

FAMILY CONFLICTS IN GENESIS

Mimesis, jealousy, murder and reconciliation

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Preliminary This exploration goes back to a presentation I gave in 2018 at the request of the OJEC (Consultative Body for Jews and Christians) on 'Sibling rivalry' in response to the Dutch translation of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' *Not in God's Name* (2015), in which Girard's views on violence and religion are discussed in detail. Later I reworked the text into a lecture in Nieuwe Badkapel (The Hague, 2024), with family conflicts as the theme of the first book in the Torah. In Spring 2025 I gave a lecture about it for the 'Littéraire Tafel' of De Witte Society, with questions such as: how are these stories put together, with which stylistic devices do characters take shape, how is tension built? The following contribution for the Dutch Girard Society discusses, with a view to some phases in the scapegoat mechanism, (1) the way in which the first murder in Genesis differs from that in myths elsewhere and (2) how conflicts in the history of Abraham and his descendants are turned from violence to reconciliation. This piece, translated in 2026, is also 'work in progress', maybe I'll rework it into a magazine article in the future.



Thomas Schütte, *United enemies* (2010)

1 MIMETIC THEORY AND THE BIBLE

Insights from mimetic theory are not only related to themes and motifs in Genesis, the first book of the Torah, but also to other books of Tanakh, the Jewish Bible, which has a sequel for Christians in the Gospels and other texts from the New Testament. In the course of his *Werdegang*, René Girard read Scripture from the thesis of mimetic desire, with increasing emphasis on what was concealed outside of it, in myths, epics and rituals of other cultures. By analysing various biblical texts, he was able to specify this desire as the first phase in a development that can lead to violence, 'which in every cultural order is always the true *subject* of every ritual or institutional structure.'¹ With the so-called scapegoat mechanism, he wanted to give shape to the foundation of 'the religious'.

When does the insight that the *vérité romanesque* is based on the stories from the Jewish and Christian tradition become manifest in Girard's work? His first major study from 1961, in which the romantic lie is contrasted with the romantic truth, contains hardly any references to the Bible, although Max Scheler's motto at the beginning of this book, 'Man has a God or an idol',² can be regarded as programmatic for his later work. A characteristic quote from this book:

For two or three decades this has been the underlying principle of every 'new' Western doctrine: God is dead, man must take his place. Pride has always been a temptation, but in modern times it has become irresistible because it is organized and amplified in an unheard-of way. The modern 'glad tidings' are heard by everyone.³

When Girard elaborates on Max Scheler's study of resentment, the problem of the other as a model and obstacle, which he will later recognize in specific Bible stories, already appears several times. "Everything becomes clear when one sees that the loathed rival is actually a mediator."⁴ In chapter II, 'Les hommes seront des dieux les uns pour les autres' it can be read: 'The denial of God does not abolish transcendence, but deflects it from the 'other side' to the here and now.'⁵

In his study on Dostoevsky, published two years later, there are a number of remarks in which the indebtedness to Biblical insights comes to the fore very succinctly,⁶ but it is not until *La violence et le sacré* from 1972, with a view to anthropological writings and classical works from Greco-Roman antiquity, that he discusses specific passages from the Old Testament when they resemble tales from other cultures: in the first chapter 'Le sacrifice' the sacrifices of Cain and Abel are mentioned, and it's briefly about Abraham, his son Isaac and his wife Rebekah. Their sons, the twins Jacob and Esau, are also mentioned,⁷ after which the chapter 'La crise sacrificielle' focuses on mythological, historical and literary *frères ennemis* from Greek and

¹ Girard (1978): 233 (NL 1990): 256.

² As for the translation 'idol': in the first, French edition (Girard 1961: 11) the word *idole* is used; the German translation of *Mensonge* gives the original (more extensive) text by Scheler: '... der Mensch glaubt entweder an Gott, oder glaubt an einen Götzen. Kein Drittes!' (20122): 9. The word *Götze* (of Germanic origin, introduced by Martin Luther and used by Nietzsche, among others) and *Idol* are more or less synonymous in German, also with *Abgott*. *Idol* comes from the Greek εἶδωλον 'eidolon', which means, among other things, 'phantom, idea' and occurs in the Septuagint, the Greek translation Tanakh, in Ex. 20: 4 as a translation of the Hebrew לִפְסֵל *fesel* 'image', in the second word of the Decalogue. The English translation (1966) does not have this motto.

³ Girard (1961): 62 (EN 1966): 56 (NL 2022²): 72.

⁴ Id. 22 (EN 1966): 14 (NL 2022²): 29.

⁵ Id. (1961): 65, translation ME.

⁶ 'C'est le Dieu unique de la tradition judéo-chrétienne qui donne sa qualité particulière à l'individualisme occidental' (Girard 1963: 101-102).

⁷ Id. 14-16 EN (1977): 5.

Roman antiquity, Eteocles and Polyneices, Romulus and Remus, but also, for example, Richard the Lionhearted and John Lackland.⁸ Elsewhere in the book, Girard refers to other books of the Bible: the crisis in the book of Exodus, the function of fate in the book of Jonah, and the calls of Israel's prophets. However, the fact that the focus in Bible stories differs from that in archaic cultures is not yet systematically discussed. Anticipating what he will refine in later work, he writes: 'The books of the Old Testament are rooted in sacrificial crises, each distinct from the other and separated by long intervals of time, but analogous in at least some respects'.⁹

From his main work in 1978, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, the starting point has shifted: already on the first page of the long conversation that forms the content of this book, Jean-Michel Oughourlian reports that Girard wants the problem of desire to begin with anthropology and that the secret of man 'seul le religieux peut le livrer'.¹⁰ As Girard himself says in the foreword to a reissue of his great works in 2007, it is still about religion, 'mais du christianisme cette fois'.¹¹ With this perspective, he also appears to reconsider the stories in Genesis that deal with conflicts¹² and give meaning to them in his analysis of *doubles*. Looking back on his oeuvre at the age of 84, in the same year in which his last major study in French was published,¹³ he stated that his instruments of analysis were neither philosophical nor 'concepts sociologiques ou anthropologiques', they were very simple human relations and '*c'est moi qui les ai repérés et isolés pur la première fois*'.¹⁴ The first part of this remark, in which he refutes his enormous learning, is in line with what he once said in an interview: 'In everything that matters to me, I am self-taught'.¹⁵ The second part can possibly be interpreted as bragging, but given what Girard wrote about his work elsewhere¹⁶, I am inclined to read it *in bonum*: 'Coincidentally, I am the one who discovered this.'

As far as mimetic theory in relation to the Book of Genesis is concerned, I concentrate in seven-league boots on one storyline, the development of family relationships, and specifically on the way in which imitation, friction and conflicts are described, starting with Cain killing his brother Abel. With Abraham, a new dimension comes in Genesis with the conflicts between his wives Sarah and Hagar and his sons Ishmael and Isaac. The latter will get Rebekah as his wife and in both their children Esau and Jacob a new cycle of mimesis, rivalry and threat of murder unfolds. When Jacob later has Leah and Rachel as wives, there is also disagreement between them, which continues into the next generation and culminates in the long passage about Joseph and his hostile brothers. Studies by Girard and his students often describe the scenario in which a mimetic crisis turns into violence, but Genesis shows how fratricidal disputes can be turned for the better.

2 CAIN AND ABEL

The story of Cain and Abel is well known, the interpretations of the first sixteen verses of Genesis 4 alone in Jewish and Christian writings are incalculable and numerous writers have

⁸ Id. 95-96. EN (1977): 61

⁹ Id. 102 EN (1977): 66.

¹⁰ Girard (1978): 11.

¹¹ Girard (2007a): 7.

¹² Girard (1978): 168-177 (NL 1990): 184-194.

¹³ *Achever Clausewitz* (Girard 2007b). The English translation *Battling to the End* appeared three years later.

¹⁴ Emphasis ME. Girard (2007a): 8.

¹⁵ Adams (1993): 11.

¹⁶ [] 'Since Cain, since 'the founding of the world', all cultures have rested on the murder of foundation. That's not what I'm saying, that's the gospels.' (Girard 1994: 141 EN 2014: 93). 'I do not believe [] that the theory of mythology I have outlined [] is new. I do not think that it is mine at all [] it is the transposition of the anthropological content of the Bible.' (Girard 2004b: 113).

incorporated the theme into their books over the centuries. A few years ago I read the *magnum opus* of the American writer and Nobel Prize winner John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (1952). Steinbeck could not have written that without knowledge of the biblical brothers. In the book itself, one of his novel characters states: 'I think this is the most famous story in the world, *because it is everybody's story*. [] The greatest fear a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell it fears. I think everyone in the world has had to deal with rejection to a greater or lesser extent. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger a kind of crime of revenge for the rejection, and with the crime of guilt – and that is the story of humanity.'¹⁷

Excursion In a notebook from the first grade of primary school I found a drawing in which I depicted the sacrifice that Abel makes. When I was told, "The Lord looked down graciously on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering He took no notice," I was deeply indignant. After almost seventy years I still remember that it cut through my soul, because in the parental family I was the eldest and the pain I felt when a younger sister or brother was favored in my childlike experience, I saw reflected in Cain's frustration that God accepts his brother's sacrifice and rejects his.



Steinbeck's quote confirmed to me why Genesis 4 is still fascinating: you start to empathize with the characters and compare your own experiences to them. *One does, the other doesn't*: that gives this passage from Genesis tension. The story is only short and below is the text of the first sixteen verses in the English Standard version ([ESV](#), 2016).¹⁸

1 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." 2 And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. 6 The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it." 8 Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" 10 And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12 When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." 13 Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. 14 Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." 15 Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. 16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

¹⁷ Steinbeck (1952): 270 (2020): 271-272.

¹⁸ For the original text of Genesis in Hebrew with English translation per verse see (among others): <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/genesis/4-1.htm>. The *Jewish Study Bible* has an excellent annotation.

Biblical scholars and researchers in the humanities have considered numerous - very diverse - questions. I mention a few without systematizing them.¹⁹

What is the purpose of the story, how is it that it continues to arouse the curiosity of the reader? Why is the text so compact, has the author²⁰ deliberately omitted things and only speaks of 'after the passage of days'?

Why does God pay attention to one sacrifice and not to another? Does this imply that he rejects Cain's sacrifice? Is the Great Protagonist of Genesis portrayed by the narrator as capricious in His preference, could He not have foreseen that Cain would become furious? Could we find an explanation for this? Why does the text explicitly state that Abel sacrificed 'of the firstborn' of his flock 'and 'of their fat'? Does this mean that Cain's sacrifice was inferior and that God had good reason not to look after his sacrifice? What does that mean, 'looking back at the sacrifice', can't that simply be interpreted as: it went well for Abel, Cain didn't?

Could Abel have tried to comfort Cain? Was Cain a bad guy from the start, as was stated not only by Flavius Josephus,²¹ in many midrashim but also in the Christian tradition²² ? Does his name (from the verb *kanah* 'to acquire, possess, have') provide the key to what happens in this chapter? Can Cain's behavior perhaps be traced back to the tension between Adam and Eve, the *Mangelsituation* of the first humans? Why does the word 'jealousy' not appear in the text?

What did Cain say to his brother Abel as they went into the field? Why is nothing told about their interaction? Does it have any meaning that the murder takes place 'on the field'? Was there a murder weapon? Couldn't God prevent the murder? Is Cain shirking his responsibility? How could he even know what murder is? Is this story about crime and punishment or about divine justice?

In what way is the murder a disturbance of natural harmony? Couldn't God have foreseen this?²³ Is the lesson of verse 7 'His desire is for you, but you must rule over him' that freedom of choice must be the result of an inner struggle, that God is admonishing Cain to control himself?

Is the figure of Abel a model for Cain, an obstacle that must be removed? Or did the younger Abel – the text does not mention how much they differed in age – mirror his older brother?

In Girard's work, Genesis 4 appears for the first time in *La violence et le sacré* and his interest is less in a meticulous literary or theological interpretation of the various verses that make up this short story than in an anthropological approach to main points: the similarities with similar stories in other cultures. He starts from the second verse: 'Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.' The contradictions and conflicts between brothers that are at the beginning of different cultures have been written about more often in view of what is told about them worldwide, but in Girard's view on the origin of violence, the murder in Genesis 4 is related to this in a specific way: Cain does not have the violence-outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal. 'Cain's "jealousy" of his brother is only another term for his one characteristic trait: his lack of a sacrificial outlet.'²⁴ After all, the purpose of sacrificial substitution would be to mislead the violence. The enmity between brothers that can be recognized in the myths of

¹⁹ Based on issues addressed in (among others) Westermann I (1986: 48-57), Gelandner (1993: 45-59, Jagersma (1995: 60-74), Kim (2001), Duyndam (2009), Sacks (2015, 2020, 2025), Finkelman (2016), Zucker (2020).

²⁰ By author I mean the editor-in-chief, who unified various sources of Genesis. See Alter (2011): 21. Fokkelman (1995: 56) still distinguishes between the author (writer) and the narrator, 'a pose, an attitude. You can call him a split off or sub-personality of the writer.'

²¹ *Ancient History of the Jews (Antiquitates Judaicae)*, Book 1, chapter 2.1 [52]: 'Cain was an extremely bad man in every way. He only had an eye for making a profit' (1996).

²² Sacks (2015: 98) mentions that Christians have come to think of themselves as Abel and Jews as Cain, fratricides condemned to eternal exile.

²³ Gelandner (1997: 1) writes in the introduction to his study '... and the way in which God learns from experience has great significance.'

²⁴ Girard (1972): 14 (EN 1977): 4 (NL 1994): 10 .

different cultures is explained later in the book as a manifestation of the sacrificial crisis.²⁵ The strict sequence in the story, which runs from Genesis 2 to 4, in which there would be no other people besides Adam, Eve and their sons, has of course been deviated from - which also occurs in many other interpretations in which 'empty spaces' in the text are filled in on the basis of oral traditions, fantasies etc.

Des choses cachées, which is considered to be Girard's main work, contains a more extensive consideration of Cain and Abel. In myths and stories about hostile twin brothers, Girard points out the universal antagonism between *doubles* at the height of the crisis, which can be both masked and revealed. One of the brothers must die, because the doubles must disappear, the difference must not be re-manifested, and furthermore in order to be able to establish the state. 'The murderer is individual, but he represents the whole community in that he has escaped the conflict of the *doubles*.'²⁶ Although it may be concealed in the Cain myth, the collective character of the persecution is fully visible in the story of Joseph.²⁷ In the studies he wrote afterwards, Girard also uses the murder of Abel to show the difference between the Biblical story and a myth such as that of Romulus and Remus.²⁸ The attention is not so much focused on the mimetic aspects, the jealousy that is usually attributed to Cain, but on the question of God in verse 9a, which, according to the biblical scholar Jan Fokkelman, forms the *emblem* of Genesis: 'Where is Abel, your brother?' That question is missing from the founding of the city of Rome in the myth of Romulus and Remus.

The perspective in Bible stories is different, as Girard does not cease to claim in *Livre II* of *Des choses cachées*, which deals with the Judeo-Christian²⁹ scriptures. It will become a core part of his work, not only in studies that explicitly deal with Biblical themes. At the beginning of this book II, Girard anthropologically substantiates his scapegoat hypothesis by signaling 'similarities between the myths of the Bible and other myths' and he discusses the special nature of the Bible. In the myth about the founding of the city of Rome, he writes, the question of whether Romulus is a murderer does not arise.³⁰ Didn't Remus commit an offense by not respecting the city's 'border'? Romulus is acquitted: he is given the status of sacrificer and high priest.³¹ Cain, however, is not absolved of guilt and must realize that he is a murderer.³² When asked where his brother is, he answers (Gen. 4: 9b-10): 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper? And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.'" There is a clear parallelism with the transgression in the previous

²⁵ *Id.*: 96, NL 67.

²⁶ Girard (1978): 47 (NL 1990): 53 EN (1987/2017): 37.

²⁷ *Id.* 173 (NL 1990: 189) EN (1987/2017): 143.

²⁸ Girard is sparse with notes in all his works: it is unclear to what extent he elaborates in this comparison on what Augustine remarks about the differences between Cain and Abel on the one hand and Romulus and sparrows on the other (*De civitate Dei*, Book XV: 5): 'It is therefore written about Cain that he founded a city, while Abel, stranger as he was, did not found one. [] The difference is [] that [Romulus and Remus] were both citizens of the earthly city. [] Cain and Abel, however, were not equals in lust for earthly goods. [] What asserted itself here was that diabolical envy, which the bad bear to the good [] (NL pp. 674-679).

²⁹ The term Judeo-Christian is controversial in Jewish circles and is often misused, but it appears regularly in Rabbi Sacks (2015).

³⁰ Of course, a distinction must be made between the myth and poems or historical works of later times. Cf. a famous (political) poem by Horace (*Epoden 7: 17*) from which Sacks (2015: 88) quotes: *Sic est: acerba fata Romanos agunt / scelusque fraternae necis, / ut inmeritis fluxit in terram Remi / sacer nepotibus cruor*. 'So it is: a bitter fate drives the Romans, the crime of fratricide, since the blood of Remus, who was innocent, fled to the ground, as a curse for posterity.' See also the entry 'Romulus und Remus' in the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, Volume 11: 827-831.

³¹ Girard (1978): 170 (NL 1990): 186.

³² Here too, the course of the Genesis story could lead to the question: how could Cain know what a murder is at all? Cf. Zucker (2020).

chapter: Adam, too, when he has eaten of the forbidden fruit and hid himself, was told: 'Where are you Adam?' It is not clear from the text whether Cain repents after the curse that is pronounced on him. The sign that God gives to Cain in verse 15 is that *he* would not also be killed by vengeance. Expansion of the conflict, leading to more bloodshed and violence, must be discouraged. The basic murder leads to a law against murder.

Later, Girard will no longer use the word 'myth' for biblical stories and will reserve this word for texts in which the scapegoat mechanism appears to be justified. In *Des choses cachées*, the difference between the two begins to take shape: in myths we can indeed distinguish layers of reality, but that requires a reversal in our thinking because we are often used to considering them as fiction. However, a myth is more than an 'autonomous signifying system' and has a reference to something other than itself: it is not a fabrication, but a text modelled on the belief in the guilt of their victim, including the belief in his divinity. Myths capture the view of the community that was reconciled by the collective murder and is unanimously convinced that it was a sacred act. The step from the concealing reading of myths (and persecution texts) to the revealing reading of them is, according to Girard, an important step in intellectual history.³³

In the course of the 1980s, this insight led him to adopt a new definition of the concept of myth:³⁴ 'a myth is an account of scapegoating narrated from the viewpoint of the persecutors.'³⁵ That is why Bible stories, despite the many mythical elements, should not be considered myths:³⁶ after all, in their attention to victims, they begin to reveal the scapegoat mechanism, culminating for Girard in the Gospels. Spread throughout his books, he substantiates his arguments for this not only with examples from European mythology, but also elsewhere from the hidden point of view of the scapegoat.³⁷

It is striking that mimesis has hardly any place in Girard's discussions of 'the first murder'. A close reading of verses 3 and 4 shows: Cain is the first in Genesis to offer a sacrifice. And Abel *follows him in this*, as it literally says in verse 4: 'And Abel, *he also* brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof.' (KJV). Does this imply that Cain also offered the best of the fruits of the field? Or can it be deduced from this that the addition 'of the firstlings' and of 'the fat thereof' shows that Abel wanted to surpass his brother? That he provoked Cain?³⁸ Did mimesis arise through *comparison*,³⁹ which allowed mimetic desire to develop, which led to jealousy, anger and murder?

³³ Girard (1978: 171).

³⁴ For the relationship between Girard's view and that of other ethnologists, see the well-organized chapter III "Myth" by Golsan (1993).

³⁵ Girard (1987): 79.

³⁶ 'So there is apparently a fundamental difference between the Hebrew Bible and the myths for the problem that concerns us. What cannot be imagined in biblical monotheism is the divine that arises from the victim mechanisms, while this is the case in archaic polytheism' (Girard 1999: 170-171 NL 2000: 110).

³⁷ For the Tikopia and Ojibwa Indians see Girard (1978): 114 et seq., for the Yahuna Indians (1987): 79, for the myth of Prajapati from India (1987): 83, for a South African Venda myth Golsan (1993): 151, for Teotihuacan among the Aztecs (1982), chapter 5, for that of the Old Norse Balder (1982) ditto. Comprehensive, with special attention to the Vedic tradition (2011).

³⁸ 'Rabbenu Nissim writes that [] Abel never thought of bringing an offering until he saw Cain do bring his gift, then he was aroused as well to bring one, but he did it to make him [Cain] look bad in God's eyes, to show him up, to make him look smaller than him. Therefore, he brought from the best of his flocks and their fats, so that Cain's gift would not be pleasant [to God] when compared to his gift. This doesn't exonerate Cain, but it mitigates his actions as having been based on his (false) perception of what happened with the sacrifice.' (Zucker 2020, note 26)

³⁹ Cf. Duyndam (2009): 245.

3 ABRAHAM, SARAH AND HAGAR; ISHMAEL AND ISAAC

Genesis is about man's freedom of choice⁴⁰ and responsibility. In line with this, the question is what the basis of society will be: bloodshed or - painfully obtained - harmony? Violence and hatred - or reconciliation? The events after the murder of Abel already indicate a different direction than what is usual in archaic myths. In chapter 4 verse 17 it says that Cain builds a city – with him the culture begins.⁴¹ The chapter ends with his offspring, with the birth of his brother Seth, and only then does he disappear from the story. The sinner is not written off – which led Voltaire to the question: what kind of God is that, what kind of Christian God is he who is on the side of Cain, who protects a murderer?⁴² Girard, in 'Modernity, Postmodernity and Beyond', an added chapter in the English version of *Les origines de la culture*, argues that this question can only be answered by a biblical reading of foundation myths, which teaches why the first collective murder leads to the harshest punishment for murder.

Genesis continues with genealogies, the flood, Noah, the tower of Babel and from chapter 12, when the Torah turns from the universal to the particular, Abram comes into the picture, to whom God gives the well-known command: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.' A new story begins, again not without mimetic desire, rivalry and conflicts, beginning with the women through whom the first patriarch begot sons. In the next generation, the struggle appears to continue. We are in chapter 16 of Genesis, when Sarai, Abram's wife who cannot have children, desperately advises her husband that he should sleep with her slave Hagar: 'Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai' (16:2) – a precursor to today's surrogacy? The couple has lived in Canaan for ten years when Abram sleeps with Hagar and she becomes pregnant.

When Hagar noticed that she was pregnant, 'she looked with contempt on her mistress' and Sarai told Abram: 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!' Abram, apparently embarrassed, answered her: "'Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.'" Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.' Hagar flees into the desert, but is not abandoned there: an angel of the Lord found her at a spring of water in the desert and admonished her: 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her' (16: 9). He also promises that her offspring will be numerous, 'so that they cannot be numbered for multitude'. She bore a son for Abram, who was 86 years old, and he called him Ishmael '*God hears*'.

When in Genesis 17 the covenant has been made by God, Abram has become Abraham, circumcision has been instituted and Sarai will henceforth be called Sarah, God says that Sarah will also have a son.

⁴⁰ Gelander (1997: 59) believes that the author of Genesis was aware of the dangers of that freedom of choice and raises the question whether there was no other possibility than to show its existence in the worst possible way [the murder of Cain].

⁴¹ Westermann (1986: 57) remarks that, contrary to the myth of Prometheus, there is no need here for a robbery and cultural hero who wrests the achievements of culture from the gods. 'The achievements potentially lie in the blessing given by God to his creature.'

⁴² Quoted from Girard (2004a) EN (2008): 260. I am unable to find out the exact location of this quotation in French, it seems to come from the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764). Girard (*id.*: 267) refers to *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, vol. 62: 466-7.

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" ([Genesis 17:17-18](#))

That last sentence is remarkable, because it has often been presented as if Abraham did not care about Ishmael.⁴³ But that is not true: the love between father Abraham and his son Ishmael is unmistakable. Isaac may have been chosen by God for a certain purpose, but Ishmael was not rejected. In verses 20-21, God says, 'As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.' When Abraham circumcises himself as a 99-year-old, he also circumcises the then 13-year-old Ishmael:⁴⁴ the sign of the covenant family.

Only in chapter 21, after numerous vicissitudes, when Abraham is a hundred years old, Sarah gives birth to a son. She says in verse 6: 'God made me laugh; anyone who hears it will laugh with me'. The boy's name, Isaac, *Yitzhak*, (from the verb *tsachaq*) means 'he may laugh'. But then: when there is a feast when Isaac is taken from the breast, his older half-brother Ishmael has to laugh at him, mockingly – and yes, Sarah gets angry again, at Hagar and 'that son of hers':

"Drive away this slave girl and her son, for the son of this slave girl will not inherit with my son, with Isaac." These words were utterly evil in the eyes of Abraham, because of his son.
(Genesis 21:10-11)

What was Abraham to do in this conflictual situation? God explained to him that he should not look at it that way, that he should listen to Sarah, 'for only through Isaac will you have an offspring that bears your name.' (21: 12). But the son of the slave girl will also be made a people. And so, the next morning, Abraham provided Hagar with bread and a sack of water, put the child on her shoulder, and sent her away. Once again, she wanders around in despair, in the desert near Beersheba, realizing that her son will not make it. And even now an angel comes to save them. "Then God opened her eyes, so that she saw a well. She walked over, filled the bag with water and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy and he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt" (Gen. 19-21).

Genesis continues in chapter 22 with the famous story of the *Aqēdat Yīṣḥāq* 'binding of Isaac'.⁴⁵ In mimetic theory, it functions, among other things, to discuss the replacement of a human sacrifice by an animal sacrifice. Girard mentions it in *La violence et le sacré* when he hints at a Muslim tradition in which the very ram that Abel sacrificed is delivered by God to Abraham, so that he would sacrifice it instead of his son Isaac. 'What we have here is no mystical hocus-pocus, but an intuitive insight into the essential function of sacrifice, gleaned exclusively from the scant references in the Bible.'⁴⁶

⁴³ Sacks (2015): chapter 6 'The Half-Brothers', 107 ff.

⁴⁴ Islam states, among other things, on the basis of this text that it was Ishmael who was chosen, not Isaac. 'He, after all, was the first of Abraham's children to be circumcised and carry the sign of the covenant. Muslims accused Jews of falsifying the biblical text, rewriting it, to make Isaac the hero' (Sacks 2015): 109.

⁴⁵ In the Christian tradition often called 'the sacrifice of Abraham' or 'the sacrifice of Isaac'.

⁴⁶ Girard (1972): 14 (EN 1977): 4-5 NL (1994): 10.

Contact between Sarah and Hagar has not been restored since Hagar was chased away.⁴⁷ In chapter 23, Sarah dies at the age of 127. A wife is sought for Isaac (Rebekah) and Abraham himself gets another wife, Keturah, who bears him six children. When he has bequeathed all his property to Isaac, he dies at the age of 175.

Important for the theme of rivalry in Genesis is that one of the half-brothers does not kill the other. In Genesis 25:9 we read that Isaac and Ishmael, the sons of Abraham, who seem to have had no further contact with each other, buried him in the cave of Machpelah; Together they stand at their father's grave. Jonathan Sacks interprets: neither Abraham nor Isaac was at peace with the banishment of the handmaid and the child. When Sarah was no longer alive, they were free to bring about reconciliation: Isaac and Ishmael came together when Abraham died. In line with Girard's work, Sacks writes: 'It is now clear why Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been locked in a violent, sometimes fatal embrace for so long. Their relationship is sibling rivalry, fraught with mimetic desire: the desire for the same thing, Abraham's promise.'⁴⁸ And of course, in the rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac, one may wonder: why was Ishmael not chosen? Sacks believes: because he has physical strength and shrewdness. It is Ishmael's natural strength that does *not* make him fit to continue the Covenant – but he is not blackened.

In line with Girard's thinking, Sacks then argues that this is not the world of myth, with simple plots and two-dimensional characters: 'in myth Ishmael would be a tragic hero, strong, resourceful, combative - but defeated by an implacable fate. Abraham would have sent him away, fearing that he would one day become a threat. Ishmael might return unexpectedly, killing Abraham not realising that he is his father, and we would then have a biblical version of Oedipus.'⁴⁹ In that sense, Genesis is a *subversion* of the myth, a *counter-narrative*, constructed in such a way that our sympathy is even more likely to go out to Hagar and her son than to the rancorous Sarah. Certainly, she is the first Jewish mother, Isaac the first Jewish child, with whom history continues. Yet he does *not* take the place of his half-brother. Ishmael will have a different destiny, but he too remains a beloved son of Abraham: he is blessed four times.⁵⁰

4 JACOB AND ESAU

Sarah's son Isaac also gets a consort: the story about 'the bridal recruitment' in Genesis 24 ends when Isaac has his wife enter the tent of his mother Sarah: 'And he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death' (v. 67). Narratologically, Isaac can be regarded as a *flat character*: he does not develop much and there is no conflict like the one between Sarah and Hagar: Isaac is the only patriarch who has only one wife.

Like her mother-in-law Sarah, Isaac's wife Rebekah is barren. 'And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife [] and the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived (25:21).⁵¹ Of twins, that is, and in her belly the boys start fighting each other, she notices. When she consults the LORD, she is told: 'Two nations are in your womb, and two nations from within you shall be

⁴⁷ The conflict between Sarah and Hagar has also been used by the Christian tradition to emphasize its own superiority. Paul (Galatians 4:21-31) compares the covenant on Sinai to Hagar and enslaved Jerusalem, while he sees Christianity in Sarah. Christians (Isaac) are free, Jews (Ishmael) are slaves.

⁴⁸ Sacks (2015): 98.

⁴⁹ *Id.* 116, NL (2016): 139.

⁵⁰ In Gen. 16: 9-10 (his descendants will be too numerous to count), 17: 20 (where he will be father of twelve kings, 'I will make him into a great nation'), 21: 12-13 (to Abraham: '[Ishmael] is your offspring'), 21: 17-20, where everything is summarized again. (Sacks 2015:110).

⁵¹ Fokkelman (1981: 8) notes that the text does not dwell on Rebekah's negative feelings. Even before we hear of her barrenness, there is already her husband's prayer.

divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger' (25:23). The motif of fraternal strife appears here even before the boys are born; here too, Jonathan Sacks writes, we must be careful not to lapse into dualism with regard to Esau and Jacob: *one bad, the other good*: 'The Biblical narrative is full of nuance. There are no villains without virtues, no heroes without shortcomings.'⁵² This differs from several midrashim in which this contrast is invoked: 'When [Rebekah] would stand adjacent to synagogues and study halls, Jacob would convulse to emerge. That is what is written: "Before I formed you in the belly I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). When she would pass houses of idol worship, Esau would run and convulse to emerge. That is what is written: "The wicked are corrupt from the womb."'⁵³ The tradition of Christianity also shows this contrast – with the usual anti-Judaism.⁵⁴

When Rebekah gives birth, the first child turns out to be ruddy and hairy from head to toe. Then his brother appears, holding the heel of Esau, hence his name Jacob.⁵⁵ Esau becomes a hunter, Jacob lived in tents.⁵⁶ Isaac had a preference for Esau,⁵⁷ because he liked to eat venison, but Rebekah loved Jacob more (the text does not say why): with the contrast between the parents, this verse points forward to what will be central to this story: the stealing of the blessing from Esau by Jacob (chapter 27). But before that happens, Jacob wrests the birthright from his brother:⁵⁸

Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom) Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

René Girard hardly deals with mimetic desire in the stories about Esau and Jacob, but in the first chapter of *La violence et le sacré* the famous 'deceit of Jacob' is about the disguise with animality as a motif in the ritual substitution mechanism. The Bible text about it is in chapter 27, when Isaac, old and blind, feels his end approaching and asks his shaggy-haired, eldest son Esau to serve him venison in order to give him the blessing. But Rebekah had been listening and wants her beloved son Jacob to receive that blessing. She comes up with a ruse:

Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command you. Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves. And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies." But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon

⁵² Sacks (2015) note 10, p. 279 NL (2016): note 129, p. 323.

⁵³ *Bereshit Rabbah* 63: 6. According to the view of Rabbi Yochanan the twins were fighting over the inheritance of *Olam Haze*h 'this world' and *Olam Haba* 'the world to come'. Sacks (2015): 137, *id.*: 'Rabbinic Midrash, for educational reasons, turned Esau into a bad man.'

⁵⁴ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* (Book XVI, 42) where Esau is a prefiguration of the Jews and Jacob of the Christians.

⁵⁵ The Dutch translation (with a pejorative meaning) 'hielenlichter' *heel-lifter* is a case of Hebrew folk etymology; Possibly the meaning is 'he will protect'.

⁵⁶ Like Cain and Abel, they have a different profession: according to anthropologists, distance is a condition for limiting conflicts between siblings. Kim (2001: 69) refers to Aristotle, who writes in his *Rhetoric* (2.10.5) 'that they are envious who are close to each other in time, place, age and status.' Plutarch, in *De fraterno amore*, advised brothers 'to pursue distinct professions in order to avoid sibling rivalry.' That the latter is not always the case, not only the stories in Genesis show.

⁵⁷ Would Esau remind him of his own brother, the rough and noisy Ishmael? (Waskow 1978: 5).

⁵⁸ Genesis (ESV) 25: 29-34.

myself and not a blessing.” His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me.” So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her older son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. (Gen. 27: 8-16)

Although Isaac is suspicious and wonders if he really has Esau in front of him, 'Are you really my son Esau?' (27: 21), the ruse succeeds and when Isaac smelled the smell of Esau's clothes, he pronounced a blessing on him. After the benediction, when Jacob has left, Esau enters, and the deception comes to light, Esau cries out in pain, anger, and sorrow—he concludes, 'The days of mourning for my father are approaching; *then I will kill my brother Jacob.*' But Rebekah advises Jacob to flee to her brother Laban in Haran.

What Girard does with this passage is to draw a comparison between Jacob and a story from Homer's *Odyssey* (book IX), where Odysseus hides among his sheep in the cave of the one-eyed cyclops Polyphemus to escape from the monster, which devours one of Odysseus' companions every day. A plan is carried out to blind Polyphemus using a flaming stake. Mad with anger and pain, the cyclops bars the entrance to the cave to prevent the attackers from escaping. Only his flock of sheep is allowed to go outside to graze. "In a gesture reminiscent of blind Isaac, the Cyclops runs his hands over the back of each sheep as it leaves the cave to make sure that it carries no passenger. Odysseus, however, has outwitted his captor, and he rides to freedom by clinging to the thick wool on the underside of one of the ram."⁵⁹

Girard sees two forms of substitution clashing here: that of one brother by the other and that of an animal for a man. The animal protects the son from the violence that threatens him. Jacob is associated with manipulating the violence of sacrifice - in the Greek world Odysseus plays that role. The two texts explain each other mutually, he believes: the sacrificial interpretation becomes more plausible. In both cases, an animal is placed at the crucial moment between the violence and the person threatened by it. The Cyclops of the *Odyssey* emphasises the fearful menace that hangs over the hero, which is obscure in Genesis, but there the slaughter of the goats and the offering of the savory meat indicate the sacrificial character of the flock that might go unnoticed that is not so immediately noticeable in the sheep of the *Odyssey*. In both cases, man saves himself by identifying with the animal. The temporary removal of the dividing line between humans and sacrificial animals points to the origin of the sacrificial mechanism. The question of what the myths underlying both stories might have looked like is left unanswered by Girard.⁶⁰

Jonathan Sacks, who shows himself indebted to him in his reflections on sibling rivalry,⁶¹ elaborates on Genesis: the desire to have what someone else has ultimately involves the desire to *be* what someone else is. With various references to Girard, he states: 'Nowhere in all literature is this more clearly the case than with the biblical Jacob.'⁶² Jacob wants to take the place of his hunting brother, to lay aside his own identity, *to be* Esau – the child his father loved so much.

⁵⁹ Girard (1972): 15 (EN 1977): 6 (NL 1994): 12.

⁶⁰ It would be interesting to investigate to what extent the Cyclops can be considered a scapegoat: he is portrayed as a monster, he is deviant, has one eye, lives outside the human community, devours people, opposes the collective of Odysseus and his companions, and by blinding him (sacralization by mutilation) they regain their freedom. Elsewhere Girard also wrote about it (1982: 57 EN 1986: 37 NL 1986: 50).

⁶¹ In Elias (2020: 15 ff.) I elaborated on Sacks' vision of Girard. In an interview he stated: 'I was looking at the very roots of human violence. The two people who have had the most profound insight in the 20th century were Sigmund Freud and Rene Girard. Girard's book *Violence and the Sacred* was a very prophetic work.'

⁶² Sacks (2015): 136 NL (2016: 163).

To Isaac's question, "Who are you, my son?" he answers, "Esau, your firstborn." Here too we cannot possibly identify with the deceiver Jacob, but all the more with Esau, when not *he* but *Jacob* receives the blessing from Isaac.

If the author of the story has mentioned Esau's intention to kill Jacob, it is obvious that the reader's expectations are raised: will he find that 'heel-lifter' at Laban's house in Paddan-Aram, will he kill his brother in revenge? But no, for the time being we are hardly told anything more about Esau: the author focuses on all kinds of vicissitudes of Jacob, over a period of twenty-two years, in which he gets a taste of his own medicine from his uncle Laban when he takes his daughters as his wife: the deceiver deceived. Only after breaking away from Laban does he dare to return, a rich man, but still terrified of his brother Esau, who is coming to meet him.

And then follows one of the most intriguing stories of Genesis: 'Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him, until the dawn broke' ((32: 24). A *noche oscura* 'dark night' as a mystic like John of the Cross says, Blaise Pascal speaks of a *nuît de feu*. A night of purification, through which the reader can finally identify with Jacob. Who is the man Jacob wrestles with? An angel of God, as the prophet Hosea says? The rabbis believe that it is the shadow of his brother Esau with whom he fights.

'Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.' (Gen. 32: 25-31).

In *Des choses cachées*, René Girard interprets 'Jacob's fight with the angel', as this scene is often called, as a conflict between *doubles*. He notes that the man with whom Jacob wrestles is only called a god after his expulsion. 'In other words, the combat of *doubles* results in the expulsion of one of the pair, and this is identified directly with the return to peace and order.⁶³ For Girard, this text at the beginning of his reflection on the Judeo-Christian scriptures in Book II is the prelude to establishing the similarities and differences between the 'myths of the Bible and other myths'.

Jonathan Sacks joins in when he deepens the story of Esau and Jacob and indicates very precisely in which respects the biblical text is a counter-narrative. Even after his struggle, Jacob is still afraid of his brother Esau, whom he sees coming towards him with four hundred men. Genesis 33 tells us that he goes before his wives, children and slaves and bows to the ground seven times until he came to his brother. And what does Esau do? Twenty-two years after Jacob's deception, he runs to his brother, falls on his neck, kisses him and weeps. No anger, enmity or threat of revenge. As a reader, you now get sympathy for Esau again: impulsive, easily angry, but forgiving. And how does Jacob react? He had bowed seven times, called Esau "my lord" five times, "servant" twice. Self-humiliation, not 'logical' right? For a man who fought with God and men 'and has *prevailed*'. You would expect Jacob to display a newfound self-confidence, not this submissiveness. Does the youngest serve the oldest here? Opposite to what 'the oracle' mother Rebekah had predicted?

⁶³ Girard (1978): 166-167 EN (1987/2017): 136-137 NL (1990): 182.

If you read the story in the original text more closely, Sacks writes,⁶⁴ you will find out that Jacob was blessed twice.⁶⁵ The *first* blessing, when Isaac in his blindness still thought he had Esau in front of him, was about *wealth* and *power* (Gen. 27: 27-29) Only in the *second* blessing, when Jacob leaves for Laban, Isaac transfers the inheritance of his father Abraham to Jacob (28: 3-4) - which he appears to have always intended. For that blessing, Jacob did not have to disguise himself. The reader can therefore conclude: *the whole deception was not necessary*, Jacob did not have to pretend to be Esau at all. Isaac had never wanted to transfer the so-called 'covenant blessing' to Esau – and thus disinherit Jacob. The brothers each have a different destination. Isaac knew that his children were different. The blessing that Jacob stole had never been intended for him. When Jacob meets Esau again after his 'fight with a man', he gives him back the blessing he had stolen. The cattle that Jacob gives his brother stand for wealth and his bowing to power.

Torah literally means 'teaching': the didactic motive here is that we should not (like Jacob) desire what another has or what another is. Jacob must struggle to find an existential truth about himself. Who was he? The man who longed to be Esau or the man who was called to another destiny? On the surface, the narrative is like a Greek tragedy,⁶⁶ of a type that recurs in all mythological cultures. The refined, youngest brother cleverly takes the place of his stronger, older brother, but at the price of having to fear his revenge. A father dies, the sons fight for the succession. Whoever wins, however, is also defeated in turn. The story about Jacob and Esau is also written to come across as a myth at first reading. The counter-narrative, which is suddenly revealed at the end, is a totally unexpected reversal and involves a rejection of mimesis, rivalry, substitution, anger, violence and revenge.

After the reunion of the brothers, each goes his way, and Jacob arrived *safe* in the city of Shechem (33:18). You could also read, Sacks writes,⁶⁷ that he came out of the fray *completely*.⁶⁸ In the past, when he was plagued by mimetic desire, he was internally divided and thus a prey to fear and anxiety. To be complete, we do not need the blessing that was meant for others, but only for ourselves. Like Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, who separated again after their reconciliation on Jacob's initiative, come together when their father has died. And Isaac breathed his last, and he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.' (35:29).

5 LEAH AND RACHEL

In the chapters about Jacob's vicissitudes between his flight from Esau and the reunion with him after his nightly struggle, it is described how Jacob fared with his uncle Laban, with whom he experienced what it feels like to be deceived himself. Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Jacob was in love with Rachel, and wanted her as a wife as a reward for his labor in the house of Laban.

And he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed."

⁶⁴ Sacks (2015): 134 *et seq.* NL (2016): 158 *et seq.*

⁶⁵ The word 'bless', which is often interpreted as religious in our time, also has to do with prosperity in these texts, with the inheritance.

⁶⁶ Sacks (2015): 141. NL (2016): 168.

⁶⁷ Sacks (2020): 195.

⁶⁸ From Hebrew שלם *sh-l-m*, from which *shalom* 'peace' is derived.

So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.) So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. (Gen. 29:18-31)

Like grandfather Abraham, Jacob has two wives, who, like Sarah and Hagar, rival in this love triangle: *Nebenbuhlerschaft* is what Elisabeth Frenzel calls it in her *Motive der Weltliteratur*:⁶⁹ 'ein Wettstreit um Gunst und Besitz eines geliebten Menschen.' The entry '*Die verfeindeten Brüder*' in this standard work has no less than fourteen pages,⁷⁰ filled with references to stories from Greek myths and tragedies, from the Old Norse Edda - and also from Genesis, followed by the Western literary canon. She only deals with the rivalry between brothers; A comparable lemma about sisters is missing. Freud⁷¹ and Girard,⁷² who both saw *sibling rivalry* as the most primal form of violence, also lack a treatise on the rivalry between women.

Yet this type of rivalry plays a role in the patriarchal culture of Genesis: as Sarah and Hagar showed above, the conflict has its influence on the children Ishmael and Isaac. The conflict between Joseph and his brothers can also partly be traced back to the difficult relationship between their mothers Leah and Rachel. Leah does indeed give birth to sons for Jacob, but she is less loved by him than Rachel and she expresses the sorrow about this in the names she gives her first sons after birth: Reuben, 'for, she said, because YHWH has *looked upon my affliction*; for now my husband will love me' and Simeon, because 'YHWH has *heard* that I am hated, he has given this son also.' (29:32-33). Then Levi and Judah followed.

The tension between the sisters not only relates to their relationship with Jacob, but also to having children. Chapter 30: 1-3: 'When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" Then she said, "Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her."'

Like his father Isaac, Jacob seems to show little compassion for her grief,⁷³ but he follows Rachel's advice and gets a son Dan from 'surrogate mother' Bilhah; when he bears him a second son, Rachel says: 'I have fought a hard battle with my sister and I have conquered.' So she called him Naphtali. And then Leah, who thought she can no longer have children, also gives Jacob her maidservant, Zilpah, by whom he begat Gad and Asher. The story continues with a passage in which the rivalry between the sisters is taking shape:

⁶⁹ Frenzel (1980): 565 ff. She does not mention the relationship between Leah and Rachel in this lemma.

⁷⁰ *Id.*: 80-94.

⁷¹ 'Fassen wir zunächst das Verhältnis der Kinder zu ihren Geschwistern ins Auge. Ich weiß nicht, warum wir voraussetzen, es müsse ein liebevolles sein, da doch die Beispiele von Geschwisterfeindschaft unter Erwachsenen in der Erfahrung eines jeden sich drängen und wir so oft feststellen können, diese Entzweiung rühre noch aus der Kindheit her oder habe von jeher files.' Freud (1900/1982): 255.

⁷² Girard (1978): 166 ff (NL 1990): 183 ff. EN (1987/2017): 136 ff.

⁷³ Bereshit Rabbah 71:7: 'Blessed be He, said the Holy One to Jacob, "Is this the way to answer a woman in fear?"'

In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel said, "Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes." When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night. And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, "God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband." So she called his name Issachar. And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons." So she called his name Zebulun. Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah. Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." And she called his name Joseph, saying, "May the Lord add to me another son!" (Gen. 30: 14-24).

Genesis does not report further about the relationship between the sisters after Rachel also had a son. In chapter 35 she has another son, Benjamin, but she herself dies in childbirth and Jacob buries Rachel on the road to Efrat (Bethlehem). Leah is only mentioned towards the end of Genesis, in chapter 49, when Jacob feels his end approaching and orders his sons to bury him in the field of Machpelah, east of Mamre, in Canaan, where Abraham and Sarah were also buried, Isaac and Rebekah, *and where he appears to have buried Leah*. What has happened to Leah and him in the meantime?⁷⁴

Genesis shows little mutual sympathy in the episodes about the sisters, but as far as I know there is at least one exception in the rabbinic tradition.⁷⁵ When Laban deceives his nephew Jacob by giving him Leah as his wife instead of Rachel, whom he loves, the story does not tell us what Leah and Rachel themselves think about it. Scholder *et al.* (2025) assume that Leah does not have so many problems with the course of events: after all, it would be very embarrassing for her to 'stay over', while her younger sister would already be married. On the question of Rachel's attitude to this, they quote a remarkable passage from the Babylonian Talmud, in response to the verse in which Jacob describes himself to Rachel as 'a *brother* of her father'⁷⁶ – while he is his *nephew*, because Laban is the brother of his mother Rebekah.

It is as it is written: 'And Jacob told Rachel that he was a brother of her father' (Gen 29,12). Was he her father's brother? But wasn't he the son of his father's sister (Gen 28,2)? Rather, it must be understood that when Jacob met Rachel, he said to her, "Will you marry me?" She answered to him, "Yes, but my father is a swindler, and you will not be able to outwit him." Jacob said to her: *I am his brother when it comes to deception. [...]*⁷⁷ He asked her, "What is his deception?" Rachel told him, "I have an older sister, and he will not let me marry before her." So, Jacob gave her certain distinguishing signs that she should use to indicate to him that she was actually Rachel and not her sister [in the darkness of the night]. But when the wedding night arrived, and Laban planned to switch the sisters, Rachel said to herself, Now my sister will be embarrassed, for Jacob will ask her for the signs and she will not know them. So she gave them to her. And this is as it is written (Gen 29:25): 'And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah'. Does this imply by inference that until now she was not Leah? Rather, due to the distinguishing signs that Rachel had given to Leah, he did not know until now, when it was light outside, that she was Leah [Babylonian Talmud, Megila 13b]

This text somewhat answers the question that a 'modern reader' naturally asks: how is it possible that Jacob did not realize that he was not sharing the bed with Rachel, but with Leah? Furthermore, this explanation from the Babylonian Talmud raises the question of whether

⁷⁴ The question why Jacob wanted to be buried with Leah and not with his beloved Rachel has been discussed extensively in Jewish tradition.

⁷⁵ I base myself on Scholder, Van Uden & De Wilde (2025: 30-31).

⁷⁶ Elsewhere, 'blood relative' is translated. The Hebrew נָחַ can mean both 'other', 'relative' and 'brother'.

⁷⁷ Emphasis ME.

outside the canon, possibly in other midrashim, there are allusions to the calming of the rivalry after Rachel had a son. Given their former connection, could there have been a reconciliation between Leah and Rachel after Joseph's birth? I do not know whether there are feminist interpretations of stories about the patriarchs that discuss this.

6 JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

Genesis has an enormous variety in style, tone and genre. In this exploration, I am concerned with the main line in some *narrative* pieces that portray tensions in families, concentrating on passages that clarify key ideas from mimetic theory, first of all from the studies of Girard himself, but then also from the work of Jonathan Sacks, who in the story of Joseph and his brothers delves a little deeper into how reconciliation comes about. From his background, this rabbi with great knowledge of the Jewish tradition has ingeniously placed accents that not only underpin Girard's somewhat *pauschale Gedanken* with a thorough interpretation of the text but also deepen the insight into the development and ending of family conflicts in Genesis.

Both aim to portray the contrast between *la vérité biblique et le mensonge de la mythologie*, as Girard formulates it, apparently with an allusion to his first work, when he compares the biblical Joseph with the mythical Oedipous in *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*.⁷⁸ The difference between the two authors is that Girard extends the line that was started in the Old Testament to the Gospels and (in line with a long Christian tradition) even tends to consider an Old Testament story as a prefiguration of an evangelical truth, while Sacks stays within the tradition of the Hebrew Bible.

Before going into some of the stages in the scapegoat mechanism that can be recognized in the passages about Joseph and his brothers, first a brief summary of this cycle from Genesis, which takes up almost a third of this book of the Bible. The jealousy between Leah and Rachel continues in the next generation when we read that Joseph, the son of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel, is loved by Jacob more than his other sons. He is favored. Israel (Jacob) made for him 'a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him' (Genesis 37: 3-4).

In the story of Joseph, dreams appear to be an important motive and what this brings about starts when he tells his brothers about it:

He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. (Gen. 37:6-11).

In the Esau and Jacob's story, the brothers meet and embrace each other as friends, but then they go their separate ways. In the case of Joseph and his brothers, the entire process of mimetic rivalry, escalation and reconciliation is explained in the most painful detail. The Joseph cycle is about envy, exclusion, temptation and forgiveness – as readers we are tossed back and forth, confused. It always turns out differently than you would expect.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Girard (1999): 177 NL (2000): 117.

⁷⁹ Sacks (2015, NL 2016): Part II *Siblings*, Chapter 8 'Role Reversal'.

When father Jacob sends his son Joseph to his brothers, who turn out to be keeping cattle in Dotan, they see him from afar. There is an element of tension: as readers, we are informed by the omniscient narrator about something that the unsuspecting Joseph cannot know (verses 19-20): 'Here comes that master dreamer [] Let us kill him and throw him into one of these wells ... *Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams*'. However, the very act that was intended to end the dreams is the beginning of a series of events that will lead to Joseph's dreams coming true. Joseph is not murdered, but on the advice of Reuben he is thrown into the well and later sold to Midianite merchants on the advice of Judah - the brothers tell their father Jacob that he has been torn apart by a wild animal, as proof of which they show him the 'robe of many colors' that they had dipped in the blood of a kid. In Egypt, the Midianites sell Joseph as a slave to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh, bringing him to his court.

The motif of the *dream* also appears in Egypt. One may wonder whether the dreams of the sheaves, sun, moon, and stars were a prophecy or 'the fruit of the feverish imagination of a spoiled and overly ambitious boy.'⁸⁰ The tension in the story rests on this ambiguity. Later it will turn out that it will be a message sent by God about the future, when Joseph, who did not let himself be tempted by Potiphar's wife at the court of Pharaoh to share the bed with her, is falsely accused by her of what we now call a #MeToo. He ends up in prison and explains the dreams of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. When the cupbearer is released, he will remember Joseph two years later, when Pharaoh wants to have his dreams explained about the seven fat and skinny cows, and about the seven heavy and spindly ears of grain. The parallelism with Joseph's dreams is evident from the fact that Pharaoh also has two dreams, both of which in Joseph's interpretation appear to represent the fat and lean years that will come. Joseph advises Pharaoh to save grain during the fat years. When he is then released from prison, he is allowed to organize it himself and so Joseph becomes the second man in Egypt.

Years later, the confrontation takes place with his brothers, who have gone to Egypt on the advice of their father Jacob to buy grain there, because there is a famine in the land of Canaan. And what Joseph, the hero of this cycle, was already revealed in his early dreams, he sees as a thirty-year-old, after a long *quest*, come true: they bowed down to him – but they do not recognize him. And he leaves it that way for the time being – as a reader you see the *flashback* about this withholding of information: the brothers had not told their father what had really happened to Joseph. You may now ask yourself: will Joseph take revenge on his brothers from his position of power, will he also throw them into a pit - or imprison, torture, sell, kill? No, that doesn't happen. Genesis aims at reconciliation of the *verfeindeten Brüder*. That arrogant dreamer of the past – our perspective reverses, and we get sympathy for Joseph, who lets his brothers go through a therapeutic process, as it were,⁸¹ in which they realize what they have done, start to repent, a 'heart change' - *teshuvah* in Hebrew - 'turnaround' is also translated.

How does that story take shape? Benjamin, the other favorite son of Jacob (also a child of Rachel) Joseph wants to hold hostage for alleged deception when the brothers want to buy grain from him on a second trip to Egypt. And then it turns out that his relatives have learned their lesson: they don't want to do this to their old father and Judah, the one who had come up with the plan to sell him - offers himself as a replacement. Whereupon Joseph, who can no longer contain his emotions and bursts into sobs, makes himself known: 'I am Joseph!'. The ordeal is over, and Joseph is able to reveal his true identity. But still. When the family is reunited in

⁸⁰ Sacks (2020): 240-41.

⁸¹ Sacks (2025): 71 has the title for the parasha *Wayigash* 'The first psychotherapist'; p. 73: '[Joseph] was the first to understand what we today call 'reframing' or 'rethinking', that is: learning to look differently at negative events in your life, so that you can free yourself from depression and learned helplessness.

Egypt, Jacob feels his end approaching and blesses all his sons and dies, the brothers become afraid that Joseph will still take revenge on them – just as Esau also planned to kill his brother Jacob after the death of his father Isaac. But father Jacob had foreseen that:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants."

But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50: 15-21).

A happy ending to the book of Genesis. In retrospect, the narrator seems to have worked towards this denouement from Cain's murder of Abel. *Verfeindete Brüder* must learn what it means not to let conflicts turn into murder and manslaughter, but to solve them, to bring about reconciliation, to forgive and to live together peacefully – even if they do not occupy the same position with their parents. The latter had already taken shape in Genesis 48 in the blessing that father Jacob gives to Joseph's sons - not as it should be, according to Joseph, first the eldest and then the youngest, but first Ephraim and only then his older brother Manasseh: in contrast to his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham, Jacob has a preference for the youngest: he loved Rachel more than Leah, Joseph more than his older sons. 'The entire life of Jacob is a set of variations on the danger of favouritism and the grief to which it gives rise.'⁸²

In *Des choses cachées*, Girard uses the story of Joseph to further shape his hypothesis about the scapegoat in relation to the mythological perspective elsewhere. After his explanation of Cain, this is a second illustration of his argument in the paragraph 'The distinctiveness of the biblical myths', the opening sentence of which reads: 'Although it may be concealed in the Cain myth, the collective character of the persecution is fully visible in the story of Joseph.'⁸³ His thesis is that the authors of Genesis have recast a preexistent mythology, which involves inverting the relationship between the victim and the persecuting community. From the mythological perspective, Girard supposes, 'the eleven brothers would appear first of all as the passive objects of violence inflicted by a malevolent hero, then as the recipients of the benefits conferred by this same hero after he has been victimized and deified. Joseph would thus be at first a cause of disorder, and a remnant of this can be surmised from the dreams that he recounts, dreams of domination that excite the jealousy of his eleven brothers. The original myths would no doubt have sanctioned the charge of hubris. The kid that provided the blood in which Joseph's tunic was dipped in order to prove to his father Jacob that he was really dead, would have played a directly sacrificial role in the pre-biblical account.' About the relationship with Potiphar's wife, Girard writes that the accusation in the Biblical story, in contrast to the Oedipus myth, is described as false. His interlocutor Guy Lefort adds that in the figure of Joseph, the victim has desacralizing effects: he no longer has anything demonic or divine but is quite simply human.

The comparison between Joseph and Oedipus that Girard touches on here is not discussed further in this book.⁸⁴ In 1983, Girard presented a paper in California and discussed ritual murder and cultural formation with Walter Burkert, Jonathan Smith (and the Dutch Frits Staal),

⁸² Sacks (2015); 145 NL (2016): 172.

⁸³ Girard (1978): 173 et seq. NL (1990): 189 et seq. EN (1987/2017): 143 et seq.

⁸⁴ Neither did Sandor Goodhart, who in the spring of 1983 gave a lecture at the Colloque de Cérisy under the title 'Je suis Joseph' (Dumouchel (ed.) (1985): 69-83. Translated in Goodhart (2014): 3-31.

among others:⁸⁵ in it, he sharpens his view that the 'demythification in our world comes from the Bible'⁸⁶ by once again comparing the Oedipus myth with the story of Joseph:⁸⁷ Oedipus is expelled from Thebes twice, each time for a reason that the myth considers valid. From the beginning, he is a danger to his family and the entire city. In the myth it is said that the second time he really killed his father, slept with his mother and is responsible for the plague. Joseph is also expelled twice: first as a child by his own family and then as an adult in Egypt, where he is considered guilty of sleeping with the wife of his patron. Girard compares this crime to the incest of Oedipus,⁸⁸ but unlike the Egyptians and the Greeks, who believe such an accusation without evidence, the Bible considers it a lie. Joseph is also not accused of the drought in 'the lean years' but was able to take measures.

Oedipus is also discussed in another context in *Le bouc émissaire*,⁸⁹ where Girard strips the myth 'of its Greek clothing' in order to dress it in a Western way, i.e. as an account of an unjust exorcism.⁹⁰ In a subsequent study, he is compared to the Biblical Job.⁹¹ In relation to the Joseph cycle, a further explanation follows in *Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*,⁹² which in turn ties in with the line that was started in *Des choses*: the mimetic crisis and the victim mechanism that characterize both stories. Girard sees parallel passages in the solving of the riddle of the sphinx by Oedipus⁹³ and the deciphering of pharaoh's dreams by Joseph. Both are foreigners, suspects anyway, and show an alternation of adaptations and rejections. This is the common denominator of the mythical and the biblical, but it also makes the distance clear on the points of collective violence, rationale and legitimacy. In the myth, the victim is wrong, with Joseph it is the other way around: he is right to his jealous brothers, to the Egyptians who imprison him and to Potiphar's libidinous wife. The question is always: did the hero deserve his repudiation? With Oedipus the answer is yes, with Joseph three times no. Joseph's eventual victory, according to Girard, is not just an insignificant 'happy ending,' but a way of emphatically addressing the problem of the violent expulsions of 'malevolent individuals.'

Interestingly, in *I see Satan falling like lightning*, Girard elaborates here on the question of referentiality that he dealt with in *Des choses cachées* in his polemic with structuralists⁹⁴. Biblical truth transcends the so-called reality or non-reality of the events we are told.⁹⁵ What constitutes the truth of the Joseph story, is not his possible similarity with a fact outside the text, but his criticism of the expulsions in the myths, justified, since those expulsions are always motivated by mimetic contaminations and therefore cannot be the result of considered impartial judgments. The difference between the biblical story and the myth of Oedipus or any other myths is no easy feat. There is no greater difference imaginable. It is the difference between a world where random violence triumphs without being recognized and a world in which that same violence is seen through, denounced and finally forgiven. *C'est la différence entre une vérité et un mensonge l'un et l'autre absolus*.⁹⁶ The story of Joseph is tantamount to saying no to the religious illusions of paganism. It reveals a universal human truth that is not relative. In

⁸⁵ Hamerton-Kelly (1987). The title of Girard's paper was 'Generative Scapegoating', 74-105.

⁸⁶ *id.*, 117

⁸⁷ *id.*, 115-116.

⁸⁸ By considering Joseph in the house of Potiphar as a kind of son.

⁸⁹ Girard (1982): chapter III, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un mythe', 37-67 NL (1986): 33-59, EN (1986): 24-44.

⁹⁰ *Id.*: 45-46 NL 40 EN 29.

⁹¹ Girard (1985), in particular Part II, Chapter 3, 'Oedipe et Job', 52-63, NL (1987): 44-53.

⁹² Girard (1999): 170-189 NL (2000): 110-122.

⁹³ In [Elias](#) (1998: 51, 53, 138, 166-167) I discussed the specific characteristics of the riddle.

⁹⁴ On 'le signifiant transcendantal' see Girard (1978): 108-113 NL (1990): 119-124, EN (1987/2027): 93-98. For a further elaboration of the reference problem, see Elias (1992).

⁹⁵ See above (p. 7) on the definition of a myth, more than an 'autonomous signifying system'.

⁹⁶ Girard (1999): 180 NL (2000): 116-117.

other words, even though the Joseph cycle, like the Oedipus myth, is a story whose historicity we cannot determine, it does anticipate what we later came to call 'history', in which unjustified accusations against outsiders, 'monsters', witches and other scapegoats are refuted. Girard had previously written about this in *The Scapegoat*, with a lot of attention to the stereotypes of persecution.

In a book that is entirely about Oedipus, he seems to take up that line of thought again in the last chapter, 'The Myth of Oedipus, the Truth of Joseph'.⁹⁷ The fact that we have no historical evidence for the collective violence in myth is not very important, Girard writes: it is not a question of where and when things took place, but of bringing together mythological themes and attaching meaning to them, in the awareness that they do not merely spring from a peaceful and purely poetic imagination. Oedipus is limping and when a society is in panic, a physical disability increases the chances of becoming a victim, especially if it is also a successful stranger. Historians are aware of this when it comes to persecution texts from the Middle Ages, but in the study of myths people are not yet aware of this mechanism.

The story of Joseph, which rehabilitates the victim, can counterbalance this, not about *the* truth of the Bible, but about its anthropological truth: the stories expose the faith on which mythology is based as a harsh system of representation. It can be qualified as idolatry and although many believe in it, the truth of the persecution eventually comes to light, not as the fruit of reason, as the eighteenth-century philosophers and contemporary humanists assume, but through the influence of the Bible in our culture. According to Girard, the superiority of that perspective is not recognized in the comparative study of religion, which is stuck in the dream of 'science and objectivity' - the modern myth *par excellence*, which wants to erase the differences between the two perspectives. With the unique truth of the victim, Bible stories not only distinguish themselves from myths, but form the source of all demythologizations, which constitutes an ethical appeal to humanity.

For this reason, we can speak of *la vérité biblique et le mensonge de la mythologie* – but that is not a 'religious' truth in a strictly defined sense.

7 CONCLUSION

If we look at the family conflicts in the book of Genesis, it is striking that after Cain's murder of Abel, there is a development in the stories from Abraham onwards in which the expectation that a conflict escalates and leads to murderous violence is not fulfilled. In the long Joseph cycle, step by step it is told how a potential scapegoat is rehabilitated and can eventually bring about reconciliation.

Both René Girard and Jonathan Sacks always emphasize how much Genesis differs from myths in this respect. The difference between the two – apart from the fact that one works from a Christian perspective and the other in the Jewish tradition – is that Girard mainly uses the Bible to substantiate his hypotheses about the scapegoat mechanism and has less eye for the subtleties on which these stories are built up in detail and give shape to that difference. Sacks does and emphasizes how the Hebrew Bible - for the West the most important text on human freedom - proves that repentance can change someone.

Genesis is about failure, about learning lessons from that failure and about discovering that change is possible. Because the story of Joseph is the conclusion of Genesis, fratricidal strife 'is

⁹⁷ Girard (2004b), 107–113.

not written down in indelible ink in the script of human life.⁹⁸ The brothers have changed, Jozef shows that he is not a prisoner of resentment. People can free themselves from the violent dynamics of revenge and retribution. In Sacks' view, freedom is also about the possibility of shaping our conception of the past ourselves and of partly healing the painful legacy from it.

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⁹⁸ Sacks (2015); 157 NL (2016): 172.

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