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WHY SHE RAN

HEBREW BIBLE WELL SYMBOLISM IN THE PROTEVANGELIUM OF JAMES 11.1–4

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Abstract: There are aspects of the annunciation scene—as portrayed in the Protevangelium of James—which have not yet been examined by modern scholars. These issues are important when relating to the history of well symbolism in the Hebrew Bible, which symbolism continued in force through the Second Temple period. This paper examines the symbolism of wells, fertility, and marriage and how the author of the Protevangelium of James consciously knew about this symbolism and wrote his narrative in a way that distanced Mary, the mother of Jesus, from any ideas saying that she was less than virginal.

“**And she took her water jar and went out to fill it with water.** Suddenly there was a voice saying to her, ‘Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.’ Mary began looking around, both right and left, to see where the voice was coming from. **She became terrified and went home.** After putting the **water jar** down and taking up the purple thread, she sat down on her chair and began to spin.”¹

Some of the most famous Hebrew Bible betrothal scenes happened at a well, such as those depicting Abraham’s servant and Rebekah (Gen 24), Jacob and Rachel (Gen 29), and Moses and Zipporah (Exod 2). Typically, ancient texts reflected a

1. The Protevangelium of James 11.1–4, emphasis added. All translations from the Protevangelium of James come from Ronald Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1995), 51–53.

masculine psychology and perspective.² However, these encounters with strange men, which typically changed the women's lives, may have been frightening for the women involved. The author of the Protevangelium of James seems to have used these themes of betrothal and fear in his retelling of the annunciation. By interweaving these themes, he was able to enhance his theme of Mary's exceptional purity and virginity by setting Gabriel's first words to Mary when she was on her way to draw water, presumably at a well.³ Furthermore, when the author depicts Mary hurrying home after hearing the disembodied voice, he implies that she is running away from the imagery of marriage and sexuality that colors biblical well scenes.

THE PROTEVANGELIUM OF JAMES

The Protevangelium of James is thus labeled due to its claim of being an account that occurred before the formal evangelism of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. Other names it has received are *Birth of Mary*, *Revelation of James*—credited to the epilogue of the writing—and *The Book of James* by Origen in the third century.⁴ “James” seems to refer to James the brother of Jesus, or James the Less. But while the Protevangelium of James claims to be written by James, most scholars assume it is a pseudonymous writing that dates to the latter half of the second century or the early third century.⁵ But while things such as author, dating, genre, and provenance are debated, championing Mary's purity and virginity appears to be the author's main goal.⁶ The canonical accounts also emphasize that Mary was a virgin, but the Protevangelium of James seems to be concerned with Mary's perpetual virginity, unlike the traditional infancy narratives, which only assert that Mary was a virgin before and during her pregnancy because of theological concerns surrounding

2. While the meeting in Gen 24 has Rebekah as “actor” as opposed to someone who is “acted upon,” the story still is told from the male perspective of Abraham's servant. The ratio of male/female action in these stories has previously been explored in Esther Fuchs, “Structure and Patriarchal Functions in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scene: Some Preliminary Notes,” *JFSR* 3.1 (1987): 7–13.

3. While the Protevangelium of James does not specifically say the word “well,” the text seems to imply that Mary was on her way to a well or spring to fill her water jug (Prot. Jas. 11.1). Furthermore, many scholars, when describing the scene, describe it as “The Annunciation at the Well” Cf. David R. Carlidge and J. Keith Elliot, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London: Routledge, 2001), 79.

4. Origen, *Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei*, 10.17.

5. A more conservative dating is 170–250 CE, as espoused in Paul Foster, “The Protevangelium of James,” in *The Non-Canonical Gospels*, ed. Paul Foster (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 110–53, here 113. However, some suggest the earlier dating of 150–200 CE, such as John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), 212; and Hock, *Infancy Gospels*, 12.

6. Foster, “Protevangelium,” 117. Hock, *Infancy Gospels*, 14–15.

Jesus's birth.⁷ This might be in response to criticisms of Mary, which asserted that she was impregnated by a Roman soldier and that she was a poor girl who needed to make her livelihood by spinning.⁸ A prime example of these rumors is in Celsus's *True Doctrine*. While the Protevangelium of James may seem like an apologetic in response to Celsus's work, Ronald Hock reminds us that Celsus was far from being unique in his opinions.⁹ Such rumors could explain why the Protevangelium of James is packed with imagery of purity and perfections, such as Mary taking seven steps during her first year (Prot. Jas. 6.2) and being fed by the hand of an angel (Prot. Jas. 10.1). In addition to implicit commentaries on her purity, explicit observations on her virginity are made in the Protevangelium of James—for example, when examined by Salome after giving birth, Mary was found to still be a virgin (Prot. Jas. 19–20). Scholars such as Pieter W. van der Horst and Lily C. Vuong have expounded on this commentary on Mary's purity in the Protevangelium of James extensively.¹⁰

The themes of the Protevangelium of James seem to be clear to scholars, but issues of authorship and cultural influences are less obvious. It is assumed that the author of the Protevangelium of James came from a Jewish background due to his extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, specifically the Septuagint (LXX). This is seen by similarities in narrative and, at times, explicit citations from the text.¹¹ The names of Mary's parents, for example, seem to be taken directly from the LXX, as Joachim, a rich man, is found in Sus 4, and "Anna" is the Greek rendition of the Hebrew name "Hannah" from 1 Sam 2.¹² The similarities between Anna and Hannah have been explored by Paul Foster, who notes that not only are the names similar, but Anna's songs of lament and praise concerning her barrenness and pregnancy mirrors Hannah's from 1 Sam 2.¹³ Additionally, the annunciation to Mary in the Protevangelium of James follows a pattern of annunciation in the Hebrew Bible,¹⁴ which prepares the reader for the birth of a character who will

7. W. S. Vorster, "The Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus in the Protevangelium of James," in *A South African Perspective on the New Testament*, ed. Jacobus H. Petzer and Patrick J. Hartin (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 33–53, here 46–47.

8. Foster, "Protevangelium," 113.

9. Hock, *Infancy Gospels*, 12.

10. Pieter W. van der Horst, "Sex, Birth, Purity and Asceticism in the *Protevangelium Jacobi*," *Neot* 28.3 (1994): 205–18. See also Lily C. Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*, WUNT 358 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

11. For examples of explicit citations from the LXX text, see Hock, *Infancy Gospels*, 21–22.

12. Hock, *Infancy Gospels*, 10.

13. Foster, "Protevangelium," 116.

14. Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (London: Chapman, 1977), 156.

play an important role in “salvation history.”¹⁵ This pattern was followed for numerous Hebrew Bible figures, such as Ishmael, Isaac, and Samson.¹⁶

While it seems clear that the author had strong ties to the Jewish scriptures—specifically the Greek translation—many have argued that he also was influenced by the rising Christian community, its texts, and other culturally significant writings during his time. The Protevangelium of James relies heavily on the canonical infancy narratives, although the author feels secure deviating from them.¹⁷ For example, the Protevangelium of James takes the visitation of the magi scene almost directly from Matt 2, but when Herod begins slaughtering the innocents, Mary simply wraps Jesus in swaddling clothes and hides him in the manger instead of running to Egypt.¹⁸ The Protevangelium of James also has many phrases that mimic those from the canonical Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and 1 Peter.¹⁹ Ronald Hock argues that the Protevangelium of James was also influenced by Greek romances, such as Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*, which includes a scene where Chloe’s mother encourages her to stay inside and spin. He then asserts that this explains why Mary ran away from the well to her spindle and distaff when she hears a strange male voice, since spinning was a more virtuous activity.²⁰ Vuong furthers this assertion when she places Prot. Jas. 11.1–4 in the cultural context of concern for protecting a maiden’s virginity from “rape, seduction, and the loss of one’s virginity.”²¹

Thus far we have seen that scholarship has agreed on Mary’s purity and virginity as the central theme of the Protevangelium of James. The author of the Protevangelium establishes this theme by comparing Mary to virtuous characters from the Hebrew Bible and by presenting her as respectable in Prot. Jas. 11.1–4, where she runs home to spin when she hears the disembodied male voice. However, little scholarship has been done concerning where she was running *from*. Yes, she left the scene because she heard a male voice, but because of how carefully the author of the Protevangelium of James uses Hebrew Bible stories and symbolism, it is not unreasonable to deduce that the author set Prot. Jas. 11.1–2 near a well so that Mary could escape the imagery of marriage and

15. Raymond Brown et al., ed., *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 114.

16. Vorster, “Annunciation,” 43–44. Cf. Gen 16:10–12; 18:12–14; Judg 13:2.

17. Hock, *Infancy Gospels*, 5–6.

18. Prot. Jas. 22.3–4.

19. Hock, *Infancy Gospels*, 22.

20. Hock, *Infancy Gospels*, 25–27. For further reading on spinning as a respectable activity for a young woman and further reception by the Christian community of Mary spinning during the annunciation, see Catherine Gines Taylor, *Allotting the Scarlet and the Purple: Late Antique Images of the Virgin Annunciate Spinning* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

21. Vuong, *Gender and Purity*, 163–64.

sexuality (which colors biblical well scenes) and run to a setting that was deemed more virtuous.

HEBREW BIBLE WELL SYMBOLISM

Well imagery, including the act of drawing water from wells or fountains, is a common symbol for fertility, women, marriage, and sexuality in the Hebrew Bible. It is especially potent throughout the Hebrew Bible's betrothal type-scenes in the Torah and in the poetry of the Ketuvim. Furthermore, we can see that this symbolism surrounding wells and water-drawing imagery was carried over to the New Testament, and arguably, the Protevangelium of James.

Betrothal Type-Scenes

A biblical type-scene is a literary device observed in the Hebrew Bible that links stories together by setting the characters in similar scenes.²² Specifically, betrothal type-scenes connect the meetings of Abraham's servant and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Zipporah by having all three couples meet at wells while the woman is on her way to draw water, having the man meet her family, and having a betrothal take place.

The first of the betrothal type-scenes is the narrative that results in Isaac marrying Rebekah. It is also the longest, most detailed, and most repetitive of the betrothal type-scenes. In Gen 24, Abraham's servant is searching for a wife for Isaac and in order to find her, he asks God to give him a sign that if he asks the young woman who is to marry Isaac for water, that she will offer to give water to his camels as well. When the servant goes to the well, Rebekah comes and draws him water exactly as the sign dictates. He then gives her jewelry and asks to see her family to make the request for her to marry Isaac. The servant repeats the details of the signs to her family, and while the family consents, it ultimately is Rebekah's decision to marry Isaac. All of the betrothal type-scenes follow this narrative's core structure: Man goes to a well, a woman enters the scene to draw water, the man goes home with her to meet her family, and the meeting results in betrothal.

Thus, the story of Rachel and Jacob follows this essential pattern but includes more focus on Jacob's actions as opposed to Gen 24, where the focus is on Rebekah's actions and divine intervention. In Gen 29 Jacob goes to the well, Rachel comes to water her father's flock, and upon learning that Rachel is his cousin, he kisses her and goes to meet her family. Jacob's story, of course, ends up

22. Lyle Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well: Jesus, the Reader, and Reader-Response Criticism," *Literature and Theology* 1.2 (1987): 167–83. See also the chapter titled "Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention" in Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 55–78.

being more complicated than it was for Isaac, but even though Jacob is required to work for Laban for seven years before he can marry his bride, a betrothal is still arranged as part of the betrothal type-scene.

The betrothal type-scene that leads to Moses's and Zipporah's marriage is one of the least detailed and contains almost no information about Zipporah. In Exod 2, after fleeing from Egypt, Moses sits by a well. Seven sisters enter the scene and draw water, when Moses rises to defend them from shepherds who are trying to drive the sisters' flocks away. Moses then goes to meet the sisters' father and then becomes betrothed to Zipporah. Exodus 2 is completely focused on the character of Moses, and Zipporah seems to be a bit of an afterthought as compared with Gen 24, where most of the focus is on Rebekah and her actions, and with Gen 29, where even though Jacob is the main actor, he first chooses Rachel and then goes to her father for permission to marry her. Moses's marriage to Zipporah is not written as if it is important to the author or the story. The marriage serves more to connect Moses and Reuel, and tie them together as father and son-in-law. Esther Fuchs uses these stories to argue that as time progressed, the authors of the Hebrew Bible became less concerned about women and their choices, and the focus shifted entirely to the men of the Bible.²³ In turn, as the focus of betrothal type-scenes changed from women to men, the imagery associated with wells became less associated with fertility, female creation, and sexuality, to become associated purely with marriage and women belonging to men.

One of the effects of type-scenes is that they set a precedent for successive biblical narratives. Thus, if a biblical author decided to use the elements of a betrothal type-scene, the audience could guess that something about marriage would follow. One example of this is in the story of Ruth. In Ruth 2, after returning with her mother-in-law to Bethlehem, Ruth goes to the fields to gather leftover wheat. When Boaz comes to tell Ruth that she is welcome to do so, he also tells her that there is a well nearby and that she can go draw water from it when she needs to. Alter argues that the allusion to the betrothal type-scenes in Genesis and Exodus is used as a literary device to make the reader think of marriage when Boaz tells Ruth about the well.²⁴ If the author of Ruth is truly alluding to betrothal type-scenes, Ruth is likened more to Rebekah, because Ruth also acts to choose her husband. Or, if the audience, at the time Ruth was written, was accustomed to the dilution of well imagery so that it implied focus on only men, Ruth choosing her own destiny could be seen as well-written irony.

23. Fuchs, "Structure and Patriarchal Functions," 7–13.

24. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 61.

The placement of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at a well in John 4 could also be an ironic allusion. While Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman does not conclude in a literal betrothal, the discussion of her marital history at a well alludes to the symbol of betrothal in the Hebrew Bible. Scholars have tied the conversation from John 4 with the betrothal type-scenes. One scholar, Lyle Eslinger, argues that John 4 directly parallels Hebrew Bible betrothals in order to influence the reader to find marriage symbolism in the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.²⁵ Eslinger then further associates John 4 with the double entendre wells and water imagery provide in the Hebrew Bible.²⁶ Ellen Aitken also argues that John 4 references the meeting of Rachel and Jacob. She does this by arguing nine main details, including the following: the time of the meeting is high noon, the man has knowledge of the woman previous to the encounter, and a "revelatory statement is uttered," referencing when Jacob tells Rachel he knows who she is and when the Samaritan woman says that the Messiah has come.²⁷ This encounter and its relationship to betrothal type-scenes is significant because it implies that the imagery concerning wells, water drawing, and this type of meeting at wells continued from the time Genesis was written to the Second Temple period.

Further Symbolism

Wells are used in the Hebrew Bible not only as physical places, but also as symbols, specifically symbols of fertility, life, and women. The Hebrew Bible uses wells to symbolize these things because wells were a well-understood symbol during that time period, as Carole Fontaine explains in her article "Visual Metaphors and Proverbs 5:15–20."²⁸ Fontaine uses the examples of "mother-goddess jars," sturdy jars for carrying something heavy (presumably water), decorated with breasts and an inverted triangle, traditionally accepted as depicting female genitalia, to show that water was traditionally associated with women, especially potable water used to maintain life.²⁹ These water and well metaphors are explicit in Prov 5:15–18:

25. Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well," 168–69.

26. Eslinger, "The Wooing of the Woman at the Well," 169–72.

27. Ellen B. Aitken, "At the Well of Living Water: Jacob Traditions in John 4," in *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity: Studies in Language and Tradition*, ed. Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 348.

28. Carole R. Fontaine, "Visual Metaphors and Proverbs 5:15–20: Some Archaeological Reflections on Gendered Iconography," in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Ronald L. Troxel, Kelvin G. Friebel, and Dennis Robert Magary (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 185–202.

29. Fontaine, "Visual Metaphors," 190–92.

Drink water out of thine own cistern,
And running waters out of thine own well.

Let thy fountains be dispersed abroad,
And rivers of waters in the streets.

Let them be only thine own,
And not strangers' with thee.

Let thy fountain be blessed:
And rejoice with the wife of thy youth.³⁰

Song of Solomon 4:12–15 also uses well imagery as the author compares “my sister, my spouse” to “a well of living waters,” and a well that is “shut up” and “sealed.” Both passages not only compare the wife to a well, but they include imagery of containment. Fontaine argues that the authors of the Hebrew Bible differed from the rest of the ancient Near East because of this idea of containment.³¹ Most of the ancient Near East had artifacts such as the “mother-goddess jars” and creation legends that include “water-women,” like Tiamat, who are unbridled and are constantly creating. The imagery associated with women in the Hebrew Bible, in contrast, appears to control these “natural” passions of women and place the responsibility of “shutting them up” or “containing” them upon their husbands.

The idea of water equaling fertility is also mentioned by the author of the Protevangelium of James himself. In Prot. Jas. 2–3, Anna—who would become the mother of Mary—laments that she has not and cannot bear children, by stating that she is not like the “fruitful waters” (Prot. Jas. 3.2). This part of her lament differs from the previously discussed parallel to Hannah’s prayer in 1 Sam 1–2 because Hannah did not include water imagery.³² Therefore, if the author of the Protevangelium of James added this imagery of “fruitful waters” to Anna’s lament, there is good reason to believe that he understood the link between water and fertility.

CONCLUSION: APPLYING WELL SYMBOLISM TO THE ANNUNCIATION IN THE PROTEVANGELIUM OF JAMES

As we can see, there is an abundance of marriage and sexuality symbolism imposed upon wells and water imagery throughout the Hebrew Bible, and there is evidence that this symbolism carried over into the first centuries CE—as can

30. All translations of the biblical text are from the King James Version.

31. Fontaine, “Visual Metaphors,” 200.

32. Foster, “Protevangelium,” 116.

be seen by well symbolism used in John 4 and terms such as “fruitful waters” within the Protevangelium of James. Because of these two facts, it would be naive to assume that the author of the Protevangelium of James was not aware of the marriage and sexuality symbolism surrounding well and water imagery. This, along with the knowledge of how carefully this author chose details from the lives of Mary and Jesus to emphasize Mary’s virginal purity, creates a purposeful dichotomy between Mary’s perpetual virginity and rumors of Jesus’s illegitimacy—such as those stated in Celsus’s *True Doctrine*. This dichotomy is represented by two different actions, Mary’s virginity by her spinning the veil of the temple, and imagery of marriage and sexuality through the act of her drawing water—as seen in the Hebrew Bible.

Because of this rhetorical device, it is likely that the author of the Protevangelium of James intentionally began the annunciation scene with Mary going to draw water from a well or fountain to remind readers of the marriage and sexuality imagery associated with water in the Hebrew Bible. Likewise, in keeping with his theme of honoring Mary’s exceptional and impossible purity, the author depicts Mary as leaving the well—figuratively saying that she is running away from the symbolism associated with water and wells—and shows her returning home and spinning, which is a place and activity deemed much more maidenly and virtuous.