

A Personal Encounter with the Myths of Genesis



# OUR FATHERS' WELLS

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

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strike at the heel of Eve's children. Jacob is born gripping the heel of his brother. Both the serpent and Jacob know something about the vitality of the inferior, of the infernal, and both use the shadowy powers of speech and suggestion to deceive the innocent. The deprived and the deprived are also twins; Jacob knows the ways of irony.

A further irony is buried in this story. Jacob has indeed received a blessing, but it cannot fill him. He has even been kissed by his father, but the kiss was meant for Esau. How exquisite a pain for the betraying son to witness the father's immense love for his brother and to take that love into a cold heart where it cannot warm him. Father Isaac's blessing cannot animate his son with anything but shame and fear. Jacob cannot enjoy what he has gained because he has gained it through treachery; the blessing has not come to him through any merit of his own or any true love in his father's heart.

More important, Jacob cannot receive the blessing because he is unprepared for it. He has been raised by his mother; he is "the mild man who stays in the camp." What does he know of Abraham and that dangerous life of surrender he led, and which from his childhood Isaac led too? The Rebecca who takes matters into her own hands has not equipped him to receive the blessing or to shoulder the responsibility it entails. His soul is hidden in his selfishness.

This scene between father and son is a mock initiation. Jacob is still green. The Great Father, as Mystery, has not brushed him with His power. Jacob's imagination has not yet been fired by vision or dream or encounter. His real potency still sleeps, and his powers have been put to the ends not of conception but of deception. Jacob is spiritually unfathered; his initiations lie ahead of him. He must do as his fathers before him have done; he must leave his native land and his father's house and wander. He must become a stranger. God will meet him in the wilderness; the wilderness is his place of vision and adoption.

In setting out for strange lands, he leaves Esau behind. In his long exile, Jacob will sojourn in Haran. Many events will befall him, but always the memory of his treachery will remain; the shame and the fear of it will haunt him, and when the time comes for him to return to the promised land, he will meet his dreaded brother at the border.



My explorations with these twins over the years has taken me back to my own history with my brother. I have worked with men and women for whom the

brother story inevitably wrings from their memories forgotten incidents, old wounds, touching losses. But I have also come to see the relationship between the twins as the relationship of two parts of myself, two aspects of my own masculinity. In some ways these two parts were conditioned by my experience in my family, but I have come to recognize that I am not alone, that others share this sense of an internal doubleness for which the image of twins is fitting.

I was, like Esau, the son who longed for a mother's love. I was, like Jacob, the son who longed for his father's blessing. Like Esau I can be trusting, innocent, and strong. Like Jacob I can be deceptive, utterly self-gratifying, and callow. Like Jacob I wish for vigor and wildness. Like Esau something in the refinement of touch, the order of things in their places, eludes me. Like Jacob I have never hunted, never killed. I am an unblooded male, and some part of me longs for the skills and the knowledge of an Esau. Not much of an athlete, I never had a strong sense of my own physical power. Yet like Esau I hated schooling and the disciplines of the tent. I felt confined. Developmentally slow, it wasn't until the last years of high school that I got good grades, and though I stayed in school for twenty-five unbroken years, right through my Ph.D., I always suspected that my own true life, if ever I found it, would take me in a different direction. I know Jacob's shallow piety; Esau's paganism. Like Esau I do not know my parents' homeland; I have married among the Canaanite women. Like Jacob I am searching for the ancestral God.

However we experience them, Jacob and Esau seem like two sides, two extreme poles, of a single self. Intellect and instinct, spirit and body, orthodox and heretic, obedient and rebellious—these apparent oppositions jar in our internal dialogues. The persistence of this doubleness is the cause of our discontents as well, no doubt, of our growth. The dialectics of self-knowledge yield occasional moments of synthesis, only to split again into what Matthew Arnold called "the dialogue of the mind with itself." Isn't this what the poet James Stephens means in his poem "The Twins"?

*Good and bad are in my heart,*

*But I cannot tell to you*

*—For they never are apart—*

*Which is better of the two.*

*I am this! I am the other!*

*And the devil is my brother!*

*But my father He is God!*

*And my mother is the Sod!*

*I am safe enough, you see,*

*Owing to my pedigree.*

*So I shelter love and hate*

*Like twin brothers in a nest;*

*Lest I find, when it's too late,*

*That the other was the best.<sup>3</sup>*

The metaphor the Bible gives to this two-sided self-encounter is *wrestling*. That image and that act become the figure by which the parts are brought into strenuous relation with each other.

Like two parts of a single soul, here sundered and divided, Jacob and Esau remain apart for many years. Their reunion is prefigured, as we shall see, by Jacob's wrestling with an unseen antagonist, never named, which wounds and blesses him and frees him for his atonement with Esau. In this act of wrestling, and in the reconciliation of the brothers that follows, the patriarchal imagination speaks of its dream of the union of opposites. That union occurs, however, not as a marriage but as a fierce contest of wills between powerful masculine adversaries. This wrestling will occur at the ford of a river, in the vale of the shadow, as the dark night of the soul.

## *The Myth of the Wrestler*

A man in flight, Jacob travels to Haran. He seeks refuge in his ancestral homestead. This flight uproots him from his native land and his father's house. Though he is not "called" as Abram was called, he is nonetheless driven to exceed his father's world. He sets foot on the path of the Stranger and enters the Strange.

Strangeness begins for Jacob on his first night away from home. He finds himself at nightfall too far from habitation to find shelter. He is alone. He lies down, taking a stone for his pillow.

*Jacob came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. And the Lord was standing beside him and He said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the ground on which you are lying I will give to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you."*

*Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it."*