

The Biblical Well Encounters: Untangling a *Crux Interpretum*

Conference delivered at the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Jerusalem

Tuesday, February 15, 2022

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This evening's conference addresses a topic that has become a *crux interpretum* in modern biblical studies: in other words, a question which has generated much discussion, but little agreement. The research I will present this evening was published in November 2020 by Mohr-Siebeck in Tübingen under the title *John 4:1–42 and the Biblical Well Encounters: Pentateuchal and Johannine Narrative Reconsidered* in their monograph series *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*.

Numerous studies have analyzed the relationship among biblical texts depicting a woman and a man at a well. These often include the encounters between Rebecca and an anonymous servant of Abraham (Gen 24:1-67), Rachel and Jacob (Gen 29:1-14), Zipporah and her sisters and Moses (Exod 2:15-22), and an anonymous woman of Samaria and Jesus (John 4:1-42). Among these studies, there is little consensus as regards method, terminology, or interpretation, and their conclusions cover a wide spectrum (see Wyckoff, 21–53). Some propose that these narratives are united by individual literary motifs such as betrothal, recognition, or hospitality. Explanations for how John 4 relates to the three Torah texts include allusion, allegory, typology, parody, and simple historical coincidence.

Instead of “Untangling a *Crux Interpretum*,” I would have much preferred to entitle this conference “**Unlocking** a *Crux Interpretum*,” but that would imply that there is one key to unlock this question. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The analysis I have undertaken

suggests that the relationship among the four well encounters in Genesis, Exodus and John does not fall neatly into a single category. What unites them is not one motif, but multiple motifs in a recurring constellation. Furthermore, the Gospel episode's interaction with its pentateuchal predecessors can be called "three-dimensional," inasmuch as it encompasses what literary theorist Gérard Genette labels as intertextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality.

I. Defining the Pattern

It has long been recognized that the scenes at wells in Genesis 24 and 29, Exodus 2, and John 4 share a basic narrative structure. Although details of setting, plot and character vary in each episode, all four recount a journey by a male character to a land depicted as foreign, where he meets a female character at a well, after which she reports this meeting to others who welcome him. An analysis by Robert Culley (41–43) of the three Torah episodes in parallel was popularized by Robert Alter (47–62), who characterizes them as type scenes, borrowing a concept from modern studies of the Greek epics.

The type scene is, of course, a narrative convention by which the plot unfolds under particular circumstances and according to a fixed order (see Ska, 36–38). These occur at crucial junctures in the story, and variations to the set pattern carry significance. Different type scenes can be found throughout classical literature, including some examples which fit the pattern of a well encounter: four in Homer's *Odyssey* (*Od.* 6.110–331; 7.14–82; 10.103–132; 15:415–484), another in Euripides' *Electra* (*El.* 55–431), and one more in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (*Demeter* 98–304).

The narrative pattern shared by the biblical examples is often described in terms of a list of plot elements. This is the criterion used by Culley, Alter, and many others. Nevertheless, a list of plot elements is not the only way to define a recurring type scene such as the well

encounter. Alter (51, 54) himself implicitly suggests another way when he refers to a “fixed constellation of predetermined motifs” which can be deployed differently in each recurrence of a given type scene. “Motif,” however, is a term which can be understood in several different ways. Some essentially equate literary motifs with steps in a plot, while others treat “motif” as largely interchangeable with “theme.” The standby *Glossary of Literary Terms* by Abrams and Harpham defines a motif as “a conspicuous element, such as a type of event, device, reference, or formula which occurs frequently in works of literature” (229). Understood in this broader sense, motifs can surface in a variety of different literary elements, including vocabulary, setting, plot, character traits, and topics of direct speech.

By and large, the idea of a constellation of literary motifs in this sense has not featured in scholarly approaches to the well encounters in Genesis 24 and 29, Exodus 2, and John 4. More often, studies tend to focus on one single motif as the key to their relationship. Proposals include betrothal (e.g., Alter, Bligh, Cahill, Carmichael, Schneiders), journey (e.g., Martin), hospitality (e.g., Arterbury), recognition or “anagnorisis” (e.g., Larsen), and the breaking down of social barriers (e.g., Förster).

In the end, these arguments are not mutually exclusive, and they in turn shed light on other shared motifs. Taking this into consideration, a survey of the four biblical well encounters and their surrounding episodes suggests that a constellation of ten recurring literary motifs can be discerned. They can be labelled as follows: 1) journey, 2) socioethnic barriers, 3) water, 4) work, 5) recognition, 6) worship, 7) announcement, 8) welcome, 9) food, and 10) matrimony and progeny (see Wyckoff, 135–39).

II. Navigating the Constellation of Motifs

This entire constellation of ten motifs can be found in all four biblical well encounters or their surrounding texts, in one form or another. The surrounding texts are normally preceding and/or subsequent episodes in the same narrative sequence. Two of the important surrounding texts, however, are less obvious. The first is Jacob's theophany at Bethel (Gen 28:10–22), which comes immediately before Jacob's arrival at the well. It falls within the context of Jacob's journey, and without it, the motif of worship would be missing. The second example involves Exodus chapter 18. In the book of Exodus, the episodes related to Moses' time in Midian (2:15–4:31; 18:1–27) form a single but disconnected narrative sequence which develops the same story line (see Blum, 153–63). Only in these chapters do Zipporah, Gershom, and Reuel/Jethro appear as characters, and there are textual elements which repeat word for word. Despite occurring many chapters later, 18:1–27 brings many of the motifs from the well encounter, particularly that of worship, to an edifying conclusion.

A review of the four texts (Gen 24:1–67; 29:1–14; Exod 2:15–22; John 4:1–42) illustrates how these ten motifs recur.

1. Journey

All four episodes narrate a journey by the protagonist to a land which is foreign or unfamiliar, and this journey motif provides the framework within which the rest of the episode develops.

- In Genesis 24, Abraham's servant travels from Canaan to Mesopotamia in order to find a spouse for Isaac from among his master's kinsmen.
- Jacob makes the same trip in Genesis 29, ostensibly to also find a bride in the land of his ancestors, but in reality to escape the vengeance of his brother Esau.
- Moses in Exodus 2 avoids Pharaoh's wrath by fleeing from Egypt to Midian.

- John 4 insinuates that Jesus similarly avoids the Pharisees by departing to Galilee from Judea, but the pericope's outcome suggests that "it was necessary for him to pass through Samaria" (John 4:4) in order to win disciples there, adding a missionary connotation to the journey motif.

2. *Socioethnic Barriers*

Now the journey obliges characters in all four well encounters to negotiate the second motif, socioethnic barriers.

- Abraham commands his servant to find a spouse for his son Isaac, for the express purpose of never intermarrying with the Canaanites or abandoning the land of promise.
- Isaac passes on the command of endogamy to Jacob, but the motif gets turned on its head as Jacob's greatest threats come not from foreigners, but from his own brother Esau and uncle Laban.
- Moses in Midian reverses the motif entirely by taking a foreign wife and gaining the patronage of her father, the Midianite priest.
- The Samaritan woman accurately identifies Jesus as someone of Judean ethnicity, lineage, and cult, but this only accentuates the socioethnic barriers and expands their narrative function (see Wardle, 16–20). The historical enmity between these two rival groups who "have nothing to do with one another" (John 4:9) becomes the backdrop against which the entire pericope unfolds.

3. *Water*

This motif is fundamental to the narrative pattern. The physical setting at a well provides the occasion for the encounter and serves as a focal point for much of the action (see Resseguie, 75).

- In Genesis 24, water becomes the criterion for identifying Isaac's future spouse. Abraham's servant waits by the well at the hour when young women come to draw water and chooses Rebecca based on her response to his request for a drink.
- In Genesis 29, Jacob meets his future spouse Rachel at the well. Disregarding the local customs for its use, he opens it by himself and waters all the sheep.
- Exodus 2 portrays a conflict over water rights, with Moses drawing water for Zipporah and her sisters after chasing off the shepherds who had usurped control of the well.
- In John 4, none of the characters ever draw or drink physical water, but the motif is developed metaphorically when Jesus offers "living water." The imagery reminiscent of passages from the prophetic and wisdom books (e.g., Isa 12:3; 58:11; Jer 2:13; 17:13; Ezek 47:1–12; Zech 14:8; Ps 36:10; Prov 10:11; 13:14; 14:27; 16:22; 18:4) is recognizable to the reader but lost on the woman, since Samaritans revere only the Pentateuch as Scripture (see Pummer, 195–96).

4. *Work*

Closely related to the water motif is motif number four, work, which largely involves drawing from the well and watering livestock. In the three Torah texts, the work motif becomes a vehicle for characterization in the form of an extraordinary feat performed singlehandedly by one of the main characters.

- Rebecca shows her initiative and industriousness by providing enough water for Abraham's servant and for all the camels in his caravan.
- Jacob removes the large stone from atop the well and waters all the flocks of sheep, demonstrating strength and virility which foreshadow his years of hard work and his prolific fatherhood.
- Moses is cast as a rescuer from injustice; when shepherds steal the water drawn by a group of women and deny them further access to the well, Moses routs these oppressors and provides water for the maidens and their sheep.

- In the Gospel pericope, the Samaritan woman never draws water or gives Jesus the drink he requests, and no livestock appear apart from a brief reference to Jacob's flocks. Jesus' extraordinary feat is not in physical work, but in knowledge of the woman's past. Instead, the work motif is developed as a metaphor, with Jesus using harvest imagery to describe the shared labor of completing God's work (see Zimmermann, 737–44).

5. *Recognition*

- This motif is integral to the well encounter pattern because ascertaining the identity of key characters—either correctly or incorrectly—is a fundamental element in the plot.
- Genesis 24 narrates the entire process by which the servant recognizes the industrious and assertive Rebecca to be the ideal mate for passive Isaac (see Teugels, 96–100). The caravan's return to Canaan is marked by a scene of mutual recognition between the two spouses at long distance.
- Jacob, upon arriving in Haran alone and unknown in Genesis 29, is regarded with suspicion until he finally clarifies his identity as Rebecca's son.
- Moses in Exodus 2 is ironically mistaken as an Egyptian. His Midianite family only learns his true identity as Israel's liberator much later, in chapter 18, which concludes the Midianite subplot in Exodus.
- John 4 depicts the process by which Jesus is progressively recognized as a Jew, a prophet, the Messiah or Christ, and finally savior of the world, imbuing the recognition motif with the connotation of coming to faith.

6. *Worship*

Worship is a motif not often associated with the well encounter type scene, but it nevertheless figures in all four biblical attestations (see Greenstein, 23–24).

- Abraham's servant prays for divine guidance and gives thanks to God at each step in his quest, and he repeats these prayers in recounting the events to Rebecca's family.
- Jacob does not pray or even mention God when he meets Rachel at the well, but the immediately preceding episode narrates his first theophany at Bethel, where he dreams of heavenly worship, receives a divine promise, erects a shrine, and makes a vow of faithfulness to the Lord.
- Moses' father-in-law Reuel/Jethro is identified as a priest of Midian, but the worship motif features more explicitly in this Midianite subplot's conclusion in Exodus 18, when Reuel worships and offers sacrifices to the God of Israel.
- The Gospel pericope accentuates the motif of worship, developing it as an explicit topic of dialogue. The Samaritan woman identifies extant cultic practice as a source of division, while Jesus explains that God seeks worship "in spirit and truth," which transcends these boundaries.

7. Announcement

In this narrative pattern, the announcement motif calls for the female lead character to go and tell her kin of the protagonist's arrival at the well.

- Rebecca runs to announce the servant's arrival to her family.
- Rachel hastens to do the same when Jacob appears.
- Zipporah and her sisters incongruously neglect to tell their father about Moses, delaying the expected announcement until Reuel questions how they returned home so quickly.
- The Samaritan woman communicates the news of Jesus' arrival not to her household but to her entire city. The invitation to come see a man who might be the Christ adds the connotation of Christian witness and testimony to the announcement motif.

8. *Welcome*

This constellation of motifs also includes the protagonist's welcome and acceptance in the foreign land to which he journeys.

- The anonymous servant of Genesis 24 and his gift-laden caravan are welcomed with every detail of hospitality by Abraham's Mesopotamian kinsmen.
- However, when Jacob arrives in the same locale five chapters later as a lone fugitive, his initial reception by local shepherds at the well is quite cold and standoffish.
- In Exodus 2, the hero's welcome extended to Moses includes food, lodging, and a place in the Midianite priest's household guaranteed by marriage to his daughter and the birth of a son.
- Jesus' gradual acceptance in Samaria begins with the refusal of even a drink of water, but it ends with the Samaritan populace welcoming him en masse and acclaiming him as savior of the world. Thus, the motif of welcome in John 4 carries the additional connotation of theological belief.

9. *Food*

Along with hospitality comes an offer of food, the next motif in the constellation.

- Abraham's servant is invited to eat, but he defers in order to first complete his mission. Only once Rebecca's betrothal has been secured is a meal shared to seal the agreement.
- When Jacob is welcomed by his uncle, the conspicuous absence of any offer of food arouses the reader's suspicions about Laban's sincerity.
- In contrast, as soon as Reuel the Midianite learns of Moses' brave deed on behalf of his daughters, he sends them to invite their rescuer to share food.
- At the well in Samaria, Jesus' disciples invite him to eat, but he refuses. Instead, the food motif is turned into another metaphor: Jesus' food is to do God's will and complete God's work.

10. *Matrimony and Progeny*

None of the well encounters from Homer or Euripides lead to a wedding or childbirth, but in all four biblical examples, this motif is present in some form.

- Rebecca's betrothal to Isaac is recounted in detail in Genesis 24, and a chapter later she gives birth to Esau and Jacob.
- Jacob and Rachel meet at the well in Genesis 29, and in subsequent episodes Jacob marries two wives, acquires two concubines, and fathers twelve sons and a daughter.
- In Exodus 2, marriage to Zipporah and the birth of Gershom liken Moses both to the patriarchs and to his prolific fellow Hebrews in Egypt.
- The plot of John 4 includes no marriages or births; the motif's attestation is limited to the mention of Jacob's sons, the discussion of the woman's husbands, and references in the surrounding passages to the wedding at Cana and to Jesus as bridegroom. There is ample potential for a metaphorical development of the motif, but this is not taken up explicitly in the text and left entirely to the reader.

III. (Re)reading Genesis and Exodus through John:

Although all four biblical well encounters share a recurring narrative pattern and a constellation of motifs, consensus on how the Gospel episode relates to the other three has proven elusive. The three Torah texts reach their resolution in a marriage and the birth of children, while John 4 concludes with a profession of faith. The Johannine well encounter appropriates all ten motifs from its pentateuchal predecessors, but it reconfigures each of them in some way. Socioethnic barriers and worship are accentuated. Water, work, and food are transformed into metaphors. Additional connotations are given to journey, recognition, announcement, and welcome, while matrimony and progeny is left implicit

and ambiguous. To what extent, then, is the exchange between the Samaritan woman and Jesus to be read in light of the similar encounters in Genesis and Exodus?

In antiquity, Origen associated John 4 with the three Torah texts, drawing an analogy on how the soul can be joined to God in spiritual matrimony (*Comm in Io* 13.5–6, 29–33). Ambrose of Milan (*On Abraham* 1.9.88) compared Rebecca’s successful trip to the well with the Samaritan woman’s reluctance to draw or drink from the fount of eternal life. Among modern scholars, opinions vary widely. Some downplay the similarities as a passing allusion to Scripture (e.g., Okure) or as a coincidence of historical events (e.g., Brown, Schnackenburg). Others consider the link essential to interpretation, explaining it as adaptation (e.g., Culpepper, Duke), allegory (e.g., Schneiders, Fehribach), parody (e.g., Eslinger, Botha, Staley), Moses or Jacob typology (e.g., Reim, Neyrey), Christian midrash (e.g., Boismard), or the result of hermeneutical “screens” (e.g., Olsson).

Drawing from the contributions of past scholarship, it can be sustained that the narrative of Jesus in Samaria does interrelate with the three Torah episodes, in several distinct ways. First, it reprises the same type scene pattern as the other three, as already discussed. Secondly, it imitates but adapts three texts that the Gospel’s formulators would have known and revered as Scripture, and in this way it is derived from them. Thirdly, the Johannine pericope contains concrete textual elements from each of the three. In this sense, the relationship can be considered three-dimensional.

Fortunately, there is a theoretical framework for addressing this. Literary theorist Gérard Genette (7–15) refers to relationships between texts in general as “transtextuality,” for which he proposes a taxonomy of different categories. The three distinct dimensions described above happen to correspond to transtextual categories proposed by Genette: architextuality, hypertextuality, and intertextuality (see Wyckoff, 56–60).

Architextuality

Architextuality refers to the bond among texts which share broader modes of expression or belong to the same literary genre (see Genette, 11–12). All four biblical well encounters are therefore bound to one another as examples of the same type scene used as a narrative convention. Not only do they develop the same constellation of ten literary motifs, but they also follow the same basic plot pattern, take place in an analogous setting (i.e., by a well in foreign territory), and present their corresponding cast of characters in the same order (i.e., a male protagonist, shepherds or subordinates, a female lead character, and her kin or compatriots). Therefore, inasmuch as the Johannine pericope interacts with the pattern established by its predecessors, it can be judged against that pattern. Meaning is conveyed by emulating the pattern as well as by variations (such as the multiple maidens in Midian, or the Samaritan woman's marital history) or the absence of expected elements (such as food for Jacob, an announcement about Moses, or a literal wedding or childbirth for Jesus).

Hypertextuality

In hypertextuality, a newer text is related to a previous one by a twofold dynamic, simultaneously imitating it and transforming it according to its own purposes and priorities (see Genette, 11–15). This transformation goes beyond the variations and omissions inherent to a recurring type scene. It represents a genuine reconfiguration of literary elements and a refocusing of themes, or what Harold Attridge (13) describes as “genre bending.” John 4 reconfigures and refocuses the ten motifs proper to a well encounter. Elements from the plot of the Torah episodes such as water, progeny, livestock, marriage, and worship resurface, but as topics of dialogue. New elements are incorporated, such as harvest imagery and references to baptizing and eternal life. The overall dynamic might best be described as a “rereading” or *relecture*, following the work of Jean Zumstein (1996, 397–400), Andreas Dettwiler (188–200) and others. The Johannine rereading of the three Torah episodes and of the pattern itself creates a surplus of meaning which addresses new circumstances and new concerns.

Intertextuality

For Genette (8–9), “intertextuality” is a specific term, denoting the material copresence of literary elements from one text within another. These elements serve as intertextual markers which invite the readers to make associations with other texts. In this way, the texts acquire meaning from one another, and the readers become active participants in determining that meaning (see Kristeva, 144–46).

Due to the type scene pattern they share, the four biblical well encounters exhibit a series of parallels in setting, plot, and characters, as already mentioned (see Wyckoff, 72–92). There is also shared vocabulary. There are nine semantic fields that appear in all four well encounters (i.e., well/spring, drinking, livestock, movement toward, movement away, announcing, father, staying, progeny), and six more that appear in three out of four texts (i.e., drawing water, vessel, eating/food, knowing, seeing, hour/moment). Five Greek lexemes occur in all four texts (i.e., ἀκούω, ἔρχομαι, πατήρ, υἱός, φρέαρ), along with six more in three out of four (i.e., ἀναγγέλλω, ἀντλέω, ἀπέρχομαι, γινώσκω, ἐσθίω, λαλέω). Most of the biblical occurrences of the verb ἀντλέω (“to draw water”) and the noun ὕδρια (“water jar”) occur in these four passages.

There are also specific elements that John 4 shares with each individual Torah episode (see Wyckoff, 92–106):

- Comparing with Genesis 24, Abraham’s servant and Jesus both initiate the encounter with a request for a drink (Gen 24:17; John 4:7), are characterized as givers of gifts (Gen 24:10, 22, 30, 47, 53; John 4:10–14), and turn down food to give priority to their mission (Gen 24:33; John 4:32). The principal characters are identified at parallel key moments in both plots using the same two phrases: “I am” (ἐγώ εἰμι, Gen 24:34; John 4:26) and “this is” (οὗτός ἐστιν, Gen 24:65; John 4:42).
- Comparing with Genesis 29, Jacob and Jesus both arrive at the well at about midday (Gen 29:7; John 4:6); their initial cold reception (Gen 29:4–8; John 4:7–12) improves

after they perform their extraordinary feats (Gen 29:10; John 4:17–18). The Gospel episode mentions Jacob by name three times (John 4:5, 6, 12) and attributes the well in Samaria to him (vv. 6, 12), suggesting an association with the only well mentioned in Jacob's entire story (in Gen 29:2, 3, 8, 10).

- Comparing with Exodus 2, Moses flees when Pharaoh hears what he has done, and arriving in Midian, he sits on the well (Exod 2:15). Similarly, Jesus departs when the Pharisees hear what he was doing, and arriving in Samaria, he sits on the well (John 4:1, 3, 5–6).

IV. Conclusions

Taking all these factors into consideration, it can first of all be said that the relationship among the biblical well encounters is indeed complex. It draws in four texts from diverse literary contexts which nevertheless share a narrative convention. This convention involves a constellation of ten distinct literary motifs, some of which are not evident until preceding and subsequent episodes are taken into consideration (e.g., Gen 28:11-22; Exod 18:1-27). The Gospel pericope's appropriation of this constellation suggests that its formulators knew the Torah episodes and held them in high regard, but were also willing to adapt and refocus them. The Gospel pericope acquires meaning from those Torah episodes, and vice versa. Scripture is reread in light of the formulators' (and the readers') knowledge of Jesus, and that knowledge of Jesus is reread in light of Scripture. This dynamic is not only reciprocal, but three-dimensional, squarely straddling the distinctions between architextuality, hypertextuality, and intertextuality.

Secondly, it follows, then, that this textual relationship resists interpretation according to any single motif, trope, or category. Each of the ten motifs contributes to the overall meaning, but somewhat differently in each episode, and without any one motif providing the key to interpreting the others. All ten are reconfigured in the Gospel pericope, but by

four distinct means: connotation, metaphor, accentuation, or ambiguity. The three-dimensional relation is not entirely explicable by inter-, hyper-, or architextuality alone. All this makes for a rather untidy *mélange* of elements for readers to consider, offering them attractive avenues for reflection but compelling them to look beyond one-dimensional solutions.

Thirdly, readers are therefore guided into assuming an active role in determining these texts' meaning. Literary parallels (including similarities as well as adaptations or even opposites) invite readers to simultaneously engage the linear movement of each well encounter's narrative along with an ongoing, oblique exchange with the other three (see Wyckoff, 263–64; Zumstein 2008, 134). Layers of meaning are added to each passage according to the readers' familiarity with the others. The ability to synthesize associations becomes a linchpin of the interpretive process. Each of the episodes is coherent and compelling enough to be read independently of these associations, but to do so is to sacrifice a wealth of meaning.

In the end, the well encounter as such proves to be an effective narrative strategy for advancing diverse themes and objectives. In Gen 24:1-67 and 29:1-14, this type scene illustrates the divine guidance of events toward the fulfillment of divine promises by depicting the patriarchs encountering a wider world, overcoming obstacles, revealing their character, and finding a suitable spouse in order to ensure an heir. The pattern's use in Exod 2:15-22 places less emphasis on betrothal and more on the characterization of Moses, underscoring continuity with the patriarchs and foreshadowing his role in events to come. In John 4:1-42, the pattern has been reoriented in order to illustrate a mission which reunites the estranged children of Israel and goes beyond, challenging Jesus' followers to overcome social barriers, understand the human dynamics of the faith process, and embrace the religious patrimony of Judaism.

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