

## BOOK REVIEW

*Our Fathers' Wells: A Personal Encounter With the Myths of Genesis.* Peter Pitzele. 1995. San Francisco: HarperCollins. Hardback, 260 pages, \$22.00.

This is a fascinating book by a well-known psychodramatist who has been applying this method in helping himself and others to reconnect with their spiritual roots. The “wells” alluded to in the title come from a verse in Genesis, in which the patriarch Isaac reaffirms his loyalty to his father (Abraham) by redigging the water wells in the region where they settled in Canaan. This activity is a metaphor for the author’s own task: Pitzele felt a need to deepen his spiritual roots. The book consists of a description of a sociodramatic approach to scriptural interpretation along with the author’s reflections on the “myth-theology” (as he calls it) implicit in this first book of the Old Testament.

The Book of Genesis in the Bible describes events that are at the foundation of the three major Western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The dramatic events described are key themes in Western culture: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; Cain and Abel; the family dynamics of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael; and the stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers. In each of these dramas, there are many possible questions and many interpretations.

So much of traditional religious education involves merely the teaching of these events, and only rarely are people invited to get more involved, to dare to speculate on (what Moreno called the surplus-reality dimension) what was not reported in the official text. This is an act of improvisation, creative myth making. In fact, there is an established tradition for scholars treating the texts as basic plots and going on to make up a story that illustrates a certain moral or spiritual point. Ministers today engage in this kind of interpretation in the activity called “hermeneutics,” and in Judaism, this is called “midrash.”

For over 500 years, from the second through the seventh century, rabbis in Babylonia and Palestine created commentaries on the Torah, the first five books of the Bible that were supposed to have been dictated to Moses by God Himself. These commentaries, and the commentaries on these commentaries, became the *Talmud*, which consists of legal debates and also many stories, stories created to supplement the basic text of the canon. The point of this is that the author of *Our Fathers' Wells* has evidently taken up the mantle of con-

tinued creativity, in the spirit not only of the original patriarchs and the succeeding commentators but also of Moreno and his vision of creativity in the present moment.

Pitzele, in his own quest to understand the more subtle meanings in these traditions, has brought to the task the methodology of sociodrama. He has met with fellow psychodramatists, students in seminaries, and others who share this interest in exploring the possibilities inherent in this type of bibliodrama. After a story is told, group members are invited to identify with various of the *dramatis personae*. Scenes are enacted, and the kinds of perspectives, ideas, and sheer poetry that are produced through these improvisations are startlingly vivid and thought-provoking. I found it most stimulating to see what people in the author's groups said in their various roles: God regarding His reason for creating the forbidden fruit; the serpents giving some alternative views; Eve presenting her side of the story. I enjoyed the way Pitzele has the reader visualize the group, with several people each speaking for one character, and how they often represented quite different frames of reference.

What is described in this book seems to me to be a mixture of sociodrama and a touch of drama therapy. Roles from literature or history, a mixture of both, are enacted and creatively elaborated. Following these spontaneous explorations, discussion can be used to reflect on cultural and personal projections and assumptions that are worthy of re-evaluation. The brief examples of these enactments in the book are exciting and implicitly invite the reader to join in this creative process.

The author's bibliodrama is also an example of what Moreno called "axiodrama," a psychodramatically informed exploration of some general philosophical, political, or cultural issue. It addresses not only the personal level of experience but also the societal dimension. For more specific instructions regarding the author's approach to bibliodrama, the author is preparing another book, *Scripture Windows: Theory and Practice of Biblical Psychodrama*, that will be published in 1996.

Aside from presenting an example of an integration of Morenean methodology, the author's main thrust is a general contemplation on the various dramatic events in *Genesis*. He discusses these stories from a contemporary perspective. Weaving in a sensitivity to the feminist critique of patriarchy, Pitzele clearly struggles with the challenge of finding the wisdom within a tradition redolent with acts of seemingly capricious authority, self-defeating paradoxes, rationalized egotism, grasping manipulateness, and naked aggression. Let's face it; many of the behaviors of these almost sanctified mythic figures might well be judged rather harshly were they to occur in today's world.

Pitzele attempts a more balanced view, imagining how the characters might justify themselves and including also the viewpoint of some figures who have been marginalized in the process of establishing an official text. To accom-

plish this, he presents some opposing views, often in the imagined words of such figures as Ishmael, Abraham's other son and the "father" of the Arab peoples; or Deborah, the nurse who cared for Jacob and Esau, yet who (in this midrash) also followed the ancient "goddess" religion. I found these to be thought-provoking, vivid, and surprisingly moving.

The author humbly and frankly admits his own biases and personal struggles, and his hermeneutic effort is obviously a way for him to work through some of his own mixed feelings. He has been a fairly assimilated, agnostic, barely nominal Jew for most of his life, although one with strong spiritual sentiments. More recently, though, as he approached midlife, Pitzele has felt a need to engage with a deeper spiritual dimension of being, and, feeling a need to explore his own roots, he addressed the foundations of his Jewish traditions in the specific form of the Book of Genesis. I personally sympathize with this struggle and share certain of its features. Some are particular to being Jewish, and some seem relevant to the spiritual struggles of many non-Jews I have met: How to respect the obvious intelligence, compassion, and wisdom of many of the great thinkers of the past while questioning so much of the patently negative aspects of patriarchy; how to feel some sense of identity with a great historical lineage while rejecting the many terrible crimes committed in its behalf; how to seek certain archetypal sources in the symbols and rituals of a great tradition without feeling stifled by the cultural conserve and its crystallization of specific commandments and prohibitions.

The author's response is to focus on just one of the many books of the Old Testament and to explore, sometimes by himself and sometimes in the incubating process of the group process, to create midrashim (the "-im" being the plural form for most Hebrew nouns), and to relate these issues to intellectual, aesthetic, and personal dynamics in his own life. At times, Pitzele seems to go on at length regarding certain themes, which could serve as material for more systematic intellectual discussion in a seminar or study group.

The theme of patriarchy has become quite relevant today as a common theme in feminist cultural critiques because the concept of patriarchy remains ambiguous. Many of us grew up first exposed to the images of old, white-bearded fellows in picture books, the patriarchs being those "founding fathers" Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. There is irony in the author's mixing these two meanings as he explores the implicit patriarchal interpretation given to these scriptures, clearly recognizing them as an instrument for justifying the authority of a political and social establishment.

Pitzele figuratively wrestles with these patriarchs in a psycho-historical discourse, reminding me of the way Jacob was said to have wrestled with the Angel of the Lord. And just as that event, also, could be interpreted in many ways (Kushner, 1994), so too does the author seek to integrate his own vitality, passion, and highest values with a tradition that claims wisdom embedded

in stories that tend to evoke doubt, rebelliousness, and disturbing personal and cultural associations. This is not an easy task, but the book may also be helpful to other people, in many, or no particular, religious traditions, who are also dealing with these issues.

*Our Fathers' Wells* is an important book because it represents a new genre in psychodrama, an application of Moreno's concept of axiodrama; because it offers a model of how a person can thoughtfully explore some important spiritual issues as part of a midlife maturation; and because the issues themselves are highly relevant and can serve as a basis of further discussion. I think this book will be of interest to psychodramatists, drama therapists, teachers of creative drama and drama in education, religious educators, and group leaders who deal with people's spiritual struggles. Pitzele is an articulate, brilliant, talented writer with a highly literary flair. His writing is clear and vivid. I heartily recommend the book.

#### REFERENCE

Kushner, L. (1994). *G-d was in this place and I, i did not know*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights.

ADAM BLATNER  
Austin, Texas