

THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE DISCOURSE ON MIGRATION: A REFLECTION ON THE VIRTUE OF HOSPITALITY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

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Abstract

There have been significant shifts in terms of global patterns and sources of migration in recent decades. Still, the issue of migration remains a sign of the times. The inter-related factors of economics, politics, and violence continue to be the root causes of massive migration, and the subsequent impact on the migrants as well as on receiving countries is huge and complex. The author offers an ethical reflection on the discourse on migration by exploring the virtue of hospitality found in the *Book of Ruth*. By reading scriptural texts exegetically we identify certain qualities of Boaz's hospitality that can provide insights to our Christian understanding of hospitality. Moreover, the concern of the writer of the book seems not only to

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portray a singular virtuous character but also to reform Israelites of the postexilic period into a community characterized by such value. Thus, the practice of Christian hospitality beyond a personal level points toward reforming our contemporary society into one that incorporates immigrants and itinerant people in a Christian way.

The Issue of Migration as a Sign of the Times

Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land (Gen 12:10).

Although migration is not a new phenomenon but “as old as humanity itself,”¹ its magnitude and complexity as a global and ongoing reality continues to challenge us — as individuals and states — in the 21st century. Recent statistics show that some 214 million people lived outside their country of origin and there are over 740 million internal migrants worldwide.² The sources, pattern, characteristics of countries of origin and destination, as well as the policies toward massive migration continue to shift significantly.

There are different and yet inter-related root causes of massive migration: economic, social, political, religious, and cultural problems, which often lead to violence or war and a subsequent large number of displaced people within very short time periods. The tragedy of natural disasters further creates another outflow of people — “environmental refugees” — and adds immediate burden to their countries.³ Such massive migration has huge impacts in almost every level of our global society: from the lives of individual migrants to demographics, to cultures and religions, to politics and economics, of both the countries of origin and receiving countries, and to the international community.⁴

Although there are positive impacts identified, the general conclusion seems not to be positive. On the individual level the issue of discrimination, the violation of human rights, and the unique impact on women and children are the most widely encountered experience by migrants.⁵ Pope Francis, in his recent message for

¹Douglas Massey and others, *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998, 1.

²IOM, UNDESA, *UN System Task Team on the Post—2015 UN Development Agenda*, http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Think%20Pieces/13_migration.pdf.

³See UNFPA, “Migration: A World on the Move,” *Linking Population, Poverty and Development* <http://www.unfpa.org/pds/migration.html>.

⁴See Gil Epstein and Ira Gang, ed., *Migration and Culture*, Bingley: Emerald, 2010.

⁵See William O’Neill and William Spohn, “Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Immigration and Refugee Policy,” *Theological Studies* 59, 1 (1998) 84–106.

“World Day of Migrants and Refugees,” likewise points out that “[d]espite their hopes and expectations, [migrants] often encounter mistrust, rejection and exclusion, to say nothing of tragedies and disasters which offend their human dignity.”⁶

On the national level, the long term impact on the economy of countries both of origin and destination is still debatable; and the discussion on its impact on the socio-cultural dimension of the society is equally unsettled, especially within the receiving country. Thus, mixed attitudes and feelings, from advocacy to suspicion to xenophobia, are reported. These attitudes and stance are further manifested through policy decisions and juridical debates.

The dilemmas faced by the receiving country and its citizens are understandable. The Christian community, especially the Roman Catholic Church, perceives this complex issue of migration as a sign of the times and a challenge to each follower of Christ. Our judgment and response cannot be based solely on economy or socio-cultural, political, or security concerns but, more importantly, on Christian values.

The Hebrew Bible as a Source for Christian Understanding of Hospitality

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God (Lev 19:33-4).

Many agree that the concept of virtue and value are found in the Bible, either explicitly or implicitly. John Collins, for example, calls for speaking of values (and virtues) rather than laws in the Bible.⁷ In fact, Scripture not only discloses virtues, values, and vision, it actually promotes them. This promotion can be understood in three ways.⁸ First, Scripture orients the believers around certain values and virtues that reflect God’s self-revelation culminating in Christ; it

⁶Pope Francis, “Towards a Better World,” *World Day of Migrants and Refugees* (January 19, 2014) <http://www.news.va/en/news/popes-message-for-world-day-of-migrants-and-refugee>.

⁷John Collins, “What are Biblical Values?,” in *Scripture and Justice: The Bible in Contemporary Struggles for Social Justice. Essays in honor of John R. Donahue, S.J.*, ed. Gregory E. Sterling and Anatheia Portier-Young, forthcoming.

⁸For a detailed discussion on relating Scripture and virtue ethics, see Lúcas Chan, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century: Developments, Emerging Consensus, and Future Directions*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2013, 78–112.

shapes character and identity in a distinctively Christian way.⁹ Second, the Bible contains many 'characters' who model for us distinctive Christian moral characters and virtues. Third, the Bible is relevant to the formation of the characters and identity of the community since character is "a process of communal formation of individual identity."¹⁰ Scripture "forms community as much as community informs the reading of Scripture."¹¹ Moreover, the Bible forms a particular, spiritual, and moral community in the sense that it "render[s] a community capable of ordering its existence [in a way] appropriate to such stories."¹²

In our Christian response — theological and ethical — to the discourse on migration, the call to hospitality is often emphasized by the Church, such as in her *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* (#30).¹³ Therefore, it is appropriate to turn to the Bible for understanding of this Christian value.

The present author proposes the turn to the postexilic *Book of Ruth* for insights. There are two major reasons for this proposal. The first and general reason is that morality in the Hebrew Bible is not confined to the Decalogue or law codes alone, for the dominant feature of the Hebrew Bible is actually stories that contribute to the development of moral vision within a wider scope.¹⁴ Moreover, within the Hebrew Bible the command to care for and be in solidarity with the stranger was the second most frequently repeated message.¹⁵ What makes the Hebrew Bible notion of hospitality unique is the

⁹Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Christian Character, Biblical Community, and Human Values," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. William Brown, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002, 10.

¹⁰Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Christian Character...", 10.

¹¹William Brown, ed., *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002, xi.

¹²Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1981, 67.

¹³Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, May 2004, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents/rc_pc_migrants_doc_20040514_erga-migrantes-caritas-christi_en.html. Other important values include solidarity, sharing, and caring.

¹⁴Mary Mills, *Biblical Morality: Moral Perspectives in Old Testament Narratives*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001, 1–2.

¹⁵William O'Neill, "Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Forced Displacement," forthcoming *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*. O'Neill cites W. Gunther Plaut, "Jewish Ethics and International Migrations," *International Migration Review: Ethics, Migration and Global Stewardship* 30 (Spring 1996) 18–36, at 20–21.

sense of “God as Israel’s host.” Israelites were conscious of their identity as ‘wandering Arameans’ welcomed by God (Dt 26:5-22). This self-reflection becomes their basis for the command to be hospitable towards strangers (Lev 19:33-34), reflected in various legislation, such as those concerning tithing (Dt 12:17-19) and harvesting (Dt 24:19-22). The violation of these rules is an offense to God (Judges 8:4-17). New Testament hospitality is in general in continuity with Hebrew Bible hospitality.¹⁶

Second, ancient Judaism would centre the virtue around the patriarchs, such as Abraham and Lot (e.g., Gen 18:1-8; 19:1-11).¹⁷ However, both figures seem inappropriate if they are expected to function in an exemplary manner for our discourse: their visitors were not destitute; they were transient and thus require short-term, limited hospitality; hence, they did not deal with vulnerable, most likely permanent foreigners as we do. In contrast, the person of Boaz portrayed in the *Book of Ruth*, particularly in his words and deeds, as will be explored in what follows, seems to demonstrate more fully what hospitality could mean; Boaz can be an exemplar for our practices.¹⁸

Last but not least, following the disruptive experience of the Exile, Israel was as a community undergoing a process of rebuilding and reforming itself — restoring its identity as a covenant community whose moral and ritual purity was crucial to the existence of the people.¹⁹ The portrayal of Boaz and his hospitality in this postexilic book could contain a communal insight into self-identity from which our society can learn.

¹⁶John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985, 3.

¹⁷John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 15.

¹⁸While not rejecting the feminist view that the *Book of Ruth* is about a widow’s faithfulness and/or the loving relationship between two women, the present author believes that the third character, Boaz, could also play an important role in teaching us Christian values.

¹⁹Being the only biblical book bearing the name of a gentile and having a postexilic date of composition, the *Book of Ruth* points to a polemical motivation on the part of the author, namely, to respond to and challenge the trend of Judaism toward ‘narrow exclusivism’ (i.e., Ezra-Nehemiah’s separatist policies that opposed mixed marriage for the survival of the postexilic community) and hence reflects the inclusive vision of other postexilic writers. See André Lacocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004, 1. See also Raymond Foster, *The Restoration of Israel*, London: DLT, 1970, ix; Henry Flanders, Robert Crapps, and David Smith, *People of the Covenant*, 4th ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996, 433, 441.

An Exposition of Three Dialogues in the *Book of Ruth*²⁰

The chronological setting of the story is the era of the Judges (around 11th century BCE). Ruth, a Moabite and a widow, accompanied her mother-in-law, Naomi, to return to Judah where Ruth encountered Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's husband. Naomi plotted a plan that led to Boaz's willingness to redeem the family property and acquire Ruth as his wife.

Here, the identity of Ruth as a Moabite widow is crucial. According to ancient Near East law codes, Ruth as a widow, had two options:²¹ 1) to return to her father's house and remarry; or 2) to live by charity (as protected by the law). Yet, as a Moabite, Ruth would be perceived as an enemy and viewed with suspicion as a 'foreigner' rather than as a 'resident alien' in Judah. The distinction between these two types of strangers requires some clarifications.²² 'Resident aliens' (Hebrew *ger*) are those who abide in a place in which they are not permanently located (e.g., the Canaanites who came after the conquest). In some matters they are treated as natives/citizens by the Israel community and have to observe the Law (e.g., Ex 12:19). Yet in other matters they are treated differently. These resident aliens are generally the less advantaged and are often classified with the widow and orphan (e.g., Jer 7:6). They deserved justice and the community is obliged to provide protection for them (e.g., Dt 24:17). 'Foreigners' (Hebrew *nokri*), on the contrary, are often the subject of suspicion or even of hostility. The typical example would be the foreign wives of the Israelites during Ezra-Nehemiah's time (Ez 9:1-2). They do not enjoy the same status as resident aliens do.²³

In order to grasp a fuller understanding of Boaz's hospitality, three representative texts — dialogues in particular, as more than half of the book consists of conversations — are examined.

²⁰The following exegetical works on *Ruth* were consulted here: Kathleen Robertson Farmer, "The Book of Ruth," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 2, ed. Leander Keck, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998; Lacocque, *Ruth*; Tod Linafelt, *Ruth*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999; Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997; Katharine Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1999.

²¹Lacocque, *Ruth*, 22.

²²The works of Joseph Jensen and Dana W. Wilbanks are consulted here: Jensen, "Stranger," in *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller, 956-59, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996; Wilbanks, *Re-creating America: the Ethics of U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.

²³However, some postexilic writers, such as Third Isaiah, perceive them as helpers in the restoration of Israel (Is 61:5).

1. *Dialogues with Workers and Ruth in the Field (2:4-16)*

The occasion of the conversations is that Ruth comes to work, providentially, in Boaz's field and that Boaz has just returned from Bethlehem (2:2-3).

In verse 4 we hear the voice of Boaz for the first time. It is an open question whether Boaz's greeting is simply a conventional one, or carries fuller theological meaning; in either case, the interchange between Boaz and his workers gives the impression that Boaz takes an interest in and cares for them. In verses 5-7, Boaz asks about the background of Ruth, whom he has noticed. Even though it is Ruth who has taken the very first step by gleaning in Boaz's field, it is Boaz's awareness of a stranger that becomes the determining factor for the development of the story.

The following two verses (vv 8-9) narrate the first dialogue between Boaz and Ruth. Boaz's words of welcome and actions are extraordinary: he extends paternal protection to a foreigner and bestows special privilege on gleaning that exceeds the requirement of the law (Lev 19:9-10; Dt 24:19). Boaz's praise of Ruth, and prayer for her, in verses 11-12 recalls the journey of Abram (Gen 12:1-3) and reflects two themes important to Israelites — 'hesed' and 'God as our refuge'.

The final three verses (vv 14-16) of their first encounter are equally revealing. First, Boaz's offer of bread demonstrates the basics of the act of hospitality (Jgs 19:1-21). Second, the invitation to sit close to him could be a gesture of incorporating into her the community, although allowing a Moabite widow to eat with Judeans and men would be considered scandalous. Third, Boaz's final instruction on gleaning hints that he pushes generosity to the extreme.

2. *Dialogue with Ruth on the Threshing Floor (3:8-15)*

The context of this scene is that Ruth visits Boaz's threshing floor at night and lies down next to him. Their conversation begins when Boaz discovers her presence. It is debatable whether this scene is one of seduction or to be interpreted as another favour bestowed on Ruth by Boaz. Nevertheless, Ruth's address to Boaz as her *go'el* (redeemer) in verse 9 and her request to 'spread his cloak over her' point to the norm of protection regardless of whether it should be interpreted in a marital context (Ez 16:8). Yet, he is challenged to do more than what is required of him, for Boaz's two answers (vv 11-13) could imply that such protection (of marriage) is separated from redeeming the land (c.f., 4:3-4) and hence is not a duty required of a redeemer.

The first part of Boaz's reply (v 10) is a repetition of what we have heard in his first encounter with Ruth (2:11-12). This reveals a certain degree of consistency in his words/deeds that in turn reflects his character as one ready to include, to wish the well-being of, and to identify the good quality of Ruth. Moreover, Boaz is aware of receiving a favour from someone who is under his protection.

Boaz's response in verse 11 suggests that he is also aware of the social atmosphere to which he belongs, as well as Ruth's possible fear of refusal and loss of reputation. His acknowledgement that Ruth is a worthy woman also shows that he does not judge on the basis of her socio-economic status.

Boaz's second answer (2:2-13) indicates that he attempts to address/respond to the Ruth's various requests, although he is aware of the presence of obstacles. His instruction that Ruth should stay overnight, though ambiguous, can be understood in two positive ways. First, the Hebrew verb translated here as 'remain' is the same verb used by Ruth in her commitment to Naomi (1:16), where it is translated as 'to lodge'. So, Boaz's instruction may anticipate Ruth's lodging with him after marriage. Second, it precludes the danger to Ruth that might arise from her moving about at night, and thus it protects her reputation. However, acting in this way Boaz would face a dilemma: while saving her good name on the one hand, he might be suspected of taking advantage of her on the other.

The conversation between Boaz and Ruth comes to an end in verses 14 and 15. Here, Boaz continues to care for Ruth's reputation. When he gives Ruth some grain, no unit of measure is mentioned. This could suggest that Ruth receives as much as she can carry and hence implies that Boaz's generosity is without limits. Last but not least, the confident words of Naomi (v 18) tell us that Boaz will expedite the matter without delay.

3. Dialogue with the Kinsman at the Gate (4:1-10)

This conversation occurs at the city gate in front of a group of ten elders and the kinsman (vv 1, 2). Jewish tradition required the presence of the elders in deciding the acceptability of receiving an outsider into Israel. The presence of the elders could imply Boaz's determination to marry Ruth.

In dialogue with the kinsman Boaz presents the case carefully, and with due respect and acknowledgement of his rights. Although his mention of the land, together with Naomi and Ruth could be a tactic

to convince the kinsman to give up his right of redemption, it also reveals Boaz's creative commitment to the good of Ruth's family.

When Boaz says 'acquiring Ruth' in verse 5, it is probably for the sake of stylistic uniformity that the author uses the Hebrew verb *qanah* (buy) to refer to a marriage rather than to imply that women are property for trade.²⁴ It points to the custom of levirate marriage. However, the mention of Ruth's being a Moabite in this scenario suggests that Boaz's willingness to enter into levirate marriage with Ruth is not just unconventional but also risky, for it contradicts Ezra-Nehemiah's insistence on racial purity.²⁵

The whole conversation concludes with Boaz's declaration of his decision to marry Ruth and fulfil the legal formalities (vv 9, 10). These are his last words in the story and they show that Boaz has eventually fulfilled the promise made to Ruth on the threshing floor. Finally, Boaz's repeated reference to Ruth's ethnic background as a Moabite suggests that he acknowledges the delicate matters that emerged in the process and does not ignore them as if non-existent.

The Qualities of Boaz's Hospitality

The above exposition reveals that Boaz's hospitality, as portrayed by the postexilic writer, is not merely the conventional welcome extended to a guest but in addition contains certain distinctive qualities. Seven qualities are identified briefly:

1. The Practice Begins with Hospitality towards One's Own People

The very first word of Boaz in the entire story is his greeting to his servants, which is a sign of his interest in and care for them. In this way, Boaz's practice of hospitality begins with his care for his own people.

2. The Self-Awareness and Remembrance of Being Strangers as the Motivating Force

Boaz is aware of and remembers the journeying experience of his ancestors, which is in accord with Israelites' remembrance that they were strangers hosted by God (Dt 10:19). His receiving of blessings from his servants could further illustrate this self-awareness. This recognition of one's stranger-status could become the motivating force of Boaz's hospitality toward others — grateful response to God's *hesed*. It could also have an impact on his understanding and

²⁴Edward Campbell, *Ruth*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975, 147.

²⁵C.f. footnote 18.

use of resources: they are loaned by God to be passed on to those in need.²⁶ Here, humility is a natural attitude that accompanies Boaz's hospitality.

3. Active Awareness and Recognition of the Stranger around Us

All three dialogues reveal that Boaz's awareness of the stranger around him is unconventional. First, his immediate enquiry about Ruth is not unlike Abraham's 'running' to meet the heavenly visitors (Gn 18:2). Both take the initiative to reach out to the stranger.²⁷ Second, his awareness of Ruth's personal needs and feelings points to his recognition of her uniqueness.²⁸ Here, he meets her as she actually is. Third, Boaz also recognizes her goodness, which could be grounded in his respect for her basic dignity as an image of God.

4. Welcome and Generosity as the Basic Components of Hospitality

Boaz's invitation to continue to glean, to drink freely, to eat with his reapers, and his instructions to his workers, point to creating a welcoming, home-like experience for Ruth. Moreover, Boaz's welcome is followed by consistent, ongoing acts of great generosity, such as the permission to glean and to eat till satisfied, and his acquiring Ruth so as to "maintain the dead man's names on his inheritance" (4:5).

5. Creativity, Eagerness, and Prudence in Action

Boaz attempts to address the different needs of Ruth. This demands creativity in his actions. He is also ready to fulfil Ruth's request without delay. However, he is aware of the demands of the community/tradition and of his own limitations, and thus acts prudently at the gate. In other words, Boaz's willingness/eagerness still needs to be guided by his awareness and prudential judgment of the situation ahead and the emerging dilemmas/tensions — especially those between welcoming the stranger and maintaining identity, and between generosity and limited nature of the resources.²⁹

²⁶William O'Neill, "Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Forced Displacement," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, 1 (2007) 113–35, at 128.

²⁷James Keenan, "Jesuit hospitality?" in *Promise Renewed: Jesuit Higher Education for a New Millennium*, ed. Martin R. Tripole, Chicago, IL: Jesuit Way, 1999, 230–44, at 237, 241.

²⁸Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, 101.

²⁹Christine D. Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 19, 1 (2006) 81–101, at 94–98.

6. *An Invitation to Go the Extra Mile and Take Risk*

Boaz acts not only with great generosity but also always beyond what is required of him. He accepts the necessary risk regardless of the boundaries set by tradition and community. This shows his courage to do what is right for Ruth.

Moreover, being a 'prominent rich man,' Boaz's extraordinary and courageous generosity seems to exemplify the kind of magnanimity portrayed by Aristotle: "He will be moderately disposed towards wealth, power...takes great risks,...never or only reluctantly makes a request, whereas he is eager to help others."³⁰

7. *Incorporation as the Goal of Hospitality*

Boaz's final public announcement to marry Ruth demonstrates that hospitality is ultimately accomplished by the actual incorporation of the stranger into the community. His enduring respect for Ruth and his affirmation of her unique identity (as a Moabite) further indicate what genuine incorporation means: it seeks not to assimilate or absorb newcomers but to assist them to "become part of a corporate body...[and have] their diversity respected and valued."³¹

Boaz and the Discourse on Migration: A Reflection

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord...when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?...And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Mt 25: 37-40).

Postexilic Israel was undergoing a process of rebuilding and reforming itself. In this context, the author of Ruth might intend the story to contribute to this reshaping of identity: Boaz's hospitality could be construed as a character trait of a reformed Israelite, and the incorporation of others as the fullest expression of hospitality. Boaz could thus be a role model for the entire community of Israel in its reformation process, and as an invitation to the returnees toward the *telos* of fuller incorporation and away from the deception of ethnical purity. A reformed Israelite community is partly identified by its hospitality toward others. As a virtue, hospitality is both a means for the re-formation and an end itself.

How do we bring forward this analysis in our response toward migrants? The present author structures his concluding reflection in

³⁰Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson, London: Penguin Books, 1976, 95–97.

³¹Wilbanks, *Re-creating America*, 86–87.

two foundational questions found in virtue ethics: what kind of society would we like to become? And what ought we to do to get there?

What Kind of Society would We Like to Become?

The reforming intentions of the postexilic writer might well inspire us, as Christians, to form and reform our society into a hospitable one. While being sensitive to its own situation / culture, such a society would also be ready to welcome, to be generous towards, and eventually incorporate immigrants into itself. Each person would be assisted and accepted by the society and helped to feel at home. It would become a world without 'strangers'. Indeed, the close connection between hospitality and what our society ought to become is found in the view of Homer: "The city which forgets how to care for the stranger has forgotten how to care for itself."³² That means, what our society becomes can be reflected in our dealing with immigrants.

What Ought We to Do to Get There?

The identification of the qualities of Boaz's hospitality has provided hints on how to form and reform our society into a hospitable one. Besides reflecting on 'who we are' individually and communally — as both hosts and strangers who have experienced the hospitality of God and of others — our society needs to practice, in an analogous manner, what Boaz did.

The Practice Begins with the Hospitality towards One's Own Poor

Any reasonable discussion of migration has to recognize its impact on, and care first for the poor / vulnerable already resident within one's society. Our recognition of and care for the poor at home can increase our sensitivity to the needs of those who migrate to our countries. However, society needs not wait until all our own poor are completely cared before we extend hospitality to the immigrants. It is, rather, a matter of proper distribution of our resources. Also, the most vulnerable people in our society are often those who have been staying in our countries undocumented for some time and yet are unable to be incorporated because of their status. With proper distribution of resources, caring for the poor at home and for the migrants are not really in conflict.

³²Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961, 223.

Active Awareness and Recognition of Migrants around Us

Merely recognizing migrants or the initial inconvenience they create is not enough. Rather, we need to appreciate their goodness and potential contributions to the society as well. We also have to show them respect because of our shared human dignity. In other words, our recognition should focus on the common ground rather than on differences that set us apart.

Furthermore, our society needs to reach out to understand their different needs in order to offer more effective responses and make better policies. For example, if migrants come to look for job opportunities rather than permanent residency, a guest worker bill may be more beneficial than one that offers a path towards legal residency status.

Welcome and Generosity towards the Migrants as Basic Components of Hospitality

Welcome as a basic component of hospitality makes the other feel at home. It is “always offered from within a ‘place’ that combines physical space, social relationships, and particular meanings and values.”³³ A welcoming society, therefore, is one where migrants would feel safe and comfortable, and experience the stability to live and flourish.³⁴ For this, a non-discriminatory and just juridical system is needed.

Hospitality requires generous sharing of personal possessions. However, consumer culture that reinforces individualism and self-centeredness (individually and communally) hinders us from being generous. It is thus important for us to discourage and resist the corrosive forces of such isolating individualism, and instead cultivate a culture of generosity.

Creativity, Eagerness, and Prudence in Our Action

Creative thinking (especially on the level of policy making) in carrying out and maximizing such generosity, as well as in identifying the various needs of the immigrants is crucial, especially when resources are limited.

Besides creativity, prudential judgment is also needed, particularly in handling social dilemmas, such as tensions between generosity and

³³Pohl, 150; Pohl cites Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 157.

³⁴Pohl, *Making Room*, 152-53, 171.

limited resources, and/or between welcoming hospitality and concerns for preservation of identity/culture and social stability.

Indeed, a society need not (and should not) ignore the dilemmas that migration creates. Acknowledging them honestly helps shape the framework for responsible conversation: the issue is not whether we 'open or close the door' to migrants, but rather how society adjudicates multiple objectives that compete for resources.

Similarly, hospitality depends not so much on vast resources as on the willingness to share them.³⁵ Thus, it is important for our society to cultivate a culture of eagerness to share. For countries and cultures long shaped by Christian values, such eagerness would go beyond 'humanistic ethics' and be rooted in our response toward God's hospitality, the recognition that we are all *imago dei*, and in our responsibility for one another.³⁶

An Invitation to Go the Extra Mile and Take Risk

Generosity often, though not necessarily, involves sacrifice on the part of the host. At times such sacrifice could post great difficulty at the individual level. At the societal level, on the contrary, more often than not the host society where the migrants enter is one of relative abundance. Even in the case of massive migration, the seemingly overwhelming sacrifice on the part of the society (out of our fear of scarcity and concerns for national and economic security) can be mitigated by appropriate and rational distribution of resources and international support.

Furthermore, we need to take the necessary risk in our search for better and fairer policies, and be courageous in overcoming our collective fear as well as in letting go our biases and self-interests.³⁷

Incorporation as the Destination of Hospitality

The fact that the number of migrants is often massive in scale and that many of them tend to seek long-term or permanent residence in our societies, gives rise to another major obstacle for the society to

³⁵Pohl, *Making Room*, 116.

³⁶Amy Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001, 87.

³⁷Lucien Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God*, New York: Paulist Press, 2000, 21. See also Tyler Cowen, "A Strategy for Rich Countries: Absorb More Immigrants," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/upshot/a-strategy-for-rich-countries-absorb-more-immigrants.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=1&abt=0002&abg=0.

incorporate them smoothly. This is even more so when the migrants are from places associated with past injustices to our own society (e.g., warfare). Moreover, immigrants of different ethnicity tend to experience solidarity among themselves, “partly a response to immigrants’ experience of marginalization and rejection in the dominant culture.”³⁸ As a result, they are not able easily to be incorporated to our society.

Finally, incorporation does not mean simply allowing the migrants to reside in our society or toward ‘homogenization of differences’ but preserves ethnic diversity and assists them to become full member of the society. The society needs to cultivate a sense of appreciation of diversity and maintain unity instead of seeking uniformity between the local and other cultures.³⁹

To form and reform our societies into ones that show hospitality and aim at fully incorporating migrants is never easy. But with God’s grace, exemplary models, and individual (and communal) practices, each of us can contribute to such *telos* as Boaz did.

³⁸Wilbanks, *Re-creating America*, 87.

³⁹Wilbanks, *Re-creating America*, 86.