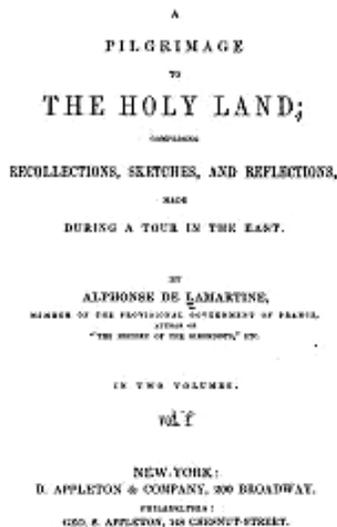


The Story of the Two Brothers – Revisited

By Daniel D. Stuhlman

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Let me retell the story—

King Solomon wanted to find a place build the Temple. A heavenly voice directed him from Mount Zion to a field that was once owned by two brothers. One of the brothers was a bachelor and the other was blessed with a wife and children. After the harvest each brother was concerned about the other. Under the cover of night the father kept adding to his brother's pile because he reasoned because he thought the bachelor had no children to support him in his old age. The bachelor added to the father's pile because he thought that with so many children his brother needed more grain. The brothers met in the middle of the field and embraced. This field, a manifestation of brotherly love, King Solomon reasoned this was best site for the Temple.¹

In 1997, before Google searches and the wide-spread of digitalization out-of-print, a faculty member came into the library with a question about the source of the story about two brothers.

He was very learned in Talmud and other rabbinic sources, but his couldn't find the source of the story. He said that the story is so old that it must be from the rabbis. He thought that he remembered it from the Talmud, but couldn't quite remember the source. He wanted my help to find the source.

This article is both an update to the original and an examination of sources I didn't have available then.

The 1997 article is one of my most popular because it illustrates how people use stories without understanding their origins. I have referred people to this article because the Two Brothers story is so widely known. In a recent rabbi's sermon, the rabbi presented this story as if it was an old Jewish story. Indeed it is a great example of familial love, honor and respect and how a place can have the honor of commemorate that story. The use of stories is an important part of speeches and sermons. However, one can not represent a story for something it is not.

If a story is written as a parable to illustrate a point and if you claim the story has ancient, royal roots, it adds credence. For example at the Yom Tov dinner table one guest told a story about a king who had a daughter who was so special that she was not allowed to have any contact with men before her wedding day. It took a long time for the king to find a groom who would marry the daughter without ever meeting her. People at the table kept interrupting the storyteller saying, "That is terrible!" "How can the king be so mean?" The people listening were impatient. The story was a parable. It never happened, but was created to illustrate a point. The king found a groom. After the couple got to know each other, the groom asked for another wedding celebration, because at the first one he couldn't fully understand the love of his life. If the people listening to the story would have been patient, they would have learned the point to the story was that love is learned and does not happen by accident.

This story of brotherly love contrasts to the stories of brotherly rivalry such as the stories of: Cain and Abel, Yitzhak and Ishmael, Ya'akov and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers. A story of brotherly love

¹ This is an abbreviated version; fuller versions are listed later in this article.

is rare. There is a 2300 year old Egyptian tale of two brothers; the younger, conscientious one is accused by his older brother of a proposal of adultery against his wife.²

The story of the two brothers sounds like it is very old because it mentions King Solomon. (Remember royal and ancient add credence.) Since the events seemingly happened in Biblical times, one should first check the Bible. The story is not in the Bible. Since the story happened hundreds of years before the Talmud, one would next reason that the story should be found in the Talmud, Midrash, or other rabbinic literature.

A search of the Talmud and Midrash found nothing. We tried Hebrew and English terms such as “two brothers,” “Temple of Solomon,” and Beit Mikdash but found nothing. We wanted to verify the story to be sure that we weren't imagining the story. We tried Bialik's *Sefer HaAgadah*³ and Micha Joseph Bin Gorion's *Mimekor Yisrael*.⁴

Micha Joseph Bin Gorion retells the story as, “A story of the Temple.” There are no comments or notes. This story was hard to find because the title does not mention “two brothers.”

We looked in the index of *The legends of the Jews* by Louis Ginzberg (1873-1953). The story is found on page 154 of volume 4. Ginzberg quotes Israel Costa in *Mikveh Israel*,⁵ no. 59 which says that Berthold Auerbach refers to this legend in his *[Black Forest] Village Stories*⁶. Ginzberg further speculates that the author may have been drawing upon an oral tradition from the Jews of Russia or Germany. The legend seems to be a midrashic exposition of Psalm 133:1 (How good and how pleasant that brothers dwell together.). Ginzberg is not sure of the source. I was unable to verify the reference that Ginzberg made to *Black Forest Village Stories*, however I found another reference in a book about Berthold Auerbach⁷ (1812-1882) written by Anton Bettelheim (1851-1930.) He remembers his mother (died 1852) telling him the story saying that she learned it from a rabbi who was her father's neighbor.

² *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* / edited by James Bennett Pritchard, Daniel E. Fleming. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2010 p. 11. (Page 12 in the 1958 edition.) The British Museum web site has a summary of the story. British Museum site has a picture of the papyrus scroll with the story : http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aes/s/sheet_from_the_tale_of_two_bro.aspx

³ Full reference: Bialik, Hayyim Nahman. **ספר האגדה : מבחר האגדות שבתלמוד ובמדרשים** == *Sefer ha'Agadah : mivhar ha'agadot shebi-Talmud. vibamidrashim*. Tel Aviv, Diver, 1967 (and other dates) English translation: *The book of legends : sefer ha-aggadah : legends from the Talmud and Midrash* New York : Schocken Books, 1992.

⁴ *Mimekor Yisrael* : classical Jewish folktales. Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1976. Vol. 1 page 491-492, no. 270.

⁵ Vilnay spells the name as “Kosta”. Full reference: Costa, Israel. *Sefer Mikveh Yisrael : ve-hu sefer sipure musar le-ḥanekh et ha-nearim ...* Livorno : Belforte, 1851.

⁶ The book has several stories about brothers. In one story the brothers are feuding over the estate of their mother. They reconcile and live in peace on harmony the rest of their lives. In another the brothers always helped each other. In the last scene of the story the majesty of God's glory descends on them.

⁷ Bettelheim, Anton, *Berthold Auerbach; der Mann, sein Werk, sein Nachlass*. Stuttgart, Cotta, 1907 p. 13-14. May be read on the Internet Archive: <http://archive.org/details/bertholdauerbac00bettgoog>

In Zev Vilnay's *Legends of Jerusalem* on page 77, he says that Israel Kosta (*Mikwah Israel*, 1851) relates a story of the two brothers. Vilnay says the legend first appears in the description of travels by Alphonse de Lamartine, *Voyage en Orient*, I, 1875.⁸

Both Vilnay and Ginzberg are unsure of the exact origin of the legend. The story is definitely not from Biblical or Rabbinic times. It may be a variant on a Russian or French non-Jewish legend. Compare this to the evidence in *Tanakh* (Bible). In II Chronicles 3:1 it says that Solomon built the Temple on Mount Moriah, which was revealed to David. *Moriah* is connected to *Akedat Yitzhak* (sacrifice of Isaac). *Midrash Tehilim* connects Adam and Noah to Mount *Moriah*. The site had *kedushah* [holiness] long before the time of King Solomon. This conflicts with the legend of two brothers.

Here are some additional published versions of the story.

Glass, Meredith A. *A tale of two brothers: a retelling of a Jewish folktale for young children*. New York, Bank Street College of Education, 1998.

Hebrew folklore from sidrach stories / edited by Steven M. Rosman. New York, UAHC Press, 1989 p. 19-20.

Smith, Cris, *One city, two brothers*. Cambridge, MA, Barefoot Books, 2007.

"A tale of two brothers" in *Stories Seldom Told: Biblical stories retold for children & adults* / by Lois Miriam Wilson. Wood Lake Publishing Inc., 1997 p 55-56.

"The two brothers" in *The World Over story book* / edited by Norton Belth. New York, Bloch Publishing Company, c1952 p. 10-12.

The answer to the bibliographic quest is the legend is not rabbinic and even goes against Biblical and rabbinic evidence. There is no recorded evidence of the story before 1835, however, by the time Ginzberg wrote his *Legends of the Jews* the story was well known. There is weak evidence that the legend is from Russian Jewish sources. We also learn that bibliographic references must be verified since Ginzberg and Vilnay made mistakes recording the titles of books. This is not the final word on the source of the legend because I have not yet located any sources of similar French, Russian or German legends. From this quest we learn that we should be careful about what we call ancient, Biblical, Talmudic or rabbinic.

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⁸ Vilnay says that the story is on page 329 of the 1875 edition, but I was unable to locate this edition. The book is a report of an 1832 journey that included the land of Israel, first published in 1935. I found via the Internet Archive (<http://archive.org/details/apilgrimagetoho00lamagoog>) an 1848 English translation published by D. Appleton and Company. The title page is the picture at the beginning of this article. After the story de Lamartine comments on page 284:

What a lovely tradition! How it breathes the unaffected benevolence of patriarchal morals! How simple, primival and natural is the inspiration leading men to consecrate to God a spot on which virtue has germinated upon earth! I have heard among the Arabs a hundred of such legends. The air of the Bible is breathed in all parts of this East.

This was a widely circulated book in both the original French and translations. Note that the story is identified as Arab, not Jewish.