

The 'Jewish' myth of the two brothers

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayera*, God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac to Him:

And [God] said, Take now your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you. [Gen 22:2]

Of course, God stops Abraham at the last minute and Isaac is saved. Later, King David purchases that site [2Samuel 24:16-25], proclaims it the House of God, and begins to build the Temple there. [1Chronicles 21:28-22:19] The site is specifically identified as "Mount Moriah" in "Jerusalem" in the Book of Chronicles [2Chronicles 3:1] These are the only two locations in the Bible where the name "Moriah" appears. So it is clearly that site where the Temple was built.

So much is in the Bible. Now, you are undoubtedly familiar with the allegedly "Jewish" story of the two brothers:

In ancient Israel two brothers shared a field. One was a bachelor, living at one end, and the other a married man with many children living at the other. After the harvest, the bachelor was worried that his brother did not have enough to feed his family and the married man was worried his brother would not have enough saved for his old age. So at night each carried some of his own produce to the other's storehouse. After many days of unwitting exchanges the two bumped into each other in the dark, understood why their stocks never diminished, and wept in each other's arms. And Tradition tells us that it's on this very spot that the Temple was built.

This is the stuff of thousands of Jewish sermons, stories and children's books. Under the title is usually a vague reference such as "Inspired from the Talmud", "Based on the Midrash", or some other euphemism for "I have no idea where this is coming from". Indeed, it is nowhere to be found in the massive sources of Jewish Tradition.

This has long bothered me, so I did some research and found that it bothered many others also, including eminent rabbis and scholars. This is what was established:

The first reference ever to this story is an 1835 book by Alphonse de Lamartine, a top Gentile French writer, and one of my favorites. He says he got the story from Arabs while visiting the Holy Land. He writes:

This is how [the Arabs] say that [King] Solomon chose the location of the [Al Aqsa] mosque. [sic]

As you know, the Arabs built their mosque on the ruins of our Temple, and retroactively declared all our Sages, from Abraham on, to be proto-Muslims. You can read the actual book online if you know French.

[Souvenirs, impressions, pensées et paysages pendant un voyage en Orient at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2100858/f454.item.r=aksa>]

The book was a hit, and after that the story was picked up by many authors in many languages, including Jews, and that's how it came to us.

One author says that it's lovely that Arabs should have preserved this story for us, and that that should help achieve peace with them, etc. But other than Lamartine's say-so, we don't know any Arabs today who have this so-called "tradition". Is it real or did Lamartine make it up? Where are today's keepers of that "Arab tradition"?

Another author found a similar Indian story from the 8th-century [Kalilah wa-Dimnah], translated by Arabs, where the brothers are STEALING from each other. Not very inspiring. (You may have heard the modern joke about the two brothers stealing from each other, then bumping into each other and slugging it out until dawn, and concluding with "And Tradition tells us that it's on this very spot that the Israeli Knesset was built.")

Now you have all the facts. Your reaction can be one of many:

You can say: So what? It's a lovely story. Let's keep it and the facts be damned.

You can say: Keep it if you wish, but don't present it as a Jewish story, because it isn't. But is our real Tradition so bereft of inspirational stories that we must not only steal from others, but pretend it was ours all along?

You can say: We cannot keep it because it is at odds with our Tradition, which tells us that the location of the Temple is Mount Moriah, where Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac. It's the binding of Isaac that determined the location, not a story about brothers.

You can say: Let's keep it and just call it a “modern Midrash”. The problem with that is that, to be a Midrash, a story must be consistent with our Tradition. This one isn't: That's not how the location of the Temple was determined. You cannot make up a “modern Midrash” that says that baby Moses was saved from the waters by a visiting Chinese businessman, grew up to be a successful investment banker in China and never went back to the Middle East; or that Abraham really killed Isaac and brought back a look-alike to satisfy Sarah.

My take? Forget the story. Find other sources of Jewish inspiration. We have enough misinformation as it is.

Shabbat shalom.