

# A Narrative Analysis of Pre-Sinaitic Well Scenes

Donald C. McIntyre

**Abstract:** There is a definite narrative progression in the well scenes of the Pentateuch, showing a cataphoric function to identify a deliverer for the progeny of Abraham. This impacts the Abrahamic promise, as is witnessed by an examination of the literary context and a description of narrative methodology and a plot-line analysis of major well scenes in Genesis and Exodus (Gen 16, 21, 24, 29, and Exod 2). A comparison of these scenes show the progression leading to Moses as the deliverer par excellence of Abraham's elect-progeny and effector of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt in fulfilment of Genesis 15:13–14. Previous analyses of the patriarchal well scenes which concluded that "seed line" or "betrothal" considerations were the primary motivation for these scenes' inclusion in the canon are unable to account for the entirety of the data in a way that this thesis is better able to defend.

Key Words: Abraham, Moses, Well, Genesis, Exodus

\*\*\*\*\*

## Introduction

The imagery of a well has been examined in detail by numerous theologians, with some seeing well scenes as nothing more than betrothal settings and others who see them as markers of Israelite boundaries.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this, an analysis

---

Donald C. "Mac" McIntyre, is a Ph.D. student at Baptist Bible Seminary and a licensed Southern Baptist minister. Mac can be reached at dcmcintyre77@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> See Danna Nolan Fewell and R Christopher Heard, "The Genesis of Identify in the Biblical World," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, Kindle ed., ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York: Oxford UP, 2016). Fewell and Heard note, "As a communally constitutive story, the dialogic narrative of Genesis is, in short, a matter of survival. As it struggles to establish and maintain internal group coherence, it also

of how these narratives fit together is lacking in biblical scholarship. The goal of this article is to analyze the narrative plot structure of the major well scenes in pre-Sinaitic literature (Genesis 1 through Exodus 2). This will establish a definite narrative progression in the well scenes of the Pentateuch, showing a cataphoric function to identify a deliverer for the progeny of Abraham. This present analysis will begin with an examination of the literary context and a description of narrative methodology before moving through a plot-line analysis of major well scenes in Genesis and Exodus (Gen 16; 21; 24; 29; and Exod 2) with a particular emphasis on characterization.<sup>3</sup> After the plot structures of these well scenes have been analyzed, a comparison of these scenes will be offered showing the progression leading to Moses as the deliverer par excellence of Abraham's elect-progeny and effector of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt in fulfilment of Genesis 15:13–14. This author views the Pentateuch in its final canonical form as a completed and unified text.<sup>4</sup>

## Literary Context

### *The Narrative Genre*

The Hebrew Bible consists of two primary genres: narrative, and poetry. Narratives are distinguished from poetry as stories which relay events as a series of actions as seen in the Hebrew text through the *wayyiqtol* construction and other grammatical markers including the relative clause and the use of independent

---

defends against external forces that press to permeate communal boundaries and absorb group identity..." (110–111).

<sup>3</sup> The scope of this article does not allow for an in-depth analysis of the multiple mini scenes of Genesis 26 with Isaac; however, they will be briefly detailed in the section on chapter 24, since the characterization of Isaac is amplified through the contents of chapter 26. These mini scenes are worthy of further analysis.

<sup>4</sup> John H. Sailhamer, remarks, "Though we often think of the Pentateuch as a collection of five books, viz., Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, it was originally intended to be read as a single book" (*The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, Kindle ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1995], 2).

personal pronouns.<sup>5</sup> Narrative and story will be used synonymously throughout this assessment, in line with major narrative critics.<sup>6</sup> Describing narrative, the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative* notes,

The mental representation of story involves the construction of the mental image of a world populated with individuated agents (characters) and objects. (Spatial dimension.) This world must undergo not fully predictable changes of state that are caused by non-habitual physical events: either accidents ('happenings') or deliberate actions by intelligent agents. (Temporal dimension.) In addition to being linked to physical states by causal relations, the physical events must be associated with mental states and events (goals, plans, \*emotions). This network of connections gives events coherence, motivation, \*closure, and intelligibility and turns them into a plot.<sup>7</sup>

These stories therefore will have characters, settings (objects), and events which show movement that formulate the plot line of the story. How one delineates the plot line and assesses characters and settings is essential to understanding a story. For this purpose, a brief orientation to narrative methodology is in order.

### ***Narrative Methodology***

The narrative methodology used herein will be limited to identifying the plot line of Fokkelman's trajectory theory for heroes (see heading below: *Well Motif*). Each narrative example involves a quest of some sort initiated towards an intended goal in which the main character seeks to achieve a certain end. This

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert Chisholm, *Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), Kindle loc. 1439–1447, 1707.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), Kindle loc. 51.

<sup>7</sup> David Herman, et al., eds., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Kindle ed. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 347.

then marks the initiation of a new act within the defined plot.<sup>8</sup> The plot then progresses through a series of scenes marked by movements via change of location or change of characters. These two elements of plot progression will help to identify that the well scenes have a distinct function that is inseparable from the larger hero-quest act.<sup>9</sup> This process will expand the boundaries of the commonly examined well-scene narratives. The well scene, as a rising action and distinct scene within the overall hero-journey act, cannot be resolved without understanding why each hero character journeys to a well in the first place. The trajectory theory as method describes how the actions of the narrative are evaluated, but a narrative analysis cannot be limited to describing actions. Actions are completed by actors (characters) and the descriptions of these actors have direct implications on the message of the narrative. The narrative development and portrayal of these actors will be referred to as characterization.

## Characterization

Characterization is achieved through a variety of means. Bruce Waltke notes that characterization in Genesis can be done through outer description (though admittedly rare), direct characterization from the narrator as an evaluation or an omniscient revelation of the character's thoughts, through the character's direct speech, action, the character's name or nicknames given, through plot devices such as scenic descriptions or symbols.<sup>10</sup> These elements will be examined for clues as to a character's nature and development in each well scene. How maturely a character develops will determine that characters "type." Character types assist in identifying their

---

<sup>8</sup> J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), Kindle loc. 1237.

<sup>9</sup> Joe Linares, *Proclaiming God's Stories: How to Preach Old Testament Historical Narrative* (Greenville, SC: BJU P, 2009), 111.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredericks, *Genesis*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2001), 40–41.

functions in the narrative. Characters can be flat/static, round/dynamic, or semi-developed.<sup>11</sup>

Despite how a character is portrayed in terms of personality (characterization), these characters also can be described in terms of their narrative function. Narrative functions involve distinct roles for characters to play, and a character can shift roles throughout a larger narrative structure, as will be seen when Abraham becomes an agent in the first two well scenes. Common narrative functions include protagonist/hero.<sup>12</sup>

There is one other aspect of characterization that is pertinent to this study: the art of narrative gapping. Meir Sternberg describes the interpretation of a literary work as a process of answering questions about the story before lamenting: “a closer look at the text will reveal how few of the answers to these questions have been explicitly provided there: it is the reader himself who has supplied them, some temporarily, partially, or tentatively, and some wholly and finally.”<sup>13</sup> These missing pieces of information are referred to as “gaps,” and the reader participates in “gap filling” through constructing the missing information.<sup>14</sup> Gapping also applies to characterization, as Waltke points out in reference to Isaac:

---

<sup>11</sup> Walsh, *OT Narrative*, Kindle loc. 519–552.

<sup>12</sup> For definitions and descriptions of “protagonist” and “antagonist” see Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985), 42. Ryken uses the term “hero” interchangeably with “protagonist” on page 45 and describes foils on page 54. For a description of characters as agents, see the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, page 9, under human agency, by which a literary agent has no purpose outside of their completion of an action within a story.

<sup>13</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: IUP, 1985), 186.

<sup>14</sup> Herman et al. define this term stating, “Texts do not supply all the information needed for their interpretation. Furthermore, the more widely agreed upon any specific information is, the more likely it is to go without saying. As a series of philosophers, literary theorists, and cognitive scientists have shown, a satisfying interpretation of a narrative sequence emerges from the interaction or joint work of a text and an audience. In the presence of a gappy text [*sic*] (and all texts are gappy [*sic*]), if there is no

A gap is an intentional omission, whereas a blank is an inconsequential omission. The gap of the expected book entitled *tôl<sup>e</sup>dô<sup>t</sup>* of Abraham (i.e., Isaac's narrative) is glaring. . . . This obvious intention gap stands as an implicit judgement against the miracle child who in later years gives himself over to sensual pleasures at the expense of spiritual discernment.<sup>15</sup>

It is assumed herein that character gapping is intentional and contextually explained in other cases as Waltke has done with Isaac.

With a basic understanding of narrative methodology, one can begin to examine narrative portions of the scripture. However, the narratives under consideration are not isolated works but are part of a larger “meta-narrative” known as the Pentateuch. This fact requires an orientation to the unity and purpose of the Pentateuch by which the individual well scenes can be understood.

## The Purpose of the Pentateuch

Waltke and Yu posit that the purpose of the Pentateuch was to serve as a foundational document for the fledgling nation of Israel. They write, “A nation typically is a common people (a primary theme of Genesis) with a constitution/law (the main theme of Exodus–Deuteronomy) and usually has a common land (a theme of the Pentateuch and Joshua).”<sup>16</sup> The creation of a founding document would require the creation of common identity and the establishing of social-political boundaries.<sup>17</sup> However, the nation of Israel did not arise from a vacuum; they

---

evidence to the contrary, audiences assume that a communication is intended” (*Routledge Encyclopedia*, 193).

<sup>15</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 40–41.

<sup>16</sup> Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 316.

<sup>17</sup> Describing the formation of the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai, Kenneth Ngwa notes, “Events around the mountain slow down the linear narrative pace as they forge a new sense of religious identity and of social belonging and boundaries” (“The Story of Exodus and Its Literary Kinships,” in *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, 132).

had neighbors whom they came in contact with frequently and to different ends. This creation of a common identity and the establishment of social political boundaries were to become increasingly clear with the beginning of the patriarchal narrative. From Genesis 12 on, there is a clear distinction between the God of Abraham and the Patriarchs and the gods of the nations who surrounded them. There is, indeed, considerable overlap between Canaanite and Egyptian religious literature, which has given rise to two main theories of explication. The first is assimilation, whereby some have accused the Jewish authors/redactors of borrowing from their neighbors in constructing their own state religion.<sup>18</sup> Others have attempted to describe the similarities to neighboring religions via intentional polemic. In *Against the Gods: A Polemical Theology of the Old Testament*, Currid describes the polemical nature of the Hebrew Bible, focusing on the clear parallels between Egyptian and Canaanite religions with Pentateuchal material.<sup>19</sup> Merrill in *Kingdom of Priests* also notes the polemical nature of the Pentateuch.<sup>20</sup> Though this contrast is debated by OT scholars, this paper will assume a polemical relationship as opposed to a plagiarizing relationship between the Pentateuch and the ANE religious texts. With this understanding, these two ideas of the Pentateuch serving as the founding documents of a nation, with a polemical emphasis that serves to establish boundaries, are the lenses through which the acts and scenes of the Pentateuch must be interpreted. It will be demonstrated throughout this present analysis that the participants of the well-scenes have a foundational role in the Abrahamic covenant, whether elect or not, and as such share a common foundation. The polemical nature of the Pentateuch has been largely ignored in discussion of the well scene narratives. Before one can address how wells relate to ANE religious polemics, there must first be a discussion on the physical settings

---

<sup>18</sup> Lewis Bayles Paton, "Canaanite Influence on the Religion of Israel." *The American Journal of Theology* 18, no. 2 (1914): 205–224. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3154722>.

<sup>19</sup> John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: A Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 80–81.

on which these well scenes occurred, as well as the water and well imagery of the ANE. Only after these elements are examined can a well-motif for Pentateuchal literature be articulated.

## The Settings

The first two well scenes of Hagar take place in the Negeb area of Israel. The “Negeb refers to the region around Beer-sheba and Arad. Beer-sheba receives about ten to twelve inches of rain annually, an amount considered marginal for agriculture but adequate for grazing flocks. . . . Water was a perennial problem for inhabitants of the Negeb, but scattered wells along the major wadis and, later, the use of cisterns permitted settlements.”<sup>21</sup> The last well scene with Moses happens in Midian near Sinai, which may have been even less hospitable regarding water. The *Holman Bible Atlas* describes that area briefly saying, “The Sinai is a desert with little rain and harsh climatic extremes. Vegetation is scarce except for the occasional oasis that lends a splash of green to an otherwise barren landscape.”<sup>22</sup> Nomadic shepherds like Abraham were always on the hunt for sufficient sources of water to provide for themselves and their flocks, searching for wells and cultivating cisterns to meet this fundamental need. For a pre-modern desert dwelling people, water was a matter of life and death, and this need was reflected in their religious beliefs and practices. Leland Ryken summarizes how this happened:

Rains in the Holy Land are seasonal, with light rains coming in fall and spring and the bulk of the precipitation falling in the months of December through February. Summers are extremely dry. Rain is commonly seen by biblical writers as evidence of special providence, with the return of rains after a prolonged dry spell associated with God’s new advent and the withholding of rains a sign of divine displeasure (1 Kgs 8:35; Amos 4:7).<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Thomas V. Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville: B&H, 1998), 20.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 930.



Haran of Mesopotamia is the location of the other two well scenes in the narrative, and this area had access to water, though its water access was not consistent. Situated on the Euphrates River the area was accustomed to annual flooding.<sup>24</sup> The mention of the Gilgamesh Epic is intriguing because it shows that the ANE cultures of Mesopotamia had a working theology of water. The water imagery of the Mesopotamian peoples and their neighbors in Canaan filled religious texts for the Baal and Marduk narrative cycles.<sup>25</sup> Some of that literature would become fodder for Moses' later polemical writings in the Pentateuch.<sup>26</sup> However, there is one more setting that should be examined before discussing the way that water imagery is displayed in the biblical narrative, Egypt.

With the narratives being described as a hero-journey narrative, the setting in which the journey conflict arrives also shapes how water is viewed by the participants. Moses, the final well scene participant, arrived at a well one day because he was fleeing from Egypt. Egypt had no such water problems as Canaan and Mesopotamia since it was situated on the Nile River, supplied by numerous tributaries. As Brisco notes,

---

<sup>24</sup> Thomas V. Brisco, describes the Mesopotamian water situation saying, "Autumn and winter rains in combination with melting snows of the high northern mountains produced a large volume of water that had to be harnessed. This inundation was unpredictable, at times being inadequate and at other times, violent. The timing of the flood in Mesopotamia was not as helpful for agriculture as in Egypt. Consequently, the inhabitants of central and southern Mesopotamia maintained a sophisticated system of canals, dikes, and dams from earliest times to protect their cities and to distribute water to thirsty fields. Ancient flood stories like the Gilgamesh Epic abounded in Mesopotamia. They expressed the ancients' fascination with and fear of these floods" (*Holman Bible Atlas*, 5).

<sup>25</sup> See John C. Gibson for reference to Baal (*Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978], 2–6) and John Goldingay for reference to Marduk (*Genesis*, Baker Commentary on the OT, Kindle ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker], 25).

<sup>26</sup> See Currid, *Against the Gods*, and Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*. Others include Jacob Bryant as cited in Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Kindle ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox), 86.

The White Nile provides a steady source of water from the lakes of equatorial Africa that are fed by constant rains. Near Khartoum in the Sudan, two other rivers—the Blue Nile and the Atbara—join the White Nile. During the spring, melting snows and rains in the Ethiopian highlands swell the Blue Nile and the Atbara with water, their swift currents carrying soil and organic materials.<sup>27</sup>

The Nile would sometimes flood disastrously, but the necessary rise of the Nile for its yearly flooding, to maintain life, was no less than six meters.<sup>28</sup>

Like the Canaanite and Mesopotamian religions, Egypt also has a theology of water. The southern neighbors in Egypt were similarly infatuated with water in their religious rites with the Nile River playing a pivotal place in Egyptian culture. The land of Egypt was considered to be the gift of the river:

The Nile provided transportation and communication as the principal highway of the land. Natural currents carried traffic northward, while prevailing north winds permitted travel upriver (southward). The annual inundation of the Nile provided the river's chief benefit to the land. Each year, with uncanny regularity, the Nile flooded, replenishing the land with water and a thin layer of new soil.<sup>29</sup>

In comparison, Egypt was privileged with a consistent water supply that allowed consistent agricultural industry and a ready trade route via the Nile and accompanying winds that their desert neighbors were unfamiliar with. Canaan was mostly desert, with a rainy season where water had to be collected and used throughout the long dry season, and the Arameans were constantly wondering which of the bipolar extremes of water they would get when the Euphrates flooded. Egypt was able to rely upon the Nile. The polytheist nation was sure to give the Nile a god of its own to offer thanks and supplication to for this gift. According to John Shoup, "The ancient Egyptians believed that

---

<sup>27</sup> Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

the Nile god, Hapi, lived in a cave under Elephantine Island at Aswan and that the Nile flood began from there. Hapi was depicted as a man with folds of fat and large breasts to indicate the fertility and prosperity the flood brought.”<sup>30</sup> With the pivotal role of water throughout the different ANE cultures and religions now understood, it would be negligent to deal with water imagery in any form without examining its theological implications and its polemical relationships to Israel’s neighbors, the question still remains, however, about the role of wells in biblical literature for these same cultures.

### *Water Imagery in the Bible*

Ryken describes water imagery in the Bible succinctly: “Water figures in the Bible in three main ways—as a cosmic force that only God can control and govern, as a source of life, and as a cleansing agent.”<sup>31</sup> However, it is not until later in the biblical text (particularly Exod 19:10 and later Lev 8:6) that water begins to function as a cleansing agent: therefore, its use in Genesis and Exodus surrounding the well scenes would be limited to a cosmic force controlled by God alone or a life-giving/preserving source.

The theology of water which saw it as an uncontrollable cosmic force limited only by God was not limited to Israelite religion. Water was part of the religions of the patriarchs’ neighbors both north and south, especially the Baal worship of the Canaanite religions.<sup>32</sup> This conflict between Baal worship and

---

<sup>30</sup> John Shoup, *The Nile: An Encyclopedia of Geography, History, and Culture*, Kindle ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017), xi.

<sup>31</sup> Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 929, where they predicate this description on the scarcity of water in the region and its universal necessity for sustaining life.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 930. Citing the seasonal rain and the belief in the providence of God for that rain, Ryken et al. remark, “The Israelites arriving from the wilderness were nomadic herdspeople, while the resident Canaanites were experts in settled agriculture, an expertise couched in the practices of Baal-worship. In Canaanite myth Baal had vanquished the fractious power Sea-and-River and so became the dispenser of the tamed waters vital to agriculture. By the time of the exodus Baal was firmly established in Canaan as the god of the winter rains and storms and hence of the primary

YHWH during times of drought would persist throughout the Biblical narrative with polemical texts post-dating the Pentateuch into the monarchy period (1 Kgs 17:1–19:21).

### *Well Motif*

The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* states, “A motif usually builds around a nuclear action sequence which can take different forms and cover more than a single event.”<sup>33</sup> The nuclear action sequence which this paper proposes for the well motif differs from that of others in viewing the reason for the journey to the well (what will be called “journey conflict”) and extending until the resolution of the journey conflict. Those who have written on well scenes have typically limited their analyses to the physical location of the well.<sup>34</sup> However, each of the well scenes examined herein have a conflict that leads to the journey, a conflict upon arrival at a well, a resolution to the conflict at the well, and concludes with a resolution to the initial conflict that led the character for journey to the well in the first place. This pattern is evident in all the well scenes examined, forming the “nuclear action sequence” evident through multiple events and characters. As such, this motif can be established and evaluated together for structural similarities and dissimilarities.

---

rainfalls of the countryside. In biblical faith the Lord of Israel was resolutely honored as the God of storms and rains (Ps 29; Jer 10:13; Zech 10:1), but the magical practices of Baal worshipers were a persisting temptation to the Israelites as they came late to settled agriculture.”

<sup>33</sup> Herman et. al, *Routledge Encyclopedia*, 322.

<sup>34</sup> See Robert Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 60–61; John Sailhammer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 243; Menakhem Perry, “Counter-Stories in the Bible: Rebekah and Her Bridegroom, Abraham's Servant,” *Prooftexts* 27, no. 2 (2007): 275–323, doi:10.2979/pft.2007.27.2.275; Jack M. Sasson, “The Servant's Tale: How Rebekah Found a Spouse,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 65, no. 4 (2006): 241–265, doi:10.1086/511101; Esther Fuchs, “Structure and Patriarchal Functions in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scene: Some Preliminary Notes,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3, no. 1 (1987): 7–13, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002051>.

As Yariah Amit points out, it is the role of the exegete to determine such import for the well-scenes. Amit notes the difficulty of identifying structural models in biblical narrative when he says, “We have seen that in constructing the plots the biblical author uses various structural models. . . . The author does not spell out which structure has been chosen, and it is up to the readers to discover if the choice of one model over another contributes to the integrity of the whole work.”<sup>35</sup> Amit encourages the interpreter to ask questions, evaluating if the author preferred “‘showing’ over ‘telling,’ or vice versa, and why?”<sup>36</sup> With these ideas in mind, the question becomes why Moses would devote so much ink to well scenes, and their corresponding motifs and imagery. To answer these questions, one must first perform an adequate literary and structural analysis.

Alter and Sailhamer suggest that well scenes serve no purpose other than to relay betrothal accounts, or to further the seed-line narratives.<sup>37</sup> But they have sub-stratified the well scenes at the exclusion of the prototype well scene of Genesis 16. When Hagar’s account is analyzed in comparison with the other well scenes, an overarching structural outline becomes apparent.

That outline could be described as:

- (1) Journey Conflict—Conflict causes a character to journey. This conflict is typically related to a catastrophic threat to Abraham’s progeny, jeopardizing the Abrahamic promise.
- (2) Arrival Conflict—The character arrives at a well where there is a separate, though sometimes related, conflict. These conflicts are of a secondary sort, serving as a rising action to the larger narrative that actually started with the flight from the previous locative setting.

---

<sup>35</sup> Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, trans. Yael Lotan (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), Kindle loc. 795.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., Kindle loc. 801.

<sup>37</sup> See Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 60–61; Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 243.

- (3) Arrival Resolution—The conflict at the well is resolved. This resolution often has marital implications.
- (4) Journey Resolution—The conflict that caused the character to journey to the well is resolved. This resolution always requires a return journey to the original location where the journey conflict began and resolves the major issue which caused the protagonist to flee.<sup>38</sup>

Amid this narrative plot structure, one particular character present at the well-scene will demonstrate a significant characterization development. It is the hypothesis of this paper that this character development is the key to understanding why these well scenes are included in the biblical corpus by identifying the deliverer of Abram/Abraham's progeny from dire treatment. It is this characterization that leads to the major thesis of this argument. This deliverer is a hero for the Abrahamic progeny, and these scenes are to be viewed as hero narratives.

Much of the difficulty in interpreting the well scenes of the Pentateuch stem from the misidentification of their literary sub-genre, affecting how one interprets the plot and structure, and therefore the author's emphasis. Most of these scenes have been interpreted as comedies. A comedy involves "a U-shaped story that begins in prosperity, descends into tragedy, and rises again

---

<sup>38</sup> Alter notes, "Some of the most commonly repeated biblical type-scenes I have been able to identify are the following . . . the encounter with the future betrothed at a well. . . danger in the desert and the discovery of a well or other source of sustenance . . ." Alter further describes the type scene of the well betrothal as having need of "the future bridegroom or his surrogate, having journeyed to a foreign land. There he encounters a girl. . . Someone, either the man or the girl, then draws water from the well; afterward, the girls rush to bring home the news of the stranger's arrival . . . ; finally a betrothal is concluded between the stranger and the girl, in the majority of the instances, only after he has been invited to a meal" (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 60–61). However, the locative setting of a well seems to superimpose the attending marriage as will be argued throughout this paper, since each marriage found in the betrothal type scenes is part of a larger narrative where there is danger in the desert, and a discovery at a well takes place that will assist in resolving the attending conflict that led to the journey.

to end happily,” as Ryken describes it. But he notes that, “The first phase of this pattern is often omitted, but the upward movement from misery to happiness is essential.”<sup>39</sup> In the well scenes under examination, there will be a split with the second Hagar scene, Jacob and Moses both enjoying the pre-conflict bliss in the pattern, while the first Hagar scene and Isaac will have the pre-conflict happiness omitted. Ryken notes that comedy is the dominant biblical form covering the meta-narrative of Scripture but extending to “numerous smaller U-shaped stories of the type.”<sup>40</sup> Had these forms in fact been comedies, then their “emphasis” as Amit calls it, would have been on a restoration to the state of happiness. In fact, it appears that this is how most interpreters have understood these texts. This has led to the common interpretation of a comedy with the happily ever after of a marriage leading to the blessed children of Abraham.<sup>41</sup> However, the texts show that these well scenes have not unanimously resulted in a happy ending. Hagar is still a slave under a harsh master in the first scene. Though Hagar is liberated in the second well scene, she is a divorced, single mother left searching for a home. Jacob is still a fugitive exiled in Padan-Aram, as is Moses in Midian. In each of these cases the prospects of bliss seem unattainable without a comedic effect. There must be another sub-genre category which these narratives would better fit.

Though these stories do exhibit some affinity to the narrative comedy, there is a better correlation with the sub-genre of a heroic narrative. This should come as no surprise since hero narratives make up the largest portion of narrative literature as Ryken points out. Ryken describes these narratives: “Hero stories are built around the life and exploits of a protagonist. Such stories spring from one of the most universal impulses of literature—the desire to embody accepted norms of behavior or representative struggles in the story of a character whose

---

<sup>39</sup> Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 81.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>41</sup> See interpretations by Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*; and Sailhammer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*.

experience is typical of people in general.”<sup>42</sup> Within the well scenes there is a focus on the struggle of a character in the midst of a conflict between proscribed social norms and their current societal context. As will be shown below, Hagar as a slave aspires to a higher station and creates conflict between her and Sarai. Isaac is without a wife or children and in a place of social jeopardy. Jacob has become a fugitive for usurping an honor which society had reserved for the oldest brother. Moses was a fugitive for murder. Each well scene is preceded by a conflict of social norms for a character who seeks a level of restoration or ascension to a more advantageous social norm.

Fokkelman describes the ideas of quest and hero as being essential to the plot. He says, “The trajectory in an independent story is often a search or ‘quest’ undertaken by the hero in order to solve or cancel the problem or deficit present at the outset. The hero is the subject of the quest, and he proceeds along the axis of his pursuit: he is on his way to the object of value that he wants to acquire or achieve.”<sup>43</sup> In this line of plot, the well scenes cannot be taken independently of their journey, since it is here where the hero seeks to resolve their conflict. Any other conflict found (such as those that occur upon the arrival at the well) would be rising actions to the ultimate denouement.

If these well scenes are accepted as hero stories, they require a hero, the main character seeking to resolve the conflict. Ryken describes heroes as follows:

The true hero expresses an accepted social and moral norm; his experience reenacts the important conflicts of the community which produces him; he is endowed with qualities that capture the popular imagination. It must also be remarked that the hero is able to act, and to act for good. Most important of all, the narrative of his experience suggests that life has both a significant pattern and an end.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 75.

<sup>43</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, Kindle loc. 1237.

<sup>44</sup> Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 76.



Ryken also proscribes literary means for identifying a hero: “The hero’s identity is revealed chiefly through six means: the hero’s (1) personal traits and abilities, (2) actions, (3) motivations, (4) responses to events or people, (5) relationships, and (6) roles.”<sup>45</sup> In each of these scenes the characterization of the protagonist in the narratives will be predominantly identified as a hero via their actions, relationships, and roles. Only with Moses will all six identifying marks become apparent. This paper will argue that the well scenes are part of a larger plot structure of the hero story sub-genre, and that the protagonists of these scenes come to function as a hero, and more specifically a deliverer, who secure the progeny of Abraham’s lineage in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Through the character’s interactions from arrival at the well through the denouement of their journey conflict, they model social and moral norms which lead to their actions being finally evaluated through narration as positive examples of piety within the overarching metanarrative of the patriarchal accounts. Specifically, this study will show that the hero of the story proves to be significant in the biblical narrative as they ensure the safety of Abraham’s progeny, participating in God’s providence of the Abrahamic covenant as it pertains to numerous descendants who would become nations and kings, and will lead to the ultimate deliverer and protector of Israel in the deliverer par excellence: Moses.

### **Hagar: The Proto-Typical Well Scene**

Hagar is the oft-forgotten matriarch of biblical literature. This is unsurprising since she is ultimately dismissed out of deference to Sarah. However, Hagar makes significant contributions to the metanarrative of Scripture. There was something that Hagar experienced that made her worthy of this special place in Mosaic literature, while such prominence was withheld from other matriarchs. Many allude to the fact that Genesis is a story of national origins, giving special attention to the identification of the boundaries of social and political

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

significance for the nation of Israel.<sup>46</sup> Though some would see the Hagar narrative as an origin story for Israel's future enemies, this should not prejudice the reader from seeing her distinct role in the metanarrative as will be shown in the well scene of Genesis 16.<sup>47</sup>

### *Journey Conflict*

In Chapter 16 of Genesis, the emphasis shifts from Abram to Sarai, who is discouraged over her barrenness, which has brought her public shame.<sup>48</sup> Sarai approaches Abram and asks him to take her slave Hagar as a concubine that she might serve as a surrogate mother to Sarai.<sup>49</sup> Abram agrees, and Hagar conceives. However, immediately upon knowledge of conception, there is conflict between the two women. Fewell and Heard describe the conflict succinctly when they state,

Sarai attempts to change her own status by changing Hagar's, but when she perceives that she has lost respect as a result of Hagar's pregnancy and attitude, she eagerly tries to shore up the boundaries that Hagar appears to be transgressing. With Abram's consent,

---

<sup>46</sup> Fewell and Heard, *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, 109–124.

<sup>47</sup> Matthews notes the ambiguous light that Hagar and Ishmael are portrayed in throughout the book of Genesis when he says, "The Genesis narratives (chaps. 16; 21) present an ambiguous view of Hagar-Ishmael: they are rivals to Sarai and Isaac, but they are also blessed by the Lord by virtue of their relationship to Abram (16:10; 21:13, 18). Ishmael as the firstborn and the first to be circumcised (17:23) and the honor of the double theophany to Hagar (16:7–12; 21:17–18) show their inclusion." See *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, New American Commentary, vol. 1B (Nashville: B&H, 2005), 178–179.

<sup>48</sup> See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 273.

<sup>49</sup> Genesis 16:2: Skinner concludes the same when he remarks on v. 2 that Sarai intends to "*be built up—or obtain children (v.i.)—from her. . . by adopting Hagar's son as her own.*" See John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner, 1910), 286.

Sarai ‘afflicts’ Hagar, using corporal punishment to put her back in her original subservient place.<sup>50</sup>

Here is a tale of two women. One who is rich and loved yet barren is pitted against another who is poor, enslaved, unloved, mistreated, and bearing the child of her master. Where Hagar was once nothing more than a slave, now she is the bearer of the patriarch’s sole heir and stands to move up in the social hierarchy. It could be inferred that this is the first time in Hagar’s life that she was afforded a place of any social status, and that she has much to gain from her new position within the clan in terms of social status and financial security.<sup>51</sup> Hagar apparently understands this and comes to despise her master. Sarai, who sought to use her slave to remedy her barrenness and remove her reproach, is now more insulted by the ascension of her slave girl, who should be counted as her personal property. Sarai places Abram under a curse, to which Abram responds by granting Sarai power to mistreat her slave, the mother of his only child. In response to Sarai’s mistreatment, Hagar flees, beginning her journey to find relief, perceiving her status and that of the child to be in jeopardy. This has significant ramifications considering Genesis 12 and 15, where Abram is promised descendants numerous as the stars, and yet is without an heir to realize that promise.

### *Arrival Conflict*

Hagar flees in desperation, pregnant and alone, and comes to a spring (עַיִן, Gen 16:7). Here the arrival conflict coincides with the departure conflict. This is seen by the conversation which the LORD has with Hagar in v. 8: “And He said, ‘Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from; and where are you going?’ Then she said, ‘Away from Sarai my mistress! I am fleeing!’”<sup>52</sup> Hagar is attempting to flee from Sarai, who has been afflicting

---

<sup>50</sup> Fewell and Heard, *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, 116.

<sup>51</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2 (Dallas: Word, 1994), 8.

<sup>52</sup> All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted, taken from the BHS.

her. Sarai's actions of social degradation had been difficult on Hagar, who being pregnant would have surely been in no emotional or physical state to withstand such harsh treatment. Instead of bearing the reproach and difficulties of Sarai's wrath, Hagar has made up her mind to flee, causing a whole new issue for Abram and his family. If Hagar does succeed in fleeing, then all three of the main characters are in jeopardy: (1) Abram's sole heir, to this point, is endangered in the womb of his mother who is wandering the desert; (2) Sarai is still reproachfully barren in the eyes of her peers; and (3) Hagar, if successful, will be an unwed mother of an illegitimate child, but if unsuccessful, could die in the desert being in no condition to travel the rugged wilderness alone and with child. The situation of the entire family is dire and in need of intervention, but to the model reader, it appears that the Abrahamic promise is now jeopardized. If Hagar is not restored and her child does not survive, the promise of God is compromised. In chapter 16, the conflict that causes the journey is Hagar's mistreatment, and that is the same conflict which she describes to the angel of the LORD when he confronts her in v. 8.

### ***Arrival Resolution***

The conflict with the well finds its resolution with the command of the LORD coming to Hagar in vv. 10-13: "Return to your mistress . . . and you shall bear a son! And you shall call his name Ishmael." God promises to bless her and the child, so that he will increase her descendants beyond multitude because of her submission and the blessing that is already upon the boy's father. As such, the LORD himself ensures the protection of the Abrahamic progeny that Hagar carries, and effects the Abrahamic blessing in part as a blessing upon Hagar's obedience, though he seemingly disqualifies Ishmael from being the elect-progeny of Abram through pronouncing a different blessing. The fact that the angel of the LORD, acting as the primary agent, serves to deliver Hagar and Abram's gestational progeny should not be missed. Wenham notes that in this scene, "the angel of the LORD is dominant, and Hagar accepts his orders and his

promises, while Sarai does not appear at all.”<sup>53</sup> Sarai is conspicuously absent so that reader is left to assume, apart from God’s condescending direct speech concerning the boy’s future, that this progeny is part of God’s plan.

### *Journey Resolution*

Verses fourteen and fifteen show the resolution to the journey:

So she called the name of the LORD which spoke to her ‘You are the God who sees’ because she said ‘Moreover, here, I have seen the one who sees after me.’ Because of this, the well is called ‘The well of the Living One who sees me’ Behold it is between Kadesh and Bered. And Hagar bore to Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son which Hagar had born Ishmael.

Hagar’s experience is pivotal to the life of Israel, as it reveals something about the God whom the nation serves so that her name for this well and the title she gives to this God who met her is made to stand for untold generations. Fewell and Heard note Hagar’s contributions when they mention her title by feminist critics as “theologian.”<sup>54</sup> However, Fewell and Heard do not explicitly state how the spring (עֵינַן) became a well (בְּאֵר). It must be inferred, since naming begets ownership, that Abram fortified this spring to become a well as a result of the LORD’s revelation to Hagar. Genesis shows that Abraham named the wells which he dug, but here he has given that right to his concubine. It is in Hagar’s return and submission that she is granted the social status which she so desperately craves, and she is memorialized through the well. Hagar has returned home, though the return journey is

---

<sup>53</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Fewell and Heard state, “Her rejoinder, a seeming mixture of awe and audacity, has earned her among feminist critics the label of ‘theologian’ (Trible 1984). She utters a garbled response about seeing and being seen by God; she gives YHWH a new name, El-Roi (‘El who sees’); and, like Abram’s erection of altars, her experience is inscribed on geographical space (Beer-lahai-roi, ‘the well of a living one who sees me’), grounding (as it were) her identity in promised space” (*Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, 116–117).

gapped, moving straight from Hagar's direct speech of v. 14 to Ishmael's birth and Abram's presence in vv. 15–16.

### *Characterization*

The character development of two characters becomes obvious through the text's direct speech and narration. Hagar the slave-girl is foreign (Egyptian), emotional (seen crying at the well), and impulsive (running away in the desert without any form of protection or provision). She craves social status (despising her master) and is willing to achieve social status through capitalizing on her newfound role within the home as a surrogate mother. However, Sarai will not allow her slave to usurp her role in the home and subjugates her through harsh treatment. This compels the pregnant young woman to flee. On Hagar's run-away journey she meets the Angel of the LORD, who corrects her faulty plan, providing her with the only means of sure safety until her son would be old enough to provide for and protect her.<sup>55</sup>

The characterization of the LORD is also worth noting, here for the first time since Eve's confrontation in the garden, the LORD speaks to a woman who is a foreigner outside of the line of Abraham. The LORD is conspicuously absent in the plans of Abram and Sarai in chapter 16, though he features prominently in chapter 15. The LORD's benevolence is shown clearly in the fact that he is willing to bless this offspring of Abram, even though Abram and Sarai hastily act out a plan which seems to be outside of the LORD's original intention of chapters 12–15. Furthermore, the LORD shows himself to be a wise and beneficent counselor in providing the only means of safeguarding Hagar and elevating her social status. However, this blessing is contingent upon her obedience to his words, evidenced through

---

<sup>55</sup> As has been seen in the footnote 50 above, Wenham notes that women had no job prospects outside of their duties in the home. However, by waiting for the removal of Hagar and Ishmael as rivals to Sarah and Isaac until Ishmael's adolescence, God has mercifully ensured that both Hagar and Ishmael may survive as he would be old enough to find employment and provide for his mother.

her submission to her human master.<sup>56</sup> Hagar's scene is important to the development not only of Israel's boundaries and identity conflicts with their neighbors, but here we see that the Hagar scene is also an important development in the characterization of the LORD's character in Scripture. Throughout this passage, the LORD will evidence his retributive justice on the generations of Sarai for her sin through Egyptian oppression as well as his manifold grace for his people whether native born of the elect, or foreigners living in obedient submission to his revealed plan.

### **Hagar: The Anti-Type Well Scene**

Hagar's prominence in the Pentateuch is indisputable as she is the recipient of a second distinct theophany in Genesis 21. The above plot structure for well-scenes is maintained in Hagar's second well scene which runs from Genesis 21:8–21.

#### ***Journey Conflict***

The journey conflict is found when Sarai sees Ishmael mocking Isaac at his weaning party. At this point she demands that her husband send the bondservant away (Gen 21:8–10). Sarah's speech betrays questionable motives of self-preservation and economic stability, which upsets Abraham.<sup>57</sup> Abraham acquiesces, only after the assurance of God's protection on the lad and sends his concubine and older son away with scant provisions (vv. 11–14). Hagar is now rejected, shamed, and divorced, and attempting to care for her adolescent son. Along the way, the boy is overcome from exhaustion, and Hagar is forced to lay him down in the shade, and to walk away that she might not see his plight to what she assumed was sure death (vv. 15–16a).

#### ***Arrival Conflict***

The arrival conflict is very brief, since Hagar is not even aware that she has arrived at the well. When Hagar sat down, "she lifted up her voice and wept" (Gen 21:16). She fears that her

---

<sup>56</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Fewell and Heard, *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, 117.

son will die, and as a result she will be without provision and protection.

### ***Arrival Resolution***

The arrival resolution begins when Hagar is again greeted by the angel of God. The texts depict the resolution, stating,

And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink (Gen 21:17–19).

With a show of divine mercy and providence, God proves faithful to his initial promise to Hagar, and his two subsequent promises to Abraham concerning Ishmael, hearing the voice of the boy, a distinct play on the boy’s name and providing the boy with water which he was evidently in desperate need of. Hagar’s immediate conflict is resolved since her son is now restored to health.

### ***Journey Resolution***

This well scene has every element mentioned throughout the above structure except for one important point. The journey resolution never involves a return. This is the only well scene in which the permanent departure is the resolution. When God spoke to Hagar in Bathsheba, God announced that Ishmael would dwell before the face of all his brothers (16:12), and this was the fulfillment of the pronouncement. This moment of conflict was a defining identification of Abraham’s elect progeny and the removal of the rivalrous non-elect progeny and his mother. The resolution for this conflict was to start a new life, which the text shows happened in Paran of Mt. Seir. Verses 20–21 of that chapter read: “And so it happened that God was with the boy and he grew and dwelled in the desert and became a great archer. And he dwelled in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.” This shows God’s covenant



faithfulness to Ishmael, who was heir to a limited aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, as was affirmed twice also to Hagar, by hearing the boy, providing for his maturity, and successfully securing the future progeny to bring his word to pass. With this scene God is again the ultimate deliverer of the Abrahamic progeny through his merciful provision as people are submissive to God's revealed will.

The fact that this scene departs from the structure of the previous well scene would be cause for little concern if the return element was not present in all the following well scenes. However, since the return is evident in the other scenes, the absence of this element calls for attention. It would appear that Moses has rendered this scene as a framing narrative for chapters 16–21. The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory notes, "Framed narratives occur in narrative situations when events are narrated by a character other than the primary narrator or when a character tells a tale that, although unrelated to the main story, contains a moral message for the listener in the text."<sup>58</sup> However, not all would agree with this brief definition. R. Malewitz of Oregon State describes framing narratives in this way: "As its name suggests, a frame story is a narrative that frames or surrounds another story or set of stories."<sup>59</sup> Though the narrator does not change in this narrative which is typically common, the characters shift, and someone who is viewed as a foil to Sara becomes a heroine. These narratives do bracket an important aspect of the larger narrative which seeks to identify Abraham's

---

<sup>58</sup> Herman et al., *Routledge Encyclopedia*, 186.

<sup>59</sup> Raymond Malewitz, *What is a Frame Story? Transcript*, The Oregon State Guide to English Literary Terms, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-frame-story>, accessed May 5, 2021. Malewitz notes further that a frame story "usually appears at the beginning and end of that larger story and provides important context and key information for how to read it. . . paying attention [to] the **frame** surrounding a story can help us to rethink the **content** of the story. . . every so often we read stories that build a frame narrative into the story itself. Instead of jumping right into the tale to be told, these narratives pause for a moment to reveal the person who tells the tale, the people who listen to the it, and the occasion for telling it" (emphasis original).

long promised son, and heir of the Abrahamic covenant, inviting the reader to pause and search out the occasion for this framed sequence of well-scenes. This search should include, according to Malewitz, asking: “Why is the story being told? What appeals does the story make to its implied audience of listeners? And how do the main story’s themes relate to the themes of the frame story?”<sup>60</sup> Moses as the author of the Pentateuch has included this story in his writings for the children of Israel who are in Kadesh Barnea and will be entering the Promised Land. Though it could be describing identity boundaries between Israel and the Ishmaelite tribes, the portrayal of Hagar as a heroine should ultimately lead to the rejection of boundary marking as the goal of these narratives. Instead, one can see God being faithful to Abraham to fulfill a secondary promise to Abraham that was graciously granted to him after a failed attempt to receive the promised son through his own devices. In the tradition of *kal wahomer*, if God will be faithful to his promises to the non-elect progeny of Abraham and to a foreign slave, how much more faithful will he be to the elect progeny of Abraham to the free and Terah-born wife?

### *Characterization*

Hagar shows no real characterization development in this narrative. She has first and foremost sought to protect her and her son’s interest and proven responsive to the word of God at each instance. Her son is only described as becoming a skilled archer, which would be an ominous portent for the people of Israel as the non-elect line would eventually become one of their chief opponents, being nothing more than an agent to propagate the non-elect line of Abraham.

The character development of God differs throughout. As God encourages Abraham to heed his wife, which is the exact thing that led Abraham to the current predicament, some are led to question God’s care for this rejected slave and newly abandoned child. However, when one reads the text as a model reader, they instead see that God proves himself to be the only

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

one capable of providing a better life for Hagar and Ishmael, as she is now emancipated with a future chieftain and accomplished warrior to provide for her.

### **Isaac: The Well Scene Par-Excellence**

The second well scene in the pre-Sinaitic account is the well scene with Abram's servant and Rebekah in Genesis 24. This is the longest well-scene in Mosaic literature, and it is distinct in the fact that it is the one scene in which an Abrahamic descendent is not present at the well (even in the Hagar account, Ishmael is there in gestational form). This is of critical importance. The characterization of Isaac in this account will prove pivotal to understanding his role throughout the rest of the Pentateuch. The author has decided to gap Isaac when compared to the other patriarchs. However, the well-scene of Genesis 24 is yet still spectacular as it encases some of the longest conversational encounters in the entire Pentateuch between the servant of Abram and the other characters.

### ***Journey Conflict***

The journey conflict of Genesis 24 comes on the heels of Sarah's burial, and Abraham's shrewd business dealings with the cave at Machpelah from Ephron and his sons. This background is necessary to understand since it suggests two things: first, that the first generation of patriarchs, namely Sarah and Abraham, are approaching death, and second, that until the purchase of the cave, they have not yet inherited any land in Canaan as a permanent possession. The negotiation of Abraham in chapter 23 will serve as a point of comparison with the same types of negotiations that his servant will have in chapter 24 with God through prayer and then with Laban. However, the death of Sarah which precludes Abraham's negotiations seem to be the real point of conflict in chapter 24 since verse 67 ends speaking of Isaac's comfort through Rebekah, his new wife, after his mother's death. There would appear to be separate conflicts, one on the mind of Abraham and the other on the mind of Isaac. As Abraham grieves over his wife's death and is forced to reckon with his own mortality, he begins to question his legacy and realizes that his son has not yet been given in marriage, and this

precedes the legitimate birth of future heirs necessary to the Abrahamic promise of chapters 12 and 17. Isaac, on the other hand, is distraught over the loss of his mother and lacks female companionship in his current state of bachelorhood. Abraham seeks to resolve both of these issues by sending his trusted servant back to Aram to find a wife for Isaac from among his own house.

The command that Abraham gives to his servant, with the accompanying oath given in a sense of doom and urgency, shows that there is more on Abraham's mind than acquiring a wife, but finding a *worthy* wife. Again, the issue of boundaries seems to be a prominent feature as Abraham tells the servant about the Abrahamic promise and its contingent ramifications in vv. 6–8 of the chapter:

And Abraham said to him, "Keep this to me that you do not take my son back there. The God of Heaven, the LORD, from the house of my father which he took me and from the land, and from my kindred, spoke to me and who swore to me to say to your seed I will give this land, and he will send his angel before your face, and you will take a wife for my son from there."

After making the necessary preparations, the servant departs.

### *Arrival Conflict*

Verses 10 and 11 describe the arrival at the well: "And the servant took ten of the camels of his master's camels and he went with all kinds of goods from his master's hand, and he arose and went to Aram-Naharaim, to the city of Nahor. Then he made the camels kneel outside the city by the well of water, at evening time, according to the time women go out to draw water." It is at this point that a new conflict arises as can be seen in the prayer and subsequent direct speech of the servant. The servant's main concern is whether or not his journey will be successful; will he be able to return to his master with the desired wife? The ESV renders verse 12 as follows: "And he said, 'O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham'" (Gen 24:12, ESV). This idea of being successful is echoed in the major English versions,

and it is qualified immediately by the servant through the LORD's continued covenant faithfulness (סֶדֶק) to Abraham, and it is repeated in praise in verses 26-27, 48-49, and 56. The servant requested the LORD to give him a sign which would speak of a woman's hospitality, qualifying her as marriage material for his master's son as a sign of his successful completion of his task. This negotiation with the LORD is qualified, rational, and motivated from a heart that seeks to see the LORD's faithfulness to the word which God has already revealed,<sup>61</sup> and the elevation of the servant's master. Though the negotiation appears immediately successful, as the LORD answers the prayer before the servant finishes speaking with the arrival of Rebekah, but the marriage must first be arranged through the family.

### *Arrival Resolution*

Upon arriving at Bethuel's house, the servant is greeted heartily by Rebekah's brother Laban:

The woman ran and told to her mother's house about these things. And Rebekah had a brother, whose name was Laban and Laban ran to the man, outside to the spring. And it happened as he saw the ring and the bracelets upon the hand of his sister and as he heard the words which Rebekah his sister said, "So the words of this man to me" and he went to the man and behold he was standing by the camels at the spring. And he said, "Come, oh Blessed of the LORD, for why do you stand outside? So, I have turned over the house and a place for the camels" (Gen 24:28-31).

There are a few narrative clues that Laban is less motivated from hospitality as he is by greed. The narrator remarks that "as he saw the ring and the bracelets . . . and he went to the man." This characterization has a cataphoric function to preclude the negotiations that will ensue from verses 34-58, where the servant recounts his prayer in detail and the marriage is arranged (vv.

---

<sup>61</sup> See the Abrahamic promises throughout Genesis 12:1-7, 15:1-21, 17:1-21, and 22:16-18, which paired with Abraham's personal history of troubled foreign wives would have set the stage for the servant's understanding of God's faithfulness to his master and the stakes associated with his task.

34–51) and then stalled (vv. 54–56), before Rebekah gives the final consent which her family seemed ready to renege on (vv. 57–58). Though the servant is in no way able to haggle from a place of prominence, there must have been some manner of persuasion employed that has been gapped. The servant is in foreign territory and would seemingly be outnumbered by the cohort of Bethuel and Laban, and yet he is able to say confidently, “Send me to my master.” The fact that this young girl is given control over her own destiny is likewise unnatural. In most arranged marriages in the ANE culture, virgins were treated as property of their respective family and would go when they were sent and not when they assented. Perhaps this was a manipulative tactic in which the family assumed that the young girl would not be willing to venture with a stranger of her own, yet she does, in which case their hostile intention would have backfired, and the servant’s conflict resolved as he is successful against all odds.

### *Journey Resolution*

With Rebekah’s assent, the family sends her away to her new family unit with a blessing fully in keeping with the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 12 and 17 when they say:

“Our sister may you increase  
becoming thousands of ten-thousands,  
and may your seed inherit the gate of his haters!”<sup>62</sup>

Then the journey to Canaan begins, and the narrative continues,

And Rebekah arose and her young woman and mounted upon camels and they went after the man. So the servant took Rebekah and he left. Then Isaac returned to Beer Laha Roi, and was dwelling in the land of the Negev. Isaac went out to wander about in the

---

<sup>62</sup> Though many would translate this as two bi-colons, the author has translated this as a tri-colon. This was done so that the blessing would be qualified so that Rebekah’s increase is given in terms of number, and then power attempting to give each verb its own colon, with the first line being progressively specified in the next two lines through numbers, and then the associated power that comes in numbers.

field as evening turned toward night. And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold the camels were coming.

The fact that the author gives an extraneous detail of Isaac's previous location as Beer Laha Roi gives coherence among the overarching metanarrative of the well scenes so that the same God who looked on Hagar to preserve the un-elect seed of Abraham has now likewise looked upon Isaac to keep the same promise of making his seed, like that of his estranged brother, a great multitude. Just as Hagar is comforted by the LORD despite Sarai's affliction, so Isaac is comforted after Sarai's death through the LORD's provision (v. 67). While Abraham was concerned about the wrong heir in chapter 16 and needed divine intervention to his conflict, so too did Abraham need the divine intervention of God to resolve the conflict of chapter 24 as God provided a wife for the elect son from among his own house (vv. 4, 27, 48).

### *Characterization*

The first characterization that must be noted is Isaac. Isaac is conspicuously absent in the major narrative of Genesis. His direct speech is limited to chapter 26, and even there he is a minor character with most of the direct speech coming from Abimelech and Phicol as well as Isaac's own servants. It should not be lost on the reader that in the major developments of Isaac's life, it is the role of others to effect God's will in Isaac's life. It is his father's servant who locates his wife at his father's request, it is the servants who dig and find the wells in chapter 26, and it is his wife who orchestrates the LORD's blessing on the correct son at the time of his impending death. In every other well scene, the person with the most to gain is present at the well with this lone exception. The author has intentionally shown Isaac to be a passive man in his own affairs, enslaved to his own emotional state, so that he is at home depressed when he should be looking for a wife. He will likewise be enslaved to his emotions and inner desires when it comes to child raising later. However, it is through Isaac's servants, working on his behalf, that the people of Israel begin to take the land through their cultivation of wells in chapter 26.

The second character developed is Rebekah. Rebekah appears out of nowhere and proves herself to be an industrious young woman, hospitable, and humble. She furthermore goes on to show herself submissive as she runs home to tell her family, the authority in her life, about her encounter. When the time comes for her to decide her fate, she submits herself to the arranged marriage which was struck the night before, even though her family has offered her an out to delay such submission. Rebekah is immediately obedient to whatever station of life she finds herself in and proves a worthy matriarch for the elect line of Abraham.

The third character is God. There is no direct speech here by God, and yet he is present. Here God answers the prayer of a servant immediately, in exact fashion to each of the petitions. God is also implicitly present watching over Isaac as he journeys from the place where God looks upon people to his new location to meet his new bride and receive comfort from God. Here God is portrayed as the God who watches over his people to give them success through prayer, as his agents work towards accomplishing his overarching purpose in the lives of the elect, and he comforts his people in their distress.

Perhaps the most noteworthy character is the one whom the author intentionally is least concerned with. It is common in narrative to leave minor characters nameless, describing them in terms of their position.<sup>63</sup> Though the servant would seem to be

---

<sup>63</sup> See Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 330. Sternberg states, "To remain nameless is to remain faceless, with hardly a life of one's own. Accordingly, a character's emergence from anonymity may correlate with a rise in importance." Thus, contrary to Waltke's assessment, the author intended the servant to remain unimportant to the overarching meta-narrative. Waltke notes, "By means of indirect characterization—actions and speech—the narrator develops a rich picture of the wise servant's gifts" (*Genesis*, 325). Before going on to assert that some commentators find him to be the main character in the account, however, Waltke identifies the servant as "anonymous;" and this "blanking" is intentional and emphatic, and therefore it is consequential. Waltke's definition of gapping, contrasted with "blanking" quoted above, showed that the delineation lay in the consequence of the missing information. The question that would automatically rise in the reader's



the protagonist in the story by counting his dialogue, observing his actions, and seeing the effect he has on the overall plot, the servant serves as nothing more than an agent who effects the will of God at the behest of Abraham for Isaac. What is noteworthy is the contrast between the servant and Isaac already at this start of Isaac's own narrative. This passivity which Isaac exhibits is in stark opposition to the activity of the servant of Abraham and later the activity of his own servants in chapter 26.

### **Jacob: The Romantic Well Scene**

Jacob is a major character in biblical thought, earning a spot as the prototypical patriarch of Israel, eclipsed only by Abraham his predecessor and Moses his successor in terms of influence. The nation is known by his name, and not that of Abraham, whether as Israel or Jacob, throughout biblical literature.<sup>64</sup> Jacob's journey to the well begins as a fugitive from justice and ends with him in exile for two decades. Keeping the overarching narrative of well type scenes in mind, the well scene narrative cannot come to its conclusion until the conflict which drove the character to the well in the first place is resolved. This narrative will span from 27:41 (Esau's intention) to 33:20 (Jacob and Esau's treaty).

### ***Journey Conflict***

Jacob is a man who is ultimately concerned with worldly goods. He is a person who seeks to acquire wealth at all costs,

---

mind is how can this servant be unnamed? Other servants are named earlier in the Genesis account. The reason for this servant remaining unnamed is that he has been intentionally gapped because his role is strictly as an agent and serves as a cataphoric indictment against Isaac. All other men in the well-scenes will be present to find their own wife. For some reason, Abraham found Isaac unfit for the journey, perhaps to keep Isaac in the land which he has finally acquired some form of permanent possession through a recent purchase. However, the narrator seems to imply through his well-scene typology that Isaac should have been a more active agent.

<sup>64</sup> See Micah 3:1; Psalm 87:2; Numbers 23:7; and Obadiah 10 for examples of Israel's corporate identity as Jacob, and numerous passages referring to the children of the nation of Israel beginning in Exodus 1:12, etc.

even taking advantage of his own brother.<sup>65</sup> He began by refusing to feed his hungry brother until he conned him out of a birthright. Years later, while his father was sick, he obeyed his mother and through trickery and an impressive feat of self-camouflage was able to obtain the paternal blessing as well. Though Esau was able to despise his birthright freely (the wealth), he was not so willing to part with the blessing (the social honor inherent in God's divine blessing of dominion).<sup>66</sup> When the deception was found out, Esau planned to kill his brother (Gen 27:41). However, Rebekah, the originator of the plot, found out about Esau's plan and capitalized on her oldest son's patience by sending Jacob away to his greedy Uncle Laban to find a wife. This was a plan that seemed innocent enough to Isaac, who was unaware of Esau's plot, since he too had to go to Padan-Aram to find a wife (Gen 28:2).

As Jacob progresses towards Padan-Aram, he is met by God in a vision around a ladder on which the angels of God were ascending and descending. God spoke to him, reiterating the Abrahamic promise to the next generation. There are points of coherence between this account and the preceding journey and arrival conflict scenes, as the LORD grants assurance to the safety of Abraham's seed and reaffirms his intentions to multiply that seed in keeping with the Abrahamic promise. In light of Jacob's current flight as an exile from legitimate justice, this must be extremely comforting to the man who has now lost everything. Whereas Abraham's servant left with ten camels full

---

<sup>65</sup> In ANE culture, wealth was calculated through the accumulation of livestock and slaves. See Genesis 12:21 where Abraham is counted as rich because of his livestock as well as silver, and the same sentiment extended to slaves in Goldingay (*Genesis*, 224), describing Abram and Lot's accumulated wealth. Meanwhile, Esau as a hunter gatherer showed no such regard for wealth, instead choosing to live day-to-day as a hunter-gatherer (see Waltke, *Genesis*, 374–375).

<sup>66</sup> See Waltke, *Genesis*, where he says, "Blessing, the presence of God and his promises for abundance and dominion, is communicated through the spoken word" (384). Regarding Esau, Waltke comments, "He inherits no God-inspired dream, no vision of the transcendent. He reacts to the immediate, without reflection on future. He despises his right to take part in Abraham's promised destiny" (*ibid.*, 374–375).

of goods with which to barter for Isaac's future wife, Jacob will arrive with nothing but God's promise to provide. This causes Jacob to make a vow, contingent upon God's ability to fulfill his promise, where Jacob would acknowledge the LORD as his God, and build the house of God upon the memorial stone which he set up at Bethel and pay tithes (vv. 20–22). The arrival conflict then becomes a question of whether Jacob's life will be spared from Esau's wrath, allowing him safe return to his father's house as God has promised, granting him a secondary blessing by giving him offspring through his future wife.

### *Arrival Conflict*

Sometime after the vision, Jacob arrives at the well in Padan-Aram where he encounters some stubborn shepherds who refuse to move the large rock covering the mouth of the well (29:2–8). Some have used this story to suggest that the stone was too large for the group to move, even leading to legends of Jacob being a giant in rabbinic literature.<sup>67</sup> Ryken notes, "A well was sometimes protected by a huge stone that only multiple shepherds could move, so that no one could steal a disproportionate share of the water (Gen 29:10)."<sup>68</sup> So perhaps the shepherds were not so much unindustrious as they were concerned with having credible witnesses who would ensure that they did not selfishly indulge in more than their rightful allotment of the precious resource. While Jacob is questioning the shepherds about his kinsfolk, Rachel arrives to draw water. Jacob is overcome with either a masculine urge to impress the girl, or social audacity that he refuses to wait any longer, so that he moves the stone himself, even though the time to move it has not yet come. The tension is only heightened with his welcome into her home. With the previous well scenes attesting to a marriage in some form, either the restoration of a marriage with Hagar or the arrangement of a marriage with Rebekah, there is yet a resolution for Jacob's secondary goal in going to Padan-Aram of retrieving a wife.

---

<sup>67</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 401.

<sup>68</sup> Ryken, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 940.

### ***Arrival Resolution***

Verses 15–20 of chapter 29 gloss quickly towards the resolution of Jacob's marital status, showing that Jacob, after many days, was approached about his wages by his Uncle Laban. Jacob, without any earthly wealth, is able to arrange his own marriage without a dowry after he agrees to indentured servitude for a period of seven years, after which Laban will give Jacob his daughter Rachel. This seems promising; however, this would not happen without a second minor conflict arising due to the greed of Laban. The trickster Jacob is now tricked by Laban, and the women are switched under the guise of a drunken night so that Jacob has now married Leah, Rachel's sister, and must fulfill a second term of indentured servitude for the woman he truly desires. After a tense argument with Laban and some bad-faith negotiations, Jacob receives Rachel after the celebration for Leah is completed but is forced to work an additional seven years. It is only after those second seven years, when Jacob receives the wife of the well scene that the arrival conflict is resolved.

### ***Journey Resolution***

Marriage, children, and wealth were not Jacob's primary reason for arriving at the well that day. Jacob left Canaan under duress, fleeing from the wrath of Esau, having every intention of returning in safety. Jacob is in no position to leave Padan-Aram freely. He is an outsider living in a foreign land.<sup>69</sup> Instead of attempting to negotiate by faith like Abraham's servant, Jacob leaves under cover as his father-in-law and his sons are shearing sheep. He is pursued, but the LORD protects Jacob, keeping with his earlier revelation. As soon as the Laban pursuit is negotiated,

---

<sup>69</sup> See Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 269. Wenham writes, "Laban is portrayed as a man governed by avarice. Again, the narrator does not spell out exactly the effect of Jacob's wealth, leaving it to our imagination to fill in the details. The important thing is that 'Jacob noticed' it: הִנֵּה 'that' shows us the situation through Jacob's eyes. He realized he was *persona non grata* with both his father-in-law and his brothers-in-law, and with no member of his own family nearby to support him, he senses his exposure and weakness."

a servant arrives to show that Jacob's situation has worsened, as Esau approaches with four hundred men. Jacob has now learned what it is like to be robbed, mistreated, and manipulated, and seeks to buy his safety through a series of flattery and gifts. The gifts and flattery work and Esau's wrath is assuaged; he offers to protect Jacob and allows him to dwell with him. With Jacob's arrival in Canaan and treaty with Laban and Esau, the main conflict that gave rise to Jacob's departure is resolved, and he has entered the land of his father rich in money, livestock, slaves, and most importantly, children.

### *Characterization*

Because of the great span of text that this section covers, there is a significant amount of characterization that takes place. To be fair, this well scene is part of a much larger act than those which come before it. Where Hagar's flight is preceded by the chapter immediate before, and Abraham's servant's conflict is described within the self-contained chapter of the well scene, Jacob's flight and arrival and return spans parts of seven chapters. Whereas the other analyses cover the well scenes with reference to the greater act, the characterization for this scene cannot be accomplished without considering the greater detail that accompanies such a larger section of narrative spanning all seven relevant chapters, since it is the conflict between Jacob and Esau that gives rise to Jacob's original flight. For this case, characterization will cover only those characters who appear at the well location. This act cannot end until Jacob returns to Canaan, just as Hagar returned to Abraham and Abraham's servant returned to Isaac.

The protagonist of the story is Jacob, although this is contrary to the reader's initial inclination. A person who is named יעקב and continues to show such deceptive and selfish behavior as Jacob did from conning his brother from a birth right, taking advantage of his father's disability and feeble state, and who is more concerned with his father's inheritance than maintaining good family relations, is not typically an endearing character. However, the narrator brings his readers to a place of sympathy with Jacob by showing that his election is from God, as seen in revelations to both Rebekah, Jacob, and later Laban. Jacob moves

from a place of prominence within the home, where he has been amassing livestock as a shepherd for his own future inheritance, to a place of destitution where he is forced to suffer as an indentured servant and is ultimately repaid for his own underhandedness. However, in time, Jacob is able to best Laban through his own craftiness, enriching himself. By the time the well scene closes, Jacob realizes that he can no longer rely on such manipulative behaviors to best the sheer force of Esau; and in case he thought that he could, the angel of the LORD meets him, cripples him, and gives him a new name. The new name signifies a new way of life for Jacob that will be marked by faith and prayer instead of self-reliance. Jacob ultimately restores to Esau a large sum of wealth, similar to that which he has stolen through manipulation, and he submits himself to Esau, referring to him as “Lord.” This exchange purchases Esau’s good favor through an extravagant exhibition of repentance.

Laban is a secondary antagonist and is a flat character. He is greedy, shrewd, and serves only as the means of providing Jacob his wealth, whether human or material. He is an unwilling participant in Jacob’s growth, only wanting what is best for himself, and does not realize his own downfall at Jacob’s hands until it is too late. Had it not been for divine intervention, it is likely he would have killed Jacob, leaving his daughters widowed and endowing himself with a rich workforce for his labors, retaining the wealth that he had been trying to amass from the labors of his son-in-law.

Rachel functions as an agent throughout the narrative and exhibits no significant growth in characterization. She quarrels with her sister over their husband as the loved wife who struggles to provide heirs. The biblical account shows Rachel negatively, stealing her father’s idols and acting deceptively like her husband, while chastising her husband for her lack of ability to conceive. She serves little purpose in the account other than to bring about the sons of Israel through themselves and their servants and serve as a foil to Leah (who is unexamined because of her absence from the well location).

The remaining character to be described is God. Throughout this narrative God speaks often and shows himself to Jacob in a violent and disabling theophany. God is not dissuaded from

fulfilling his original promise to Jacob despite his obvious character flaws, but instead seeks to correct those flaws over time and through various means of judgement. Furthermore, God keeps his word at every instance, protecting Jacob as he had promised from all harm and beginning to fulfill the promise of seed beyond number; at least thirteen children follow the company back to Canaan. God shows himself merciful, giving the women of the family children in proportion to their station in life. The unloved woman is blessed with more children than the woman who is loved, and the woman who is barren receives her answer to prayer. God shows himself the vengeful protector of his people as he threatens Laban, as well as the sanctifier of his people as he cripples Jacob so that he can no longer operate on his own strength and wisdom (as he did in Padan-Aram from the well to Laban). Though God threatens Laban to protect Jacob, he softens Esau's heart through gifts and the humility of Jacob's newfound identity.

### **Moses: The Heroic Well Scene**

Only after a proper review of the antecedent well scenes can one properly appreciate the well scene of Moses. In the previous examples a consistent plot line emerged, where there is a conflict that gives rise to a flight, followed by a more minor conflict at a well, which typically results in a marriage (or restored marriage in the case of Hagar), and the conflict at the well is resolved before the conflict that caused the flight finds its proper resolution. Each of the above scenes, excepting Hagar's final departure, involved a return to the previous setting. Hagar's first departure led her back to Sarai, Abraham's servant returned to his master, and Jacob returned to the land of Canaan. In each case, Abraham's progeny was endangered which resulted in a journey to the well. When the individual journey conflicts reach their denouements, Abraham's progeny is more secure than it was before. There also is a consistent narrowing of the elect progeny, with the first well scene being Abram's only descendent at risk in Genesis 16, to Abraham's elect descendent at risk of perpetual bachelorhood in Genesis 24, and finally Isaac's elect descendent Jacob at risk in Genesis 27. With the entire line of Jacob revealed as elect in Genesis 49, the well scene of Moses

takes on special significance, since it is with Moses that the entire elect progeny of Abraham is endangered.

### *Journey Conflict*

The second chapter of Exodus is a rapid-moving narrative that will account for the first 40 or so years of Moses' life. In Exodus 1, the people of Israel are under the oppression of Egypt serving as slaves because of the rise of a new pharaoh. The pharaoh assumed that this subjugation would reduce the number of Israelites so that they would not become a military threat. This plan did not work, so pharaoh attempted various other methods to exterminate the Hebrew children. Moses is delivered from one of these attempts through the heroic acts of his mother and the benevolent heart of the pharaoh's daughter. The boy continues to grow up in Pharaoh's house and all seems well for Moses, though the ominous fate of the Hebrews is gapped for the next 39 or so years. The next thing that the author recounts are the attempts of Moses to save a Hebrew slave from Egyptian mistreatment through murder:

And it happened in one of these days when Moses had grown that he went out to his brothers, and . . . and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers. So, he turned this way and that, and he saw that there was no one, and he struck the Egyptian, and hid him in mud. And he went out the next day, and behold, two Hebrew men were fighting. So, he said to the guilty one, "Why do you strike your neighbor?" Then he said, "Who set you to be a chief and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" So, Moses was afraid; and he said, "Surely, this matter is known!" Then Pharaoh heard this matter, and he attempted to kill Moses, but Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and he dwelled in the land of Midian and he sat down upon a well (Exod 2:11–15).

Moses sees the plight of his Hebrew brothers, and attempts to deliver one of them from mistreatment. However, he commits murder and finds himself now a law breaker and a fugitive of justice. Before Pharaoh can execute justice, Moses flees to Midian and arrives at a well. Moses' life is in danger for an attempt to deliver one slave from unjust oppression before his time.



### *Arrival Conflict*

When Moses arrives at the well, the reader has already been taught by previous scenes to expect a second conflict. The conflict arrives in the form of some oppressive shepherds who chase off some local girls:

Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and they drew water and filled the troughs to water the flocks of their father. But the shepherds came and drove them out, and Moses arose and saved them, and watered the flocks. Then they came to Ruel their father and he said, "How have you so quickly returned today?" And they said, "An Egyptian man tore us from the hand of the shepherds, and moreover drawing, he drew for us and watered the flock." Then he said to his daughters, "So, where is he?" Why have you left this man? Summon him so he may eat bread!" So Moses decided to dwell with the man, and he gave Zipporah his daughter to Moses (Exod 2:16–21).

Moses is continually portrayed in the second chapter of Exodus as a deliverer of the oppressed. The Israelite slave and the helpless shepherdess are both objects of Moses' pity, stirring him to defensive action to deliver them from affliction. The arrival at the well sees the daughters of the priests in jeopardy from evil shepherds. By the time exodus is closed, a nation of priests will likewise have been delivered from a wicked shepherd and watered by Moses' hand.

### *Arrival Resolution*

Moses, ever the deliverer, saves the girls from the shepherds and waters their flocks.<sup>70</sup> As has come to be expected, Moses'

---

<sup>70</sup> The imagery here should not be lost. In the ANE, a king was described as a Shepherd. Moses was fleeing from one figurative oppressive shepherd who was threatening elect Abrahamic progeny, and upon arrival finds literal shepherds oppressing non-elect Abrahamic progeny. Moses went from delivering one elect oppressed Abrahamic descendent, to seven non-elect oppressed Abrahamic descendants, and by the end of the narrative he will have delivered all of Abraham's elect progeny from the most powerful shepherd on the face of the earth. As Goldingay notes concerning the metaphor of shepherding, "A king is his people's shepherd;

efforts at the well lead to a marriage within the line of Terah, and more specifically within the line of Ishmael, to a Midianite priest's daughter. With this account the well scenes find an *inclusio*. Hagar is the female at the first well who finds the key to blessing through identity with and submission to the line of Abraham, and it is through this descendant of Abraham that the Kenites will be enfolded into the blessing of Abraham as this daughter of Hagar marries back into the elect family.

### ***Journey Resolution***

Moses' journey is preceded by a death threat, as pharaoh seeks to execute justice. This threat results in Moses' loss of status as an Egyptian of influence, being the adopted son of a daughter of pharaoh, to now being nothing more than a fugitive vagabond shepherd in the wilderness. Just as the journeys of each well scene were began with a threat to the protagonist, and by fiat the progeny of Abraham, and cannot end until the protagonist returns to his previous setting, neither can Moses' journey find its resolution until he returns to Egypt and the progeny of Abraham is safe. In Exodus 3, Moses receives a divine revelation via the burning bush and is commanded to return to Egypt so that he might deliver God's people. Again, the idea of "seeing" is important. In Exodus 3:7, God tells Moses, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people." The correlation with Hagar is clear: the God who sees the oppressed will comfort the oppressed, but only through a new act of subjugation as the people of Israel move from serving pharaoh to serving God (3:12). So too will Moses have to submit to God as his servant par excellence despite his initial hesitation (Exod 4).<sup>71</sup> Moses eventually does return to

---

as Israel's king, YHWH is its shepherd (Gen 49:24; Ps 80:2 [80:1 [MT 2]]) and is even the individual's shepherd (Ps 23:1). Like kingship, shepherding suggests on one hand absolute authority and the power of life and death, and on the other an obligation to see that the subjects of this authority and power are looked after properly" (*Old Testament Theology: Israel's Faith*, Old Testament Theology Series, vol. 2 [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010], Kindle loc. 1122–1125).

<sup>71</sup> Mathews notes the correlation between Hagar and Moses, without pressing it far enough, when he states, "Hagar and Moses share in a pattern of events: oppression (Exod 2:11–15a), flight in the desert where

Egypt, but entry to Egypt does not signal final resolution. Just as Jacob had to return in safety to the land of his father, Moses too must return to Egypt in safety regaining his lost honor. This will only come about through the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves which is detailed in the later narrative (Exod 11:3, 12:36). However, it is not until the successful deliverance of the people from the wicked shepherd and the progeny of Abraham is safe, emphatically described at the closing of the Red Sea, that this well scene is completed.

### *Characterization*

This account spans 13 chapters marked by the Song of the Sea in celebration of the deliverance of God's people from their ultimate demise (Exod 15). It also brings part of the meta-narrative that is foretold in Genesis 15 to a close, completing the four-hundred-year sojourn of God's people in Egypt. During the 12 chapters of narrative, Moses moves from a person who sees deliverance of Abraham's progeny as a violent affair affected through personal acts of vengeance to a person wholly reliant upon God's deliverance. Moses is mostly silent through the first two chapters of Exodus; he is hesitant to speak on God's behalf by himself in Exodus 3 but becomes the primary mouthpiece for God in the discussions with pharaoh. However, there are certain ways in which the Moses well scene and the Exodus act parallel the prior well scene which will now be examined.

### *Comparative Analysis*

A comparative analysis will yield a prospective theory of narrative progression in which certain aspects of Moses' journey are foreshadowed through the antecedent well scene narratives. These points of comparison include the progressive revelation of

---

theophany occurs (Exod 2:15b; 3:2), return and expulsion when miraculous deliverance occurs (Exod 10:11; 11:1; 15:22–27). The historical irony in Hagar's revenge is the Egyptian enslavement of Sarai's descendants (cp. 15:13; 16:6). Also, Hagar's son, who taunts Isaac, foreshadows the Egyptian purge of the Hebrew children (15:13; 21:10; Exod 1:16)." See K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, New American Commentary, vol. 1B (Nashville: B&H, 2005), 179.

identifying the elect progeny of Abraham, the proper form of negotiation for God's deliverers, the role of the deliverer as husband, and the proper employment of physical prowess on the part of a deliverer. The term "deliverer" is employed here since in each of well scenes there is a viable threat of some sort to the progeny of Abraham, and the participant of the well scene delivers the progeny from an untimely demise.

### **Which Wife and Which Seed?**

The first plot comparison begins with the Hagar and Sarai story. As was mentioned above, there is a clash between women that seeks to establish the matriarchal hierarchy within the clan.<sup>72</sup> How this conflict is resolved will have ramifications for the progeny of Abraham, as the elect of the LORD is made known. Where Sarai is constantly affirmed as the mother of nations, Hagar is not promised such inclusion in the Abrahamic promise until she submits to the authority of her earthly master Sarai, the legal wife of Abraham.<sup>73</sup> Hagar is blessed because of her submission. Likewise, by the end of the well scenes, Hagar's future descendants are blessed through their submissive relationship to Abraham's elect progeny through their marriage into Moses' family and their willing inclusion into Israel (Num 10:29, Judg 1:16, 4:11). From beginning to end, the non-elect find safety and blessing from the LORD through their relationship with and their submission to Abraham's elect progeny.

### **How Does One Negotiate God's Promise?**

The next point of comparison comes through the example of negotiation seen clearly in Abraham's servant and Moses.

---

<sup>72</sup> "Sarai attempts to change her own status by changing Hagar's, but when she perceives that she has lost respect as a result of Hagar's pregnancy and attitude, she eagerly tries to shore up the boundaries that Hagar appears to be transgressing" (Fewell and Heard, *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, 116).

<sup>73</sup> Skinner comments, "Hagar is not an ordinary household slave, but the peculiar property of Sarai" (*Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 285).

Abraham's servant had the blessing of watching Abraham intercede with God multiple times, sometimes successfully, and other unsuccessfully. This leads the Servant to learn the value of prayerful dependence upon God for a positive outcome, receiving success through faithful obedience. Isaac, in Genesis 26, and Jacob, in Genesis 29 and 30, did not learn these lessons, but relied upon their own human wisdom, and came up on the short end of negotiations multiple times. Moses had to learn negotiation, as he pled for God to be exempted from service, only to grow up into the ultimate power between the two most powerful entities in the cosmos known at the time, God and pharaoh. By the end of the Exodus event narrative, Moses has come to rely solely on God through prayer, resulting in success as he delivers God's people.

### **What Manner of Husband?**

The third point of comparison likewise contrasts Moses with Jacob and Isaac. Isaac was portrayed as a physically, and eventually emotionally, absent husband who remains home while others accomplish his duties. Jacob does slightly better, portrayed as a present husband who leaves home to find a wife, but returns with four, rightfully doling out blessing, unlike his father who failed in this respect. Moses, however, shows to be the best husband of all as there is no sign that Moses ever had more than one wife at a time. He lovingly protected his wife, bringing her with him to Egypt until it became too dangerous for her to remain (Exod 4:24–26, 18:2). Moses' relationship with Jethro, his father-in-law, was healthier than Isaac's non-existent relationship with Bethuel, or Jacob's tumultuous and co-dependent relationship with Laban. Moses proves himself to be a faithful husband and a good son-in-law in ways that the biblical account hitherto had not mentioned.

### **What is the Proper Employment of Strength?**

The next point of comparison between Moses and the previous narratives shows a progression in the deliverer's employment of strength. Jacob used his strength at the well to impress a girl whom the biblical narrative portrays as unworthy of matriarchy. Moses, however, employs strength twice, both

times to deliver the oppressed from the hands of unworthy shepherds. By the end of the narrative, Moses refuses to use his own strength and instead relies solely upon the LORD to free his people exhorting them by saying, “The LORD will fight for you, so you have only to be silent” (Exod 14:14). Moses proves to be the ultimate strong man before God, defeating a powerful ruler through faith and obedience.

### **The Better Servant**

As the comparison continues, one can see another progression through servitude. The well scenes begin with a faithless servant endangering Abram’s progeny because of the harsh retribution taken on her for her social lapse in judgment, as Hagar attempts to usurp her master. The next scene progresses through a point of comparison when an unnamed servant is faithful to his master and the LORD, and thereby can successfully secure the elect progeny of Abraham by finding a wife for Isaac. Moses, however, is afforded the highest praise as a servant implicitly by being faithful to God to secure the entire nation at the greatest personal threat, so that by the end of the Pentateuch the LORD himself says of Moses, “Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house” (Num 12:6–7). Moses is the servant par excellence.

### **A Better Return**

The final element to be examined is the theme of return. In each instance of a well scene there is an implied and later realized return to the original narrative setting. Hagar returned to Abram and Sarai in submission after the chastisement and promised blessing of God. Abraham’s servant returned successfully to Canaan with a wife for Isaac. Jacob returned to Canaan through a deceptive jailbreak, only to need God’s miraculous provision of protection through two different means. Moses experienced two different returns, one to Egypt as a frightened yet obedient servant who would be empowered through God’s continued presence in his life, and one to Midian, the place of the well and

the attendant Mount Sinai in bold and glorious triumph as the deliverer of God's people.

### Conclusion

Through this brief analysis of pre-Sinaitic well scenes, a standard form has become evident. There is a threat to Abram/Abraham's progeny, establishing a defined conflict, which results in a journey away from home. The protagonist arrives at a well, which is a rising action, and leads to a definable yet secondary conflict. The secondary conflict at the well is resolved, and typically involves a marriage. Afterwards, there is a return to the original location where the journey conflict first arose, and the journey conflict finds its resolution through the deliverance of Abraham's progeny from their original threat.

If this plot line has been established, then the major conflict being described is not at the setting of the well, but at the setting which preceded the well, and the well only serves to identify the deliverer of Abraham's progeny from their immediate danger. In the first scene, the LORD himself is the deliverer of Abram's non-elect seed Ishmael through Hagar's submission to her master. In the second scene, the servant acting on behalf of Isaac shows a character flaw and effectively gaps Isaac, so that the unnamed servant delivers the progeny of Abraham through finding Isaac's wife. Jacob's deliverance is found in his securing of wives, and through them, securing his father-in-law's wealth to buy off his brother's benevolence, delivering his elect children from harm. Moses is identified as the deliverer of those who are oppressed by evil shepherds at the well in Exodus 2.

This deliverance with foreign women by which the non-elect become included through their relationship with Abraham's elect progeny forms an *inclusio* with the Hagar story. That *inclusio* invites the interpreter to see other comparisons between the well scenes, at which point there seems to be a narrative progression leading up to showing Moses as the ultimate deliverer of God's people through his personal character as a husband, his negotiation skills, his servanthood, his tempered use of personal strength, his ability to enfold the non-elect into the covenant blessing, and most importantly his universal deliverance of God's people.

The well scenes ultimately depict one larger polemical and theological motif. The God of Israel has revealed himself in history, to multiple individuals, to be the God who saves Abraham's progeny when they are in danger, just as wells provided life-giving sustainment to shepherds in the Negev. YHWH provides stability for Abraham's descendants from the erratic chaos of turbulent waters figuratively in Haran in a way that the Mesopotamian gods were unable to give to their worshippers figuratively or literally. The LORD also begins to reveal himself in Exodus 2 as the God who provides salvation and prosperity to Abraham's progeny in a way that will ultimately thwart the Nile gods by the conclusion of the Moses well-scene. This conclusion occurs when YHWY splits the Red Sea, giving Abraham's elect progeny deliverance from sure death at the hands of a superior military force. God fulfills his covenant promises to Abraham by being the well that his people can drink from amid a hostile, unforgiving environment as God systematically triumphs over the gods of Israel's neighbors.