

Desert travel required one's passage from oasis to oasis if one were to survive.

The Bible says Abraham, the ancestor of the Israelites, came from a place called Haran to the north of Syria, located indeed by scholars within the modern borders of Turkey -- a long way from the current settlement of Abraham's Jewish and Arab descendants in Israel/Palestine today.

Also according to the Bible, Abraham apparently missed the extended family he had left behind in Haran and, wanting his only son Isaac to retain a link to those relatives, he sent a servant with gifts back to Haran to get Isaac a wife from among his cousins. And so we find in the Book of Genesis a story about a wellspring -- like the one in today's Cycle A Gospel reading.

Abraham's servant eventually arrives near Abraham's old ancestral region -- thirsty - and his camels too! The women of the town are gathered near the well and Abraham's servant thinks, if he asks one of them: *Please lower your jug, that I may drink*, and she answers, *Drink, and I will water your camels, too*, that will prove her to be Isaac's future wife!

So what happens? A girl named Rebekah (a beauty if there ever was one) comes to the wellspring and fills her jug. The servant stops her and makes his magic request: *Please give me a sip of water from your jug*. She does so and adds, *I will draw water for your camels as well*. So there she was! The future and related bride of Isaac! Her reward: a costly gold nose-ring and two gold bracelets.

But that's not all. This very Rebekah, later married to Isaac, sends her *own son Jacob* off on the same journey to distant old relatives to get a wife. And where does he pause? By a well covered with a huge stone. He learns that a cousin named Rachel frequently stops at this well -- which she does at this moment. Her presence energizes Jacob. He flexes his muscles, removes the huge stone cover from the well and reveals his relationship -- and so we are now on our way to the marriage of Jacob and Rachel (and his marriage to her sister Leah as part of the deal) -- thereby begetting the twelve patriarchal ancestors of the Israelite nation.

What do these stories tell us beyond whatever historical value they have? That we too have to journey far often through parched times, develop a kind of radical thirst for more than a paycheck, find some place in the wasteland around us that offers us access to deeper dimensions of understanding that can quench our thirst. We also have to be open to chance moments -- to the *chance* arrival of a Rebekah or a Rachel in our lives (whatever they may signify).

Or (as in John's Gospel about a well in Samaria) be open to the chance arrival of a Jesus that not only asks us for a drink but offers *to turn each of us into a wellspring, a source of deep understanding, of refreshment and profound grace that can irrigate the world all around us* -- which by the way is what makes John's version of this wellspring theme somewhat more insightful than the two in Genesis.

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