

The wells of salvation

by Douglas E. Cox

What land is host of the “wells of salvation”? Isaiah wrote:

Isaiah 12:1-3

In that day you will say:
“I will praise you, LORD.
Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.
Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.
The LORD, the LORD himself,
is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.”
With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

A literal well is dug into the ground, often through bedrock. The metaphor of a well suggests there are things corresponding to both land, and water. What are they? The land promises that God gave to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, recorded in Genesis, had a spiritual intent and purpose. Although they were each promised the land, none obtained possession of it. God referred to it as “the land wherein thou art a stranger.”

Genesis 17:8

And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

The law of Moses said the land could not be permanently sold, as it belonged to God. “The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine, for ye are strangers and sojourners with me.” [Leviticus 25:23]

The author of Hebrews said of the patriarchs, “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” [Hebrews 11:13] They were strangers and pilgrims in the land. Hebrews 11:16 says, “now they desire a better country.”

The spiritual purpose connected with the land promise is shown in the way God called Abram, Genesis 12:7. Instead of saying “go dwell in the land of Canaan,” he said, leave your father’s house, and go “unto a land that I will show thee.” There was something God intended to reveal about the land; this was not merely its location.

The land was presented and described to Abram as a desirable, glorious inheritance. He would possess it forever, along with all his seed, who would also possess it. And there would be so many descendants, such a great multitude, they could not be numbered. How would they all fit in a land of such a limited area? Would there be enough water for them all? Could the land support such a huge population?

Genesis 13:14-17

And the LORD said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee.

In Genesis, the land promise is repeated several times. [Genesis 15:7, 18-21; 17:8]

When they lived in the land, the patriarchs were involved in digging wells. One of Abraham's wells was forcibly taken away by the servants of Abimelech, king of Gerar. Abraham reproved Abimelech for it, they made a covenant to witness that the well had been dug by Abraham. [Genesis 21:30]

One of Abraham's wells was stopped up by the Philistines after Abraham's death. Isaac dug it out again. Much of the information we have about the life of Isaac relates to the digging of wells, and strife that arose from it. [Genesis 26:18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 32]

Jacob met his cousin Rachel at a well. He rolled away the stone that covered it, so she could water her father's flock. [Genesis 29:1-12] Eventually Rachel became his bride.

In John 4:12, Jacob is also said to have dug a well at the Samaritan city of Sychar, which was probably ancient Bethel. Jesus met a woman of Samaria here, and spoke to her about living water. He said, "whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." [John 4:14]

The story of Achsah the daughter of Caleb is told in Joshua 15:16-19, and in Judges 1:12-15. Jill Hammer outlined the symbolism in the story. She wrote: [1]

In Judges 1, Achsah marries after a fairy-tale-like episode in which her father promises her to the man who conquers the city of Kiriat-Sefer (City of the Book!). Achsah demands as her dowry a land with "springs of water." . . . The story of Achsah and Otniel, which is told very briefly in Joshua and Judges, is clearly of the genre of fairy tale. The father promises his daughter to the man who conquers a certain city, just as legendary kings promise their daughters to the slayers of dragons, healers of diseases, solvers of riddles. Yet after the young hero receives his bride, she herself demands a gift of her father. The object of the story, the passive "princess," turns out to be an active player after all. The gift she asks for is water: the most obvious symbol of life in a desert environment. Where her father has concerned himself with war, Achsah concerns herself with the continuation of life and civilization.

The Rabbis felt the mythic undertones of this passage. The Talmud claims that Caleb's gift of "upper" and "lower" springs is a metaphor. It means that Caleb gave Achsah Torah learning as well as physical sustenance. The Talmud also ascribes spiritual gifts to Otniel: Otniel restores many of the teachings of Moses that the Israelites have

forgotten (BT Terumah 16a). Otniel and Achsah are true conquerors of the City of the Book.

In Jeremiah 2:11-13, God is called "the fountain of living waters." The people of Israel had forsaken God, and hewed out cisterns instead, that could not hold any water.

Joel said a fountain will come from the house of the Lord, and it will water the valley of Shittim. The fountain is spiritual and metaphorical; the same verse says mountains will drop down new wine, and hills will flow with milk. [Joel 3:18]

Zechariah wrote of a fountain that cleanses from sin. [Zechariah 13:1]

Living water flows from Jerusalem, in Zechariah 14:8. This is a metaphor of the gospel going forth from the church, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Jesus said he is the source of the living water, which represents the Spirit.

John 7:37-39

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

I suggest, the *land* which contains the wells of salvation is the scriptures. The stories about the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the wells in the land set the scene for revealing the gospel of our salvation. The Church's *promised land* consists not of a literal, earthly Canaan; instead, it is a *heavenly country*, that represents invisible things, such as the promise of Jesus that the Spirit will guide the Church into *all truth*. "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come." [John 16:13] All the saints will inherit that land.

References

1. Jill Hammer. *Sisters at Sinai: new tales of biblical women* . Jewish Publication Society, 2004. p. 276.