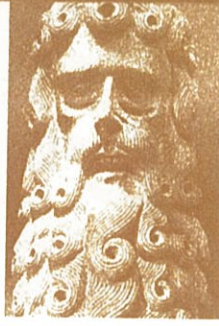


A Personal Encounter with the Myths of Genesis



# OUR FATHERS' WELLS

*"A truly superb book,  
one that stretches the mind  
and nourishes the soul."  
- Rabbi Harold S. Kushner*

PETER PITZELE

## CONCLUSION

### *In My End Is My Beginning*

There are two kinds of memory. The first is the memory each person has of what happened to him or to her, what each saw personally, felt, did, or suffered in dreams and in waking life. Imperfect, edited by time and pain, of different power in different people, this is the personal memory; it is unique, and it reminds us that each of us is unique and distinct and alone. Out of the raw materials of this personal memory each of us can compose a significant part of the story of who we are.

But it is not the whole story. A second kind of memory is, paradoxically, the memory of what did not happen directly to us. Culture is the memory of what did not happen to us. This is the memory of family stories that we may have heard at our grandfather's knee, images in films, tales in books, events in history. Our memories are crammed with such materials out of which we can form a larger story about who we are. People who come out of a continuous familial or ethnic tradition possess a self that is intimately connected to other selves as part of a family tree or a tribal community. Such people are linked not only to the ancestors, they are linked to the figures of Dreamtime; such people recognize the validity and relevance for themselves of those experiences that occurred to others in a distant, even in a mythic, past. The past is "theirs" in a very real sense. For such people memory has a coherent transpersonal dimension: The pain of a distant ancestor or a wounded hero may bring tears as quickly as the pain of a remembered childhood wound.

Part of what it means to me to be a Jew is to develop this second memory and to develop it in relation to the history and the myth-theology of a Jewish tradition. The development of this Jewish memory is coming relatively late in my life. It is an acquisition, and as such it is undertaken at least in part with

some intention. It is a cultivation, a choice made in terms of what I take time to learn, what I will read, where I will go, whom I will talk to and about what things, how I will think about my spiritual life, how I will pray. To me to be a Jew means to explore the tradition of Judaism not as an academic field, not as an intellectual exercise, but as a way of living, a way of life. That tradition is vast, branching out as it does over more than three thousand years of continuous history. For any one person it is inexhaustible not only in its span but in its depth. Various mystical schools of thought have given the stories and practices of the Jewish tradition a spiritual dimension as rich and complex as any mystical tradition I have ever heard of or encountered. One can practice Jewish spirituality as one can practice Buddhist meditation: for a lifetime. And during that lifetime one's awareness of God or self or soul—of Imagination—becomes increasingly profound.

Whatever else my book might be in its public persona, it has been for me the intimate act of cultivating my Jewish soul, a practice in the spiritual sense. It has involved my learning the sources and wrestling with the paradoxes of a patriarchal myth-theology. In writing this book I have been facing what is restrictive and narrow in that tradition and struggling to tolerate the strictures, to understand their hidden truths, and to connect them to my life. I have also been glorying in what is great and beautiful in this patriarchal legacy.

As a student of literature I have not come to Genesis ignorant of the values and powers of great literature, and I know Genesis to be a work of literature as great as anything I have read. One way one knows the sublime in literature is to sense the inexhaustible. I have sensed that in writing about this book. My approach, conclusions, and perspectives only remind me in the end of how much more there is to say about and to see in Genesis. It is a great and inexhaustible teacher. What I have learned I have drawn together in this book. That learning is only a beginning.

That beginning had its genesis ten years ago. It began with colleagues at Four Winds Hospital as we gathered once a week for an hour over lunch to read Genesis slowly together from start to finish. Gradually my interest in Genesis deepened and expanded beyond our group; I began to explore it psychodramatically. Then I came to this writing and this wrestling, which pushed me much further in the direction of commitment and study.

Much of what I have had to say here I discovered as I said it, and I am not the same man I was when I began. The writing itself has deepened my connection to my obscure and ancient Jewish roots. My soul has found images and figures in these tales of the fathers through which to appropriate to itself some of the wisdom the old myths contain. I have, to use my own paradigm, entered

the ancestral Dreamtime, for in many senses I left my own native land and father's house to travel in the biblical landscape. I have become something of a stranger to myself in fulfilling the call to write this book.

The stories and interpretations in this book are not only my own. Though I have made no direct attributions, many of the insights and ideas in this book stem from my work with people who have played out the myths in psychodramatic form. That play, in which the authority of the pulpit or the seminary was held in abeyance, was the work of siblings. In the shared arena of our imaginative play each one of us was an equal to the other. Our groups were pluralistic and thrived on our differences. Indeed, without those differences, there would have been no diversity, none of the clash and humor of rivaling voices, none of the wrestling that exercised our souls.

When I began, I set out to think about patriarchy in ways that were both personal and mythological. I wanted to look past contemporary degradations of patriarchy and to search for the sources of soul-wisdom and spirituality I thought the old biblical myths contained. From the first my working title for this book was *Our Fathers' Wells*. Genesis is full of wells; Rebecca and Rachel are both discovered by wells and springs, and Isaac, with whom of all the figures in Genesis I identify most strongly, redug his father's wells and gave them the old paternal names. At the end of Genesis Jacob, the wrestler, evokes the image of the well when he refers to his son Joseph as a "fruitful bough by the well."

The wells of Genesis are profound. They speak to me of a fertility in the soul; they are an image for the life of the imagination. That life is mysteriously deep, sprung from hidden aquifers. Wells are essential to life; the wells of the fathers nourish us and are as essential in their way as food is for the body. Wells in the wilderness are miraculous; living water from rock slakes the greatest thirst; sweet water in the dry places is provided beyond all human provision. We are asked only to keep this water fresh; we are the stewards of the gift.

As we rush headlong into a postliterate century, we may lose the maps that guide us to the wells, the songlines that take us to the living waters, the tales that connect us to the ancestors. The Philistines have covered them—the philistinism of our appetites and idolatries. Indeed, our memory of the past is deteriorating as literacy declines. Scavenging and strip-mining the past for what serves our faddist culture, we lose an old depth and continuity. Ransacking myth and history for images and marketable ideas, we are using them up as we use up other precious resources. Important parts of our past may not survive into the future. The Bible may not live on as a rich and complex soul-poem. I fear it may become only a book of dogma for the fundamentalist or an object in the museum of the mind for scholarly analysis or a ruin of scattered

stones historical sleuths will continue to dust for prints of a merely historical past. I fear that the continuous flow of biblical images and ideas that has watered the fields of literature, poetry, theology, and moral discourse for thousands of years is evaporating in the heat of our millennial ambitions. As the churches empty, as the grandparents die who heard these stories from the lips of their grandparents, the stories descend the first rung of oblivion. They will not translate to computer games; they cannot be audiovisualized. As poems they lose everything in translation to another medium.

To me the loss of the Bible as wisdom book and soul text would be tragic. For if myth is a window and mirror of the soul, then our souls require great instruments of speculation. It has been my deepest purpose to gaze into the speculative dimensions of these biblical myths. My labor has been to honor ancestral wisdom and to claim my lineage. My reading of Genesis is an act of stewardship as well as the fashioning of an identity.