

# MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS OF WELLS IN THE TANAKH

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We do not know with accuracy when people first discovered that "reserves of water lay hidden beneath the earth and could be reached by digging deep enough. The discovery is not likely to have been made very early."<sup>1</sup> As one author put it, wells in the Tanakh "provide the stage on which the drama occurs . . . . Wells along with other sources of water provide a constant framework for biblical stories."<sup>2</sup> This article will explore the multiple functions of a well [בְּרֵא - *b'er*] in the Tanakh, from the first mention (Gen. 16:13-14) onward.

## TEN FUNCTIONS OF WELLS IN THE TANAKH

### RESOURCE FOR SURVIVAL

The primary function of wells is to supply drinking water for humans and their animals. In contrast to rain, springs, brooks, and lakes that are natural sources of water on the earth's surface, wells are an invention of human knowledge and skill. They came with the advance of technology that produced tools strong enough to penetrate deeply into earth or rock to reach the underground water hidden below. Wells varied in depth according to the depth of the hidden water and the tools available to reach it. They also required the technical ability to strengthen the supporting walls of the wells and seal them with lime, so water would not seep back into the earth once it was collected in the well.<sup>3</sup>

The earliest wells were shallow and narrow, but with the development of metal tools some of those in the Middle East reached down 70 to 150 feet.<sup>4</sup> The Tanakh does not specify the depth, circumference, or design of the wells it mentions.<sup>5</sup> However, the successful digging of a well in those days required knowledge of the local terrain's potential to yield water, and the ability to protect it from envious neighbors who wanted to use the water or even take possession of the well itself. With success in digging and maintaining wells, people could obtain enough drinking water to sustain life.

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Lack of water, of course, can lead to death. The Tanakh makes this point clearly in its second episode on Hagar at a well (Gen. 21:14-20). Hagar and her son Ishmael left Abraham's household with a supply of bread and water and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water that Abraham had provided them was all spent, Hagar left her child in some bushes and sat down a short distance from him. She said to herself, *'Let me not look on as the child dies.'* Hagar wept. The Lord heard the boy's cries and opened Hagar's eyes. Hagar saw a well, filled up the water-skin, and gave the boy water to drink. Yes, the boy survived by drinking well water.

### EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Wells in the time of the Tanakh did more than simply supply water to a person's body to avoid dehydration. They supplied water to quench a deep thirst that arises from someone's emotional needs. There is a tale from a time when the Philistines were holding Bethlehem. David, then in a stronghold . . . *felt a craving and said, 'Who will give me a drink of water from the well<sup>6</sup> by the gate of Bethlehem?'* (II Sam. 23:15; I Chron. 11:17). Three loyal war heroes, believing that David's wish was their command, broke through the Philistines' camp, drew water from the well of Bethlehem, and carried off some water to give to David. However, David did not drink that water. Instead, he poured it out as a libation to the Lord, because the men had risked their lives for it. Such was the craving of David for the cool and tasty well water which he drank during his boyhood in Bethlehem (I Sam. 16:1). Water from the well of Bethlehem not only was satisfying to David's body but also served David's emotional needs.

On the emotions connected to water, it is appropriate to note the elation and jubilation that resulted from digging a successful well. Genesis 26:32 presents the triumphal feeling of Isaac's servants when, on the same day that Isaac swore a peace treaty with the Philistine King Abimelech, they announced, *'Matzanu mayim [We found water]'* The announcement is a notable alliterative, consisting of two Hebrew words each beginning with the "m" sound. The English rendering with two "w" sounds only approximates the triumphant tone of the Hebrew alliteration.

Similarly, during the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the Land of Israel, anticipation of water from a well elicited a song of joy. This is the well

at which the Lord said to Moses, '*Assemble the people that I may give them water*' (Num. 21:16):

*Spring up, O well – sing to it –  
The well which the chieftains dug,  
Which the nobles of the people started  
With maces, with their own staffs. (21:17-18)*

#### A TASK FOR A YOUNG WOMAN

An important task assigned to young women was drawing water from wells to supply the family household. The task was all the more important when the young woman was also a shepherdess responsible for watering her flock. The well was a important element in her life. In four separate incidents in the Tanakh, young women appear as shepherdesses coming to wells to water flocks of sheep. Abraham's servant stopped at a well and there met Rebekah (Gen. 24:10-27). Jacob, on his way to find his uncle Laban, met Rachel at a well where she came to water her father's flock of sheep (29:1-11). Moses met the seven daughters of Reuel at a well when they came to water their father's flock; and one of them became his bride (Ex. 2:15-19). When Saul was searching for some of his father's asses that had gone astray, he came across young women who were on their way to draw water (I Sam. 9:3-12).

#### CAUSE OF CONTENTION

A well, especially one in an arid location, was a valuable possession. In the Tanakh it could be a locus for contention and strife between individuals and groups.<sup>7</sup> Both sides often claimed ownership and use of a well. Or, at times, one group vandalized the other's well, or just seized the other's well. A well was always vulnerable to vandalism and seizure, especially when it was a distance away from the center of the owner's settlement.

In the first mention of a well in the Tanakh, Abraham rebukes Abimelech, King of the Philistines, about the well at Beersheba that Abimelech's servants had stolen from him. Abimelech avers that he did not know his servants had done this (Gen. 21:22-34). Similarly, it is told of Isaac's wells, wells that Abraham had dug:

*And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them*

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*with earth. And Abimelech said to Isaac, 'Go away from us, for you have become too mighty for us' (26:15-16).*

Consider the incidents described in the Book of Numbers about the Israelites' return journey from Egypt to the Land of Israel. The Edomites refuse to allow the Israelites to cross their land, forbidding them to pass through fields and to drink well water. When Moses again requests passage, promising to stay on the path and to pay for any water used, the Edomites refuse again and go out against the Israelites with a large force of armed men. The Israelites turn away from the Edomites, refusing to engage them in battle. For the Edomites, protection of their land and their wells is a high priority, high enough to risk a war (20:14-21).

Farther along in the journey of the Israelites, Sihon, King of the Amorites, refuses a request to let them pass through his land, after they promised to stay on the highway away from the fields and vineyards and not drink any water from the wells. Sihon goes out to attack the Israelites and loses. Unfortunately for Sihon, he engaged the Israelites in battle and lost to them all his land from the Arnon River to the Jabbok River(21:21-31).

Some wells in the Tanakh actually bore names associated with disputes: One is the Well of Contention, so called because the herdsmen of Gerar contended with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, *'The water is ours'* (Gen. 26:20). The other is the Well of Hostility (or Harassment), so called because the Gerar herdsmen again contended with Isaac's herdsmen (26:21).<sup>8</sup>

## LOCUS FOR COOPERATION

A well could be an object of contention, but it could also promote cooperation among shepherds using the same well. For example, Genesis 29:2-10 tells how Jacob, on his way to find his uncle Laban, sees a well where three flocks of sheep have already been brought for watering. The shepherds were unable to roll off the large stone that is placed over the mouth of a well when it is not in use. Jacob asks the shepherds whether they know Laban, and they point out his daughter Rachel now arriving with the family's flock. Jacob says, *'It is still broad daylight; too early to round up the animals; water the flocks and take them out to pasture.'* The shepherds reply, *'We cannot do this*

*until all the flocks are gathered together; then we roll the stone off the mouth of the well and water the flocks.'*

One interpretation of this passage relates it to manners and social custom. It was a matter of custom and civility for the shepherds to water their flocks at the same time, so the shepherds waited until all had arrived with their flocks. Another interpretation relates the passage to the strength needed to roll off the heavy stone that covers the well. In general, one man alone could not do it. The shepherds had to work together, first to remove the stone so they could reach the water and then to replace it, to protect it from whatever could damage or pollute an open well.

#### A MEETING PLACE

A well, noticeable and accessible in an open place, was a likely place for people to meet one another. Abraham's servant seeking a bride for Isaac, Jacob on his way to Laban's home, and Moses arriving in Midian all stop beside a well, and in each case a marriage ensues. In an article aptly entitled "Wells, Women and Faith," Joan Cook traces the recurring pattern: (1) a man journeys to a foreign land; (2) he encounters a girl or girls; (3) someone draws water; (4) a girl runs home to announce the visitor's arrival; (5) the visitor is invited to a meal.<sup>9</sup>

Wells were also sites for negotiating agreements and making treaties. There people could congregate, discuss matters, serve as witnesses, and celebrate a successful conclusion. It was at the well in Beersheba that both Abraham and Isaac asserted their rights of ownership and had them recognized by Abimelech. And there Isaac made a feast for everyone and they swore to a treaty of peace (Gen. 26:31).

#### LANDMARKS

Wells stood as landmarks along the routes between one main settlement and another. The name of the well and the name of the place became one and the same. During the trek through the desert, the place called Be'er [Well] was where the Israelites made a stop after camping in Moab (Num. 21:16). Later, Jotham fled there after reciting his parable about The Trees that Sought a King (Jud. 9:16-21). The settlement of The Wells of the Children of Jaakan

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marked a known point on the route to Moserah in the desert, as the Israelites journeyed from Egypt to Canaan (Deut. 10:6).

### HIDING PLACE

One well in the Tanakh served as a hiding place (II Sam. 17:18-21). This was during Absalom's attempted coup d'état to overthrow his father, King David. Jonathan the son of Abiatar and Ahimaaz the son of Zadok, both loyal to David, went to the town of Bahurim where they were to receive word about Absalom's plans which they could report to the King. However, a boy spots the two men and tells Absalom of their presence. To avoid being apprehended, Jonathan and Ahimaaz hide in a well situated in the courtyard of a house, and the lady of the house covers it with a cloth to conceal them. When Absalom's counterspies come to capture the two men, she says that they had already left. The counterspies search for Jonathan and Ahimaaz in vain, never thinking of looking into the well. With the help of information from Jonathan and Ahimaaz, King David and his troops put down Absalom's rebellion.<sup>10</sup>

### THE WELL AS METAPHOR

Wells also appeared in metaphorical terms. Perhaps the most positive, romantic, and uplifting use of the well as metaphor is in Song of Songs 4:14-15. There, the beloved praises his beloved: *Nard and saffron, Fragrant reed and cinnamon, With all aromatic woods, Myrrh and aloes – All the choice perfumes. [You are] a garden spring, A well of living water, A rill of Lebanon.*

The well as metaphor also appears in the Book of Proverbs, where a father counsels his son to be faithful to his wife despite any rising lust for other women: *Drink water from your own cistern, Running water from your own well* (Prov. 5:15). Here the wife is a well of flowing water from which a man will always be able to drink (5:16-20). Similar imagery appears later in Proverbs 23:27: *A harlot is a deep pit; A forbidden woman is a narrow well.* The metaphor of the narrow well raises the image of danger and limited possibility for a man.

The Psalms also use the image of the well figuratively, but with a twist. In Psalm 69:16, the psalmist requests the Lord to save him with His saving truth: *Let the floodwaters not sweep me away; let the deep not swallow me; let the mouth of the well<sup>11</sup> not close over me.* In Psalm 55:23-24 the psalmist calls for trust in the Lord Who "sustains you" and brings down the unrighteous men of bloodshed and deception: *Cast your burden on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous man collapse. For You, O God, will bring them down to the nethermost well.*<sup>12</sup>

Beyond their poetic function, wells also serve as a metaphor to make powerful prophetic statements. Jeremiah, in typical prophetic style, contrasts the Lord, as *the source of living water*, with idols and other gods. Jeremiah complains that the Israelites have left the source of living water *to hew out cisterns, broken cisterns, that cannot hold water* (Jer. 2:13). He uses his contrasting analogies to provide a meaningful message about the life-sustaining qualities of the Lord. A well of living water is a powerful contrast to a broken cistern with holes and cracks through which life-sustaining water drains away.

Furthermore, the word "בֵּר [b'er]" has given rise to a derivative *be'er* [explain, expound]. Moses' *be'er* explains and clarifies the Torah (Deut. 1:5; 27:8). Habakkuk is instructed by the Lord, *Write the prophecy down, and inscribe [u'ba'er] it clearly on tablets* (Hab. 2:2).

#### PLACE OF DIVINE REVELATION

Perhaps the most exalted role of the well in the Tanakh is that it serves as the site of Divine revelation. One well, the first mentioned in the Tanakh, is the site of a revelation by the Lord's angel to Hagar, who had fled from Sarah (Gen. 16:1-6). The angel finds her by a spring of water, tells her that she is pregnant, directs her to return home to Sarah, and promises that the Lord will increase her descendants through her future son Ishmael (vv. 16:7-12). Hagar calls on the Lord '*You are El Roi,*' by which she means, 'Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!' *Therefore, the well<sup>13</sup> was called the Well of the Living One Who sees me.* (vv. 16:13-14)<sup>14</sup> It is not surprising that the revelation of the angel of the Lord is given at a source of water, life-giving water, in that the angel announces a new life, a son, for Hagar. That well between Kadesh and Bered subsequently was the place whence Isaac came

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when Rebekah first sees him, having made her journey from Haran to Canaan to start a new life as Isaac's wife (24:62-67). It is also the place where Isaac settles when he starts a new life after the burial of his parents in the Cave of Mahpelah (25:9-11).

### CONCLUSIONS AND COMMENTS

Wells had a significance in the lives of ancient peoples in both their primary and their secondary functions. It is surely possible that, for some people – Abraham's servant for example – the secondary function of wells as meeting places had a personal importance to them beyond the primary function of supplying water.

A consideration of the multiple functions of wells leads to the conclusion that wells in the Tanakh have an overall positive image. The positive image stems from wells as a source of life-giving water, their association with betrothals, their explicit message that the exiled Hagar saved the life of her young son by giving him water from a well, the ability of a well to quench the deep thirst for the sweet water of King David's childhood, and the association with loyalty and peace oaths, especially those that Abraham and Isaac swore at Beersheba.

Even though wells were connected to incidents of contention and strife, their image remains positive. Even some of the contention associated with wells was resolved in a positive way. For example, Moses resolved the contention that Reuel's daughters experienced at a well by defending the shepherdesses and watering their flock – a deed that led to his finding his wife, Zipporah, and to associating with Reuel/Jethro who later became his trusted counselor.

While modern readers of the Tanakh might associate wells with the "simple pastoral life of the past" in contrast to the "complex urban life of high-technology today," it is wise to remember that wells were man-made (and still are), not natural objects like mountains, deserts, and rivers. Recently, there appeared a front-page article in the *New York Times* about the United States army "gouging out a well as part of a civil reconstruction" project in northern Iraq. A villager viewing the reconstruction said, "It makes people think good things are on the way. When this well is done, each time somebody takes a

drink of water they will say the Americans did something good." (*New York Times*, July 20, 2004, at A1 and A8.)

The appearance of wells in all three parts of the Tanakh – Torah, Prophets, and Writings – in literal or metaphorical language, indicates the centrality of wells in the lives of the Israelites. Thus, wells not only appear in the times of Abraham and Moses but also during the period of David and of Solomon, to whom is ascribed the authorship of the Song of Songs and the Book of Proverbs.

Wells were so central to the lives of the Israelite, that they became objects to be used in figurative language as reference points for key messages to pass on to younger generations. To be a metaphor is a mark of universal understanding. Everyone in the Tanakh knew about wells just as everyone knew about sowing and reaping, night and day, cold and heat, summer and winter (Gen. 8:22) and about the rainbow in the sky (Gen. 9:12-17). To become a metaphor is recognition of importance and fundamentality.

The significance of wells derives, I believe, from the association of wells with the life and death cycle of both human and domesticated animals. Their significance is connected, in key episodes of our ancestral leaders, with young women, the future givers and sustainers of human life. It is not coincidental that women are described metaphorically as wells in the Song of Songs and Proverbs. It is not an overstatement to say that wells in the Tanakh, as suppliers of living water, serve the Lord, the Creator and Source of living water that runs throughout the history and theology of the Tanakh.

#### NOTES

1. R.W. Hamilton, "Water Works," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) p. 812.
2. Laura Hobgood-Oster, "For Out of that Well the Flocks Were Watered: Stories of Wells in Genesis," *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. N.C. Habel and S.Wurst (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) p.187.
3. Clark R. Youngblood, "Wells," *Biblical Illustrator* 13 (Fall 1986) p.42.
4. John Peter Oleson, "Water Works," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992) p.886.
5. *Ibid.* See also Immanuel Benzinger, "Well," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 12 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1907) p.500.
6. Here the "well" in Hebrew is pronounced differently even though the three-letter root is still spelled ׁוּל. The word used here is sometimes translated as "pit." However, here I have translated it as "well" as does the King James Version of 1611 and the original Jewish

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Publication Society translation of 1917. I have done so because the context for this passage concerns sweet-tasting water, not pit water. Pit water does not have the quality of well water. Unfortunately, I believe, the new translation of the Jewish Publication Society (1999) offers the word as "cistern."

7. E. Hull, "Well," *A Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol.4 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988) p. 914.

8. For other sources of water with names associated with contention, see Genesis 14:7, Exodus 17:1-7, and Numbers 20:2-13.

9. For an analysis of these three betrothal scenes, see the article by Joan E. Cook, "Wells, Women, and Faith," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 17 (1997) pp. 11-18.

10. For another aspect of the counter-espionage used by the supporters of King David, see Ronald T. Hyman, "Power of Persuasion: Judah, Abigail, and Hushai," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 23 (1995) pp. 9-16.

11. In Psalm 69:6, the published English translations offer "pit" instead of "well" even though the three-letter root is written and pronounced as "well." Perhaps this occurs because of the negative image created in the psalm. A closed well or pit with a person in it is a frightening thought, especially if the cover is a large stone, as in Genesis 29:2.

12. See note 11.

13. Although Genesis 16:7 states that the angel found Hagar at a spring, the Tanakh subsequently states, *Therefore, the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered* (16:14).

14. For more on this well, see John Bridge Curtis, "On the Wells of *lhy*," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society* 3 (1983).



### RESPONSES

#### FROM RABBI HAYYIM HALPERN'S BOOK TORAH DIALOGUES

1. The picture that emerges from the negative, positive and neutral references to alcohol consumption in the Bible is that in moderation intoxicants can be a blessing while excessive drinking leads to sin. The prescription of wine in so many Jewish rituals reinforces that view.
2. Both Moses and the rebels mimic phrases used by their opponents as a form of mockery (see: Num. 16:3 and the end of v. 7, v. 9, and v. 13). Indeed, in verse 13 Dathan and Abiram sarcastically refer to Egypt as the "land flowing with milk and honey!"
3. The song at the Sea of Reeds (Ex. 15) and the farewell song of Moses (Deut. 31:30).