective groups, by lavish generosity and nothing less than reckless hospitality.[23]

Not only are wealthy persons placed into positions of power, but political leaders are also expected to be rich so that they are able to honorably perform their duties of hospitality. One social anthropologist makes this observation regarding the role of a Shaikh, which is a tribal leader in a Middle Easter community,

> Each *bait* [extended family] and *'aila* [clan] has its Shaikh, chosen for his age and wisdom or for his prowess, though the Shaikship is generally hereditary in certain families. A Shaikh receives obedience and respect from his dependants [sic] but *ought to be rich because the demands of hospitality are considerable.*[24]

Hospitality is expected to be extended to wandering nomads, and even more so towards those who have provided benefit to the host in any way. In the *Stories of*

---

[21] James B. Pritchard, ed., "The Banquet of Ashurnarsipal II," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Third edition with supplement (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 560.

[22] Ahmed Abou-Zeid, "Honour and Shame among the Bedouins of Egypt," in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. John G. Peristiany (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 250.

[23] Ibid.

[24] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 60. Emphasis mine.

Aqhat, a metalworker, Kothar-wa-hasis, made a bow and arrow for a present to the young man, Aqhat. When Danil, Aqhat's father, saw Kothar-wa-hasis coming towards their house, he called his wife Danatiya, "Prepare a lamb from the flock. Cook for Kothar-wa-hasis his favorite meal. Kothar-wa-hasis is hungry. The master craftsman wants something to eat."[25] The expectation of hospitality is intensified with familiar guests where benefits are reciprocated. The special treatment Kothar-wa-hasis receives from Danil and Danatiya was a social expectation.

Hospitality or Hostility

What happens when hospitality is not extended to guests? Or what if a guest rejects the hospitality offered by a host? When the hospitality code is broken, it signifies hostility. In fact, in the ANE, enemies can be received as guests. Describing one of the Bedouin tribes, Cole observes, "the greatest praise they bestow on a person is to say that he is a man who is generous and who kills an animal—or whatever he has—for his guests. A guest is a sacred trust and is highly honored, even if he is from an enemy group."[26] By extending hospitality, a host turns a stranger into a guest in his home. The stranger no longer becomes a threat. The enemy is a friend, as long as he is entertained by the host.[27]

---

[25] Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, eds., "Stories of Aqhat," in *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, Revised and expanded (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 69–70.

[26] Cole, 67.

[27] Some even suggest that not only does the stranger turn into a guest, but the guest turns to be the actual lord of the home. Wight asserts that "an Easter proverb runs thus: 'The guest while in the house is its Lord.' This is a true statement of the spirit of the hospitality of the East. One of the first greetings a Palestinian host will give his guest is to say, 'Hadtha beitak,' i.e., 'This is your house.' This saying is repeated many times. Thus the guest during his stay is master of the house. And whenever the guest asks a favor, in granting it the host will say, 'You do me honor'" (Wight, 77). This seems to be the case with Abraham's hospitality towards the three strangers. In Genesis 18:3, Abraham said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant."

Not only is the stranger's status changed, but the host becomes obligated to protect the guest from other threats, even from threats in the community. This is the case in Genesis 19 with Lot and his guests in Sodom. Lot was not willing for the men of the city to take his guests. He would rather give his daughters to the crowd instead. In Genesis 19, Lot was more protective of his honor as a host than of his own daughters.[28] When appealing to the mob, Lot appealed to the code of hospitality, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known any man. Let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please. Only do nothing to these men, *for they have come under the shelter of my roof*" (Genesis 19:7-8, emphasis mine).[29] Drawing from the work of Ahmed Abou-Zeid, Persistiany observes that

> One of the most important ways of displaying the honour of the *beit* is by granting the 'right of refuge', so that a man pursued by his enemies may find here asylum. By granting asylum a man publicizes his honour and that of his kinsmen. The highest grade of honour…is attained when the idea is realized at the expense of the performer himself. The best example of this is the obligation of honour to grant sanctuary to an enemy.[30]

By taking in a guest, the host obligates himself to protect the guest as part of his household.

When a host denies hospitality, he is declaring war against the guest. Conversely, by refusing hospitality from a host, a guest presents himself as hostile to

---

[28] T. Desmond Alexander vindicates Peter calling Lot "righteous" despite the negative portrayal of Lot's righteousness in the Genesis account (2 Peter 2:7–8). For Alexander, one of the signs of Lot's righteousness is his hospitality. He cites 1 Clement 11:1, indicating that Lot was saved out of Sodom because of his hospitality and piety. See T. Desmond Alexander, "Lot's Hospitality: A Clue to His Righteousness," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (June 1985): 289–291.

[29] A similar situation is found in Genesis 19 with the old man from Gibeah taking in the Levite as his guest.

[30] John G. Peristiany, "Introduction," in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, John G. Peristiany, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 16.

the community.[31] This is the case in Judges 8:4–17. Gideon and his three hundred men were exhausted, but still pursuing the kings of Median, Zebah, and Zalmunna. When they crossed the Jordan, they asked the men of Succoth for bread, but the men from Succoth refused. And when Gideon reached Penuel and asked for bread, the men of Penuel also declined their request. Gideon threatened both the men of Succoth and the men of Penuel.

> So Gideon said, "After the LORD gives me victory over Zebah and Zalmunna, I will return and tear your flesh with the thorns and briers from the wilderness…" So he said to the people of Peniel, "After I return in victory, I will tear down this tower" (Judges 8:7–9, NLT).

Sure enough, after defeating the kings of Median, Gideon returned from the battle, learned the names of the elders of Succoth, and confronted them (cf. Judges 9:15–17). One of the most despicable acts of betrayal in the ANE is when guests turn their back against a host.[32] Thus, in the ANE, a refusal of hospitality, by either the guest or the host, is an act of hostility.

Part 3: Reading 1 Samuel 25 with an ANE Lens

A more satisfying reason for David's war-like response against Nabal is Nabal's failure to uphold the hospitality code expected in an ANE culture. From the biblical text, without reconstructing the narrative, several clues demonstrate that Nabal and David fit the role of an ANE host and guest.

---

[31] Matthews and Benjamin observe that "hospitality in the world of the Bible was more than simply an amenity for travelers. It was a village's most important form of foreign policy. Villages used hospitality to determine whether strangers were friends or enemies" (Matthews and Benjamin, 82). See also Michael Herzfeld, "As in Your Own House: Hospitality, Ethnography, and the Stereotype of Mediterranean Society," in *Honour and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David D. Gilmore (Washington: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 75–81.

[32] Cf. Obadiah 7; Psalm 41:9.

Nabal in the Role of a Host

The narrator of 1 Samuel 25 portrays Nabal as a suitable candidate for an ANE host. First, the narrator describes Nabal as a wealthy man. He is a businessman with 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats (v. 2). He has more than enough food to provide for his own household and for David's men. Secondly, it was a feast day, a day of celebration (v. 8).[33] The shearing of sheep (or the shearing-festival) is a public feast in the agricultural regions of Palestine.[34] Thus, this is a time of excess food and drinking. Third, when Abigail gathered food for David, the text says that she did it with haste (מָהַר) and secretly—she did not tell her husband Nabal (vv. 18–19).[35] There was so much food in Nabal's household that gathering food with haste could take place discreetly; Abigail had to tell Nabal what took place the next day (v. 37). The amount of food that Abigail gave David and his six hundred men was small enough in comparison that the missing food was hardly noticeable. Lastly, towards the end of the feast, Nabal was drunk, and he held a feast "like a feast of a king" (v. 36).[36] Hence, Nabal's reasoning that his bread, water, and meat were sufficient only for his men was not legitimate. David was not asking too much when he asked for food for six hundred men. Surely, Nabal had more than enough food to provide for David and his men.

Furthermore, not only was Nabal capable of performing the role of a host, he was obligated to be a host. There are at least three reasons indicated in the text.

---

[33] Literally, the phrase is a "good day" (יוֹם טוֹב), which is an idiom for celebration (cf. Esther 8:17; 9:19, 22).

[34] Andrew Steinmann, *1 Samuel*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 194.

[35] The use of the same verb, מָהַר, implies that Abigail's sense of urgency mirrors Abraham's urgency for his guests in Genesis 18.

[36] Ralph W. Klein observes that Nabal's "gluttonous eating and drinking are in stark contrast with his denial of David's request for provisions for his starving, thirsty band. Nabal feasted like a king but rejected the legitimate request of the future king." *1 Samuel*, 251.

First, Nabal was a wealthy businessman, a tribal leader responsible for the practice of hospitality in the community.[37] He is "the Calebite sheikh."[38] Secondly, Nabal is of the same tribe as David. There is a reason the narrator indicated that Nabal was Calebite (v. 3), from the tribe of Judah. Nabal is David's kin. This is evident in the young men's speech to Nabal: "Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to *your son David."* If hosts are obligated to extend hospitality to total strangers, how much more to those who are of the same tribe? The third reason is the benefit that Nabal received from David. One of the reasons Nabal can celebrate the shearing festival with his household is the fact that David and his men protected Nabal's shepherds and sheep in the wilderness so that none of the sheep was missing (v. 7).[39] One of Nabal's servants even testified about the protection David gave,

> Yet the men were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we did not miss anything when we were in the fields, as long as we went with them. They were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep (1 Samuel 25:15–16).[40]

Ordinarily, it is expected in the culture of the ANE for anyone to extend hospitality within his economic means to any traveler. But the details in 1 Samuel 25 even heighten the obligation of Nabal, as a tribal leader, kinsman, and recipient of

---

[37] Abou-Zeid observes that "the role which livestock plays in determining the political power of a person or group is shown in the fact that a wealthy man, *i.e.* a man with a large number of animals, is likely to be invited to look into disputes and adherents and clients both round himself and round his kin-group." Abou-Zeid, "Honour and Shame among the Bedouins of Egypt," 250.

[38] Steinmann, 194. This is an alternate spelling for "shaikh."

[39] "The value of David's protection is suggested by a previous narrative account, which noted that after the Philistines attacked nearby Keilah, they were in possession of livestock (23:5)." Bergen, 246.

[40] The fact that the servant testifies that David's men were "very good to us" indicates that David's protection was not a "protection racket." Contra Levenson, 19; and Halpern, 21–22.

protection to extend hospitality to David. Was refusing to provide a meal to David Nabal's prerogative? According to the ANE culture, the answer is in the negative.

David in the Role of a Guest

The biblical narrative demonstrates that David assumed the role of a guest throughout the account. David, with calculated diplomacy, sent his envoy to greet Nabal with a blessing characteristic of a guest requesting hospitality (vv. 5–6). In a polite way, appealing to the services they provided, David's men asked for whatever Nabal desired to give. David's request was nothing close to demanding a premium for providing services.[41]

When Nabal refused to extend hospitality, David's vengeful response was not surprising in the ANE culture. Nabal's denial of David's request was an act of hostility, a declaration of war. This is hinted in the text by the fact that one of Nabal's young men felt the need to report the incident of his master's misconduct to Abigail. He urged Abigail to do something about the situation to protect the household since "evil is determined against our master and against all his household" (v. 17). How did the servant know that David planned to attack Nabal? David's violent knee-jerk reaction was only known to David's men *after* they reported Nabal's denial of their request. Additionally, the young man was not the only one who feared David's potential attack; the entire household of Nabal acknowledges this imminent danger. In v. 17, the servant comments that Nabal is "so ill-tempered that no one can even talk to him!" (NLT).[42] What the text implies is that the whole household knows that they are in danger, but none of them dares rebuke their master Nabal. Furthermore, Abigail's sense of urgency reveals that she was convinced of the threat to her household because of her husband's misconduct (v. 18). It is therefore safe to

---

[41] Contra Halpern, 284.

[42] Baldwin suggests that Nabal's shepherds were in fear, "*guessing* David's reaction to Nabal's rebuff." Baldwin, *1–2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary,* TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 159.

assume, grounded by the details of the text, that David's hostile response to Nabal is a natural expectation based on the hospitality code culture of the day.[43]

Nabal was clearly the antagonist of the passage. He was culpable for his violation of the culture's hospitality code and for insulting the Lord's anointed. The point of view of the narrator attests to this.[44] In the opening of the narrative, Nabal is depicted negatively—he was "harsh and badly behaved" (v. 3). The ending of the narrative confirms this. Abigail called him a wicked man and a fool, and points out that his name literally means "fool.". After hearing of Abigail's hospitality towards David, Nabal had a stroke (v. 37). Then the narrator explicitly reveals the divine viewpoint concerning Nabal's inhospitality: "And about ten days later the LORD struck Nabal, and he died" (v. 38).

Conclusion

Was David overreacting? An awareness of the hospitality code in the ANE makes us understand David's response not as an overreaction, but as a natural reaction. Nabal's insult was not merely rudeness but a foolish declaration of war. Nabal's servant and Abigail realized this and prevented it. While David's vengeful response was expected in the culture, reacting within the cultural norms of the day does not excuse him for his vengeful spirit. Bergen comments, "Nabal had violated

---

[43] This reaction is consistent with 2 Samuel 12:1–6, where Nathan tells a parable of a host who stole another man's sheep to offer to his guest to confront David for his sin with Bathsheba. David's reaction against the host was a violent one. He swore an oath that the man would surely die and repay fourfold. Compare 1 Samuel 15:13, 21–22 with 2 Samuel 12:5–6.

[44] See "point of view, ideology and narrative world" in Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and Expanded, 2nd Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 204–206.

the Torah…and wronged David. Nevertheless, the Torah reserved for the Lord alone the right to avenge wrong in this case."[45]

Applying the cultural practice of hospitality into 1 Samuel 25 best explains the incidents that may seem strange and puzzling for a western, twenty-first century reader. In the treatment of hospitality in 1 Samuel 25, the cultural background serves the details of the text instead of altering the text in order to accommodate the data found in the historical-cultural background. The biblical text remains to be the priority over the details provided by the cultural research. The greatest danger in the use of historical background is to force history, archaeology, or literature into the biblical text. If this danger is avoided, however, historical-cultural background provides valuable insight in discovering the meaning of the biblical text.

---

[45] Bergen, 250. Contra Hoffner, who argues that Nabal did not break any laws by his rudeness. *1 & 2 Samuel,* Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015). Bergen cites the following passages: Lev. 19:18; Deut. 24:15; 32:35.

Selected Bibliography

Primary Sources

Arnold, Bill T., and Bryan Beyer, eds. "Instruction of Amenemope." In *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study*. Encountering Biblical Studies. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*. London: Oxford University Press, 1949.

Heimpel, Wolfgang. *Letters to the King of Mari: A New Translation, with Historical Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003.

Matthews, Victor H., and Don C. Benjamin, eds. "Stories of Aqhat." In *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*. Fully Revised and Expanded Edition. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.

Pritchard, James B., ed. "The Banquet of Ashurnarsipal II." In *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Third Edition with Supplement. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.

Secondary Sources

Abou-Zeid, Ahmed. "Honour and Shame among the Bedouins of Egypt." In *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*. John G Peristiany, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Alexander, T. Desmond. "Lot's Hospitality: A Clue to His Righteousness." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (June 1985): 289–291.

Benjamin, Don C. *Deuteronomy and City Life: A Form Criticism of Texts with the Word City ('ir) in Deuteronomy 4:41-26:19*. New York: University Press of America, 1983.

Black-Michaud, Jacob. *Cohesive Force: Feud in the Mediterranean and the Middle East*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975.

Bratcher, Dennis. "Stranger." *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. Paul J. Achtemeier, ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.

Cole, Donald Powell. *Nomads of the Nomads: The Āl Murrah Bedouin of the Empty Quarter*. Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1988.

Davison, Beverly C. "Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger." *American Baptist Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (March 1992): 6–19.

Gaster, Theodore H. *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament: A Comparative Study with Chapters from Sir James G. Frazer's Folklore in the Old Testament*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith Publishers, 2011.

Halpern, Baruch. *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

———. *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.

Herzfeld, Michael. "As in Your Own House: Hospitality, Ethnography, and the Stereotype of Mediterranean Society." In *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, David D. Gilmore, ed. Washington: American Anthropological Association, 1987.

Hobbs, T. Raymond. "Hospitality in the First Testament and the 'Teleological Fallacy.'" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26, no. 1 (September 2001): 3–30.

———. "Man, Woman, and Hospitality--2 Kings 4:8-36." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23, no. 3 (September 1993): 91–100.

Lasine, Stuart. "Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot's Hospitality in an Inverted World." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 9, no. 29 (June 1984): 37–59.

Matthews, Victor H. "Female Voices: Upholding the Honor of the Household." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 8–15.

———. "Herem versus Hospitality in the Story of Rahab." In *The Genre of Biblical Commentary: Essays in Honor of John E. Hartley on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*. Timothy D Finlay and William Yarchin, eds., 217–233. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015.

———. "Hospitality and Hostility in Genesis 19 and Judges 19." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (1992): 3–11.

———. "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 13–21.

Matthews, Victor H., and Don C. Benjamin, eds. *The Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250-587 BCE*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993.

Morschauser, Scott. "'Hospitality', Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19.1-9." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27, no. 4 (June 2003): 461–485.

Niditch, Susan. "The 'Sodomite' Theme in Judges 19-20: Family, Community, and Social Disintegration." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (July 1982): 365–378.

Nieuwenhuyze, Christoffel Anthonie Olivier van. *Sociology of the Middle East: A Stocktaking and Interpretation*. Leiden: Brill, 1971.

Pehrson, Robert N. *The Social Organization of the Marri Baluch*. Fredrik Barth, ed. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1981.

Peristiany, John G. "Introduction." In *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, John G. Peristiany, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Pohl, Christine D. "Hospitality." *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy, eds. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

———. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Wight, Fred. *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1953.

Wright, Rebecca Abts. "Establishing Hospitality in the Old Testament: Testing the Tool of Linguistic Pragmatics." Ph.D. Diss, Yale University, 1989.

Stone, Ken. "Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19: Subject-Honor, Object-Shame?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 20, no. 67 (September 1995): 87–107.

Commentary Literature

Arnold, Bill T. *1 & 2 Samuel*. NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

Auld, A. Graeme. *I & II Samuel.* The Old Testament Library. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

Baldwin, Joyce. *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary.* TOTC. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988.

Bergen, Robert D. *1 & 2 Samuel*. New American Commentary. Vol. 7. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1996.

Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel.* Interpretation. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.

Davis, Dale Ralph. *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart.* Focus on the Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.

Evans, Mary J. *The Message of Samuel.* The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

Firth, David G. *1 & 2 Samuel*. Apollos Old Testament. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Gehrke, Ralph David. *1–2 Samuel.* Concordia Commentary. London: Concordia Publishing House, 1968.

Hoffner, Harry A. *1 & 2 Samuel.* Evangelical Exegetical Commentary. Bellingham,

WA: Lexham Press, 2015.

Klein, Ralph W. *1 Samuel*. Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 10. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983.

Levenson, Jon D. "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (January 1978): 11–28.

Lozovyy, Joseph. *Saul, Doeg, Nabal, and the "Son of Jesse": Readings in 1 Samuel 16-25*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2009.

McCarter, R. Kyle Jr. *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary.* The Anchor Bible. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980.

Murphy, Francesca Ara. *1 Samuel*. Brazos Theological Commentary. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010.

Smith, Henry Preserved. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel.* International Critical Commentary.

Steinmann, Andrew. *1 Samuel*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016.

Tsumura, David Toshio. *The First Book of Samuel*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Youngblood, Ronald F. "1 & 2 Samuel." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Vol. 3. Revised Edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.