

In the Shadows of
GENESIS



*Exploring the Mysterious Heart
of the Bible's First Book*

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Rudi Wolff is an accomplished New York-based graphic artist.

The cover image is #9 from a series entitled “The Creation.”

The Hebrew inscription reads:

“And God said: Let us make man in our image.”

His work may be viewed at www.rudiwolff.com

CONTENTS

IN THE SHADOWS OF GENESIS

Introduction

Creation

Adam, Eve and the Serpent

Cain and Abel

Noah

The Tower of Babel

Abram

Abraham and Sarah

Abraham and Isaac

Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Esau

Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Esau (II)

Jacob, Rachel and Leah

Jacob and Esau

Joseph and His Brothers

Joseph and His Brothers (II)

In the Shadows of Genesis

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Introduction

We recognize the names, beginning with Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel. Their mythic lives and the commentaries about them are bedrock elements of Western civilization. But what if we relinquished the hallowed ground of perceived wisdom and considered Martin Buber's instruction, presented as an epigraph to this book, to approach the text as something new, letting the words of the Book of Genesis reach us? Could we encounter the sacred heart of these mysterious stories as if for the first time?

Following Buber's sage advice, I imagined a movie camera poised on my shoulder to capture pivotal moments in the spare and poetic narratives about our ancient spiritual ancestors. Soon, compelling questions emerged: what was it like for Eve to encounter the serpent and then meet Adam *after she ate the fruit but before he did*, or for Cain to meet Abel after both realized God accepted the offerings of one and not the other? What did Noah and his family experience inside the ark when they became humanity's first holocaust survivors? If we consider Abraham and Isaac walking towards the mountaintop after God commanded the father to sacrifice his son, what, if anything, did Isaac know and when did he know it? How about Esau's discovery that Jacob stole his blessing or the confrontation between Joseph and his furious brothers when they destroyed a treasured coat and nearly killed him? Could we imagine these dramatic scenes as lived moments?

Exploring these remarkable events, the plot thickened as even more intriguing questions surfaced: if God wanted Adam and Eve to remain in paradise, what was the serpent doing in the Garden? What was the relationship between the serpent and God? Why did the Lord destroy most of creation with floodwaters, then choose to save Noah and his family or ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? What prompted Isaac's wife Rebecca to use one son, Jacob, to betray another, Esau, and to deceive her husband? How

did Esau move from a place of murderous rage to become a teacher about the meaning of forgiveness? And how did Joseph evolve from being a spoiled self-centered brat to a deeply wise man? As I allowed myself to be drawn in any direction, without attachment to existing interpretations of the text, new and startling layers of meaning emerged in the fertile shadows of Genesis, demonstrating how established wisdom about these stories concealed as much as it revealed.

And what about God? God is the central presence in Genesis. Any set of reflections about these narratives must account for His experience too. One of the striking aspects of Genesis involves its representation of God, with human thoughts, feelings and behaviors prompted by human motives. These stories present God as being engaged. He is not indifferent or disinterested. The things men and women say and do matter to Him. This does not diminish God's infinite grandeur or His essential mystery. But it indicates that human affairs fulfill an important need. God hears and sees, measures and considers, waiting for each of us to experience the reality of His living presence. The human representation of God underscores the psychological intimacy between humanity and its Creator: each is affected and transformed by the other. These spiritual insights, expressing, as we shall see, Joseph's great wisdom, engender a marvelous and joyous encounter with one's Self, the essential purpose of one's life and with the Creator of all things.

Throughout the book, I make reference to God's thoughts and feelings. A friend once accused me of wanting to be God's psychologist. Of course, that's true. But if He wants each of us to identify His desire, aren't we all invited to become His therapist, to understand what prompts Him to summon creation out of nothing or to make Adam and Eve in His image, and to depict how His experience of men and women evolves during the course of Genesis?

While there is spiritual significance to portraying God with human thoughts, feelings and actions, I do not imagine Him with a human body or gender. He and She are equally inadequate to characterize God. But for the sake of consistency and convenience, I use the male pronoun. I hope no one will misconstrue my intention or take offense.

Another puzzling aspect of these stories involves the amount of awful behavior they describe. With all the lying, stealing, cheating, murder, rape and incest that occurs, Genesis seems like the Biblical version of an Aaron Spelling miniseries. Why does the initial book of the Bible provide a veritable catalogue of human ugliness? Why are we being introduced to a group of deeply flawed people? While the text portrays an intricate dance God and humanity engage in to find one another, Genesis reveals the full spectacle of being human, requiring us to become fully acquainted with ourselves. These stories examine and connect the psychological and spiritual aspects of human experience.

I explored stories that inspired me, including those about creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, the Tower of Babel, Abraham and Sarah, Lot and the destruction of Sodom, Rebecca, Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah and the story of Joseph and his brothers. In addition, I depicted a pivotal moment not presented in Genesis: Abram's (Abraham's original name) rejection of his father's gods. How did Abram turn away from existing religious practice to embrace a different deity? His spiritual journey defined, for me, a remarkable act of courage and surrender that lies at the core of human faith.

Like many Jews of my generation, I grew up identified as being Jewish without any practical experience of Judaism's traditions, rituals or texts. Many years ago, Bill Moyers produced a weekly television series that assembled a group of distinguished people from all walks of life to discuss Genesis. On a Sunday afternoon, I stumbled on the program about Cain and Abel. While stimulated by the vivacious conversation, I was captivated by the story itself: soon after their exile from paradise, Adam and Eve had a murder on their hands. Grappling with Cain's motive to kill his brother fascinated me. But it soon gave way to a deeper mystery that countless readers have wrestled with: why did God accept Abel's offering and reject Cain's?

There seemed no reason to explain the Lord's choice, yet it hardly seemed possible He would act capriciously. As I raised this pivotal question, an inner light, emanating from some great depth, revealed itself ever so slightly, affording me a glimpse of the road ahead while encouraging me forward. I vowed to inhabit these stories as deeply as I

could and to allow them to inhabit me. Looking back on this momentous experience, I recall Rilke's evocative poem entitled *A Walk*:

*“My eyes are ready touch the sunny hill,
going far ahead of the road I have begun.
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp,
it has its inner light, even from a distance —
and changes us, even if we do not reach it,
into something else, which, hardly sensing it,
we already are;
a gesture waves us on, answering our own
wave...
But what we feel is the wind in our faces.”*

(Translated by Robert Bly)

The inspiration to write this book emerged from my experience of the Bill Moyers TV series and the marvelous translations of Genesis presented by Robert Alter and Stephen Mitchell. But during the course of writing, it felt like the book chose me, appearing in my life as a distant figure whose gesture waved me on. Only gradually did I become aware that writing this book answered my own wave.

Contemplating layer upon layer of meaning embedded in Genesis changed my life. Spending time with these stories influenced my decision to join a synagogue and engage with Jewish ritual and prayer. My spiritual practice, long informed by eastern ideas, was augmented and deepened by a reverential movement towards Jewish ancestors and the God first encountered by Abram.

Exploring the mysterious and timeless Book of Genesis has represented one of the most thrilling intellectual and spiritual adventures of my life. So I offer these reflections and meditations as an invitation to share my excitement. I would love nothing more than to inspire you, the reader, to return to the text as if for the first time, to experience anew the depth of our humanity and the living presence of God shimmering through the words of Genesis and in the spaces between them.

Creation

Imagine the eternal moment before creation, the timeless time before time inhabited by the wondrous presence of God and nothing else; His unfathomable mystery transcending the infinite, more certain than the absolute, in the nothingness of nothing.

Nothingness: the no place where all becoming emerges, the no place where everything in a state of being returns.

“When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters, God said: ‘Let there be light.’” (1:1-3)

Now imagine the beginning. Did a great tidal wave of matter careen through space like unleashed floodwaters? Or did a subtle flick become a faint trickle, a steady stream, a stately river and then a magnificent ocean calmly filling the ether?

At a moment of *His* choosing, God planted a combustible seed that evoked the dream of Creation. Invisible seams of the limitless void yielded to a crackling exuberance unfurled with a deafening roar, *as being that was nothing in a state of nothingness, became being in a state of being that was becoming.*

But if God was infinitely perfect all by Himself, what prompted Him to set everything in motion? When the Lord conjured the universe from His boundless imagination, He summoned an essential aspect of Himself: His identity as creator.

Matter and light streak across time and space, as gurgling joyous energy explodes then collapses into itself and reappears, connecting each ecstatic

thing to each ecstatic thing. Nothingness and being fuse and separate then fuse and separate again, fragmenting and colliding, buckling and erupting. God is sublime pleasure as the membrane of creation emerges to announce itself everywhere.

Imagine the ringing gospel of all the sacred words of all the sacred stories inscribed in every atom of billions of suns and trillions of stars and planets, the breath of life giving birth to life in the unspooled body of the universe.

“And God saw all that He had done, and, look, it was very good.” (1:31)

There is no beginning or end to the unremitting joy and everlasting love God feels. His jubilation is eternal as creation itself. And the reality of love manifests a discernable and supremely intelligent life force that suffuses and defines, embraces and sustains the entire breadth of God’s work.

“And God created the human in his image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.” (1:27)

But in the unremitting frenzy of life something was missing. The Creator of all creation became restless. His exultation was not enough. So He sculpted a being capable of relating to Him as God, who would appreciate how each living thing contained His essence and that the miracle of life expressed His singular pleasure. This is what it means to be made in His image: to be able to experience the living presence of God *as God*.

“...then the Lord God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature.” (2:7)

The Lord flung a patch of soil into the air and chiseled dust into bone, muscle and flesh. And when He bestowed the breath of life, the man assumed his place in a wondrous garden of hanging vines, fragrant petals

and luscious fruits. In the middle of this glorious place, the towering Tree of Life swayed to the tranquil rhythm of an eternal present. Hoisted into the heavens by a great trunk, its seemingly infinite height connected Eden with the wellspring and mystery of all creation. A gnarled, craggy old sage of a tree, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, bearing fruits of radiant color and beguiling scents, stood in the majestic shadow of the Tree of Life.

In paradise, each thing was an extension of everything else. There was no “I”, no “Thou”, no “God” identified as God. To know anyone, including God, required embracing the separateness of the other: an ability to distinguish *me* from what is *not me*. But since the man perceived the Lord as an extension of himself like an infant experiences his mother, humans would never discern God’s otherness in the garden. And here was the problem: while the Creation narrative expressed God’s sublime pleasure to create, the Garden of Eden story elaborated His fervent desire *to be known as God*.

His desire to be known this way did not reflect some narcissistic impulse or express profound loneliness. The Lover simply wanted a relationship with His beloved, those capable of encountering Him as God. The Lord’s decisive action revealed that long before the man and the woman ever became aware of His living presence, He pursued *them*.

“From every fruit of the garden you may surely eat. But from the tree of knowledge, good and evil, you shall not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you are doomed to die.” (2:17)

God chose His first words carefully. His swift prohibition created an imaginary line, an initial boundary separating man from God. Feeling the devastation and terror the human would soon experience, the Lord trembled while His momentous command resounded everywhere. In this perfect place shimmering with God’s infinite radiance, what could the human know of death? What did “die” mean to any living thing in Eden? Buried in his still dormant soul, inaudible to everything and everyone except to the Creator, the first anguished cries rang out.

God said the man could eat any fruit in the garden, except those hanging on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. *But that was not true*. He

worried about the succulent fruit growing on the Tree of Life. So why did He mention one tree and not the other?

God *reveals as He conceals*. Since the Lord did not mention the Tree of Life, it remained out of the man's awareness. He would not be tempted to eat its fruit. God's deliberate silence reflected His profound concern the human might eat from the tree and live forever.

God *conceals as He reveals*. When He prohibited the man to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Lord prompted the human to wrestle with His words and the need to fashion a response. A parent prohibits and the child becomes fascinated by what is forbidden. But why did God incite human curiosity about the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil?

“It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a partner to help him.’ And the Lord God fashioned from the soil each beast of the field and each fowl of the heavens and brought each to the human to see what he would call it...”
(2:18-9)

As the man struggled to absorb the meaning of His words, the Lord invited the man to name all the animals. Henceforth, they would be known by their particular names, rather than as aspects of a seamless web of aliveness He created. The process of assigning names lifted the man out of an experiential oneness with all other creatures. The human and his Creator stood together while the animals filed past. The Lord made the feathered wing of the bird, the proud mystery of the cat and the graceful glide of the giraffe with loving precision. Their sounds were as varied as the shapes, sizes and colors of their bodies. And despite the human's affinity for each of them, God knew none of the animals would be a suitable companion. This was a poignant moment, not a light-hearted comedy. He paraded them before the man so he could experience a longing to be seen and recognized.

“And the Lord God cast a deep slumber on the human... and he took one of the ribs and closed over the flesh where it had been, and the Lord God built the rib He had taken from the

human into a woman and He brought her to the human.”
(2:21)

The Creator's loving hands fashioned another hallowed body that enabled God to admire two interlocking vessels designed for union with one another and partnership with Him. The wind of heaven became the woman's living breath while the Lord wept over exquisite eyes, nose, mouth and torso. As her body absorbed His remorse about the impending exile, her passion and emotional awareness expressed the melancholy caress of God's tears. The man and the woman beheld one another and they were beautiful and equal in each other's presence and before the glorious eyes of God.

The Lord understood the need for company. When He said the man should not be alone, He also referred to *His* desire to establish an intimate relationship with those made in His image. But how could humanity know its Creator without understanding what was good? If no one ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, men and women would never acquire wisdom about Him. So here was the central paradox in paradise: God needed them to eat the forbidden fruit to claim their human birthright, to know and experience God as God. *In order to enact the Lord's desire, they had to disobey His word.*

The problem God confronted in Eden was enormous. If the humans chose not to eat, they would remain like the goat, dog or horse, unable to reflect on their relationship with the Lord to realize His desire. Something drastic needed to be done. He agonized over this but sensed the inevitable. The man and the woman had to relinquish their place in the garden. The question was not *if* they could stay, but deciding *how* they were to leave.

If He needed to banish them, why not simply tell them to go without mentioning the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? By prohibiting them to eat from the tree, the Lord compelled the man and the woman to grapple with His word. If He told them their days in Eden were numbered because He wanted something different, they would never contend with the meaning of His command. To be in relationship with their Creator involved wrestling with the meaning of what He revealed and what remained unspoken.

But there was another reason why God did not banish the man and the woman outright. He loved them too much. While He acknowledged their fateful exile as He created them, the Lord hesitated to disclose what needed to be said. And when we remain unable to identify our feelings and/or put them into words, we express ourselves in action. Enter the serpent. He emerged from God's imagination to exile humanity from paradise forever.

“Now the serpent was most cunning of all the beasts of the field that the Lord God had made.” (3:1)

God took great care designing the serpent, making him the smoothest of talkers using the most soothing of voices. There was nothing hard or angular about him, nothing that made you pause or run in the other direction. You wanted to bask in his presence, hear what he had to say, know what he knew, because it seemed important. His moist scales glistened like jewels and his beguiling scent calmed even the most rattled of nerves. He never hurried or gave the impression of trying to trick, manipulate or force anyone to do anything against his will. He was perfect for the job. It was simply a matter of choosing an appropriate time and place for the fateful encounter.

When God directed the serpent to confer with the woman, He never believed she was timid or more susceptible to temptation. The Lord did not plan a seduction. He was trying to get the humans out of paradise. God realized His prohibition troubled the man, even though he never understood its meaning. Left to his own devices, he would resist eating the fruit. On the other hand, because the woman never heard God's words directly, His pronouncement did not rattle her or generate the same worry. The Lord reasoned that the best way to entice the man to defy His command involved a fear of losing her forever should she eat the fruit.

The serpent knew about the Lord's instruction. And now he understood that God wanted them to disobey His word. Certainly they would leave paradise forever. That was the whole point. But how would they survive living in exile and relate to the Creator after losing everything? When his work was done and the humans were banished, the serpent believed that

nothing but praise would come his way. Yet he continued to worry about his own fate. Did God intend for him to leave paradise too?

The man and woman discussed the appropriate course of action. Nothing prepared them for this decisive moment. Should they approach the tree? Or taste the forbidden fruit? How would their lives change if they did? And what if they refrained from eating and kept everything the way it was? No words described their keen disappointment when they contemplated doing nothing, as if they risked subverting an essential part of who they were, one that struggled to make its presence known.

Unknown to the man, woman and serpent, God worried they *would* make the wrong choice and refuse to ingest the fruit. He feared the humans remaining in paradise, unable to establish the relationship He desired, as much as their eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil *and* the Tree of Life to become like Him.

Maybe it happened this way: there came a time when the fear of *not* eating the fruit outweighed the fear of defying the Lord's words. Isn't it so whenever we contemplate any significant change? We compare the fear of standing still versus the fear of leaping into the unknown. It's fear all the way around. Maybe the man told the woman he had things to do. He was, after all, the Lord's steward in paradise. Suddenly, a terrible weight rested squarely on her shoulders. She considered again the words spoken to her partner as she resolved to embrace the deeper mystery of her life by choosing to eat the fruit. She was alone and just like that, she wasn't.

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