St Boniface London

GERMAN-SPEAKING CATHOLIC PARISH



Hans Feibusch

Five Stories
from the
Old Testament

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Dear reader,

For more than 200 years, the German-speaking Roman Catholic Chaplaincy in London has had its home in St Boniface in Whitechapel, an East End district that was once known as 'Little Germany' and which notably offered protection to Jewish immigrants. By displaying the works of Hans Feibusch, an artist of both German and Jewish origin, in this setting, we are thus deliberately recalling local history.

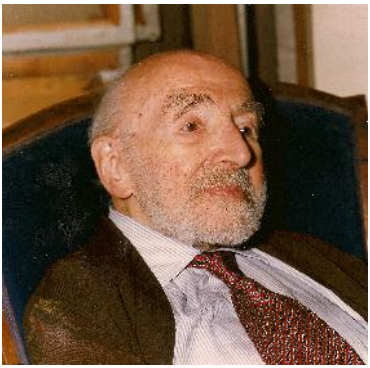
Feibusch originally created his picture cycle Five Stories from the Old Testament for the Stern Hall of the West London Synagogue. The works finally found their way to us in 2021 via the Ben Uri Gallery, to whom we are deeply indebted for this exceptional permanent loan, and they have inspired art lovers and believers alike ever since.

The sermons here offer a spiritual reading of the paintings, looking at them in relation to the biblical texts on which they are based and reflecting on their relevance today. I hope they will give you food for thought and encourage you to explore the expressive artistic world of Hans Feibusch for yourself.

All good wishes,



Hans Feibusch



* 15.08.1898 in Frankfurt/Main, son of Jewish parents

1916-18 soldier on the Russian front

1920 studies at the Academic College of Fine Arts Berlin, master student of expressionist Karl Hofer

1925 back to Frankfurt, member of the "Frankfurter Künstlerbund"

1931 award from the Prussian Academy of Arts for painting "The Fishmonger"

1933 exclusion from Frankfurter Künstlerbund

Emigration, exile in Britain

1934 member of the London Group of artists

1937 "Zwei Schwebende" displayed in "Entartete Kunst" exhibition in Munich.

Known for his church murals

1937 "The Footwashing" in the New Methodist Hall, Colliers Wood

1938 awarded British citizenship

1939 revocation of German citizenship

1944 first exhibition at the Royal Academy

1948 Mural Painting, published by A & C Black

Painting commissioned by the Bishop of Chichester, George Bell

1965 conversion to Christianity

Largest mural in St Alban the Martyr, Holborn

1973 picture cycle Old Testament

1989 Commander's Cross / Great Cross of Merit from Federal Republic of Germany

Return to the Jewish faith

† 18.07.1998 in Camden, London, buried at Golders Green Jewish Cemetery

‘Lord, why?’
Ex 32:11

The Law from Mount Sinai

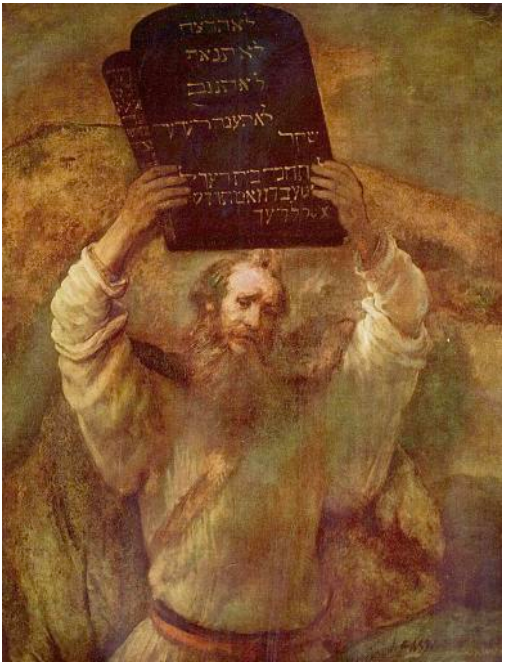
Reading: Ex 32:7-11.14-20, Gospel: Mt 5:1-12



Moses's pile of shards are not the end

This is the only painting in Feibusch's series of Old Testament stories in our church that features only one figure. It is as if this in itself is making a point about how extraordinary Moses was, and what an extraordinary moment the picture portrays. With the stone tablets in his hand, Moses is usually quickly recognised. He is effectively the greatest of the Old Testament Jewish prophets. It is to Moses that God reveals His name in the burning bush, to him He entrusts the liberation of His people from slavery in Egypt, and to him, at Sinai, He entrusts the Law which has had a civilising effect far beyond Judaism. We know it as 'the Ten Commandments'. Thousands of years after Moses, people all over the world who want to live a good life still look to them for guidance.

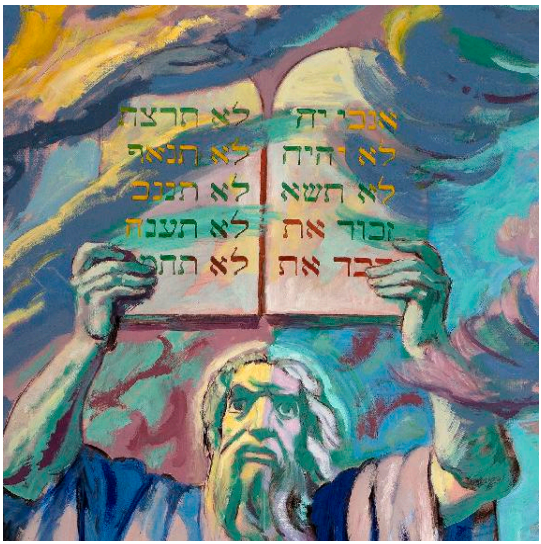
Feibusch celebrates Moses and this key moment in his characteristic bright colours, chiefly blue, the colour of the heavens, the divine sphere. However, the moment when a human encounters God remains as taboo for him as it is in the Old Testament story. As in many other places in the Bible, the moment when a human actually meets God is so intimate that no third-party description can do it justice, either in words or pictures. Instead, Feibusch shows us what follows: Moses coming down from the mountain holding up the stone tablets inscribed with the first two words of each of the Ten Commandments. Yet, strictly speaking, Moses comes down from the mountain twice. The first time, when he hears the noise of the people, and sees the dance around the 'golden calf', he angrily smashes the tablets at the foot of the mountain. It's a delicate moment, because however well we can imagine Moses's annoyance that his people have no patience, that they still don't trust God and could not resist an idol of their own making, we still have to remember that what Moses smashes here is nothing less than God's word: tablets 'inscribed by the finger of God' as the Bible explicitly says (Ex 31:18). Is this a prophet whose holy anger is justified? Or is it a man who is so angry that he contradicts God now himself, and thus threatens to destroy his own future and that of his entire people?



There is a famous painting by Rembrandt from 1659 called 'Moses Smashing the Tablets of the Law'. The parallels to our painting are striking. The similarities of composition and figure drawing

thus raise the question of whether Feibusch could have taken the Rembrandt as a model when he set out to capture the same dramatic moment. In that case, we would be dealing with a Moses who throws the tablets at our feet [like 'pearls before swine' to use the Bible's words (Mt 7:6)], along with the unspoken but resonant reproach that we are no better than the Israelites of old, as we dance around the golden calves of today. Our painting would then need to be understood first and foremost as a reminder, to always check the focus of our thinking, speaking and doing: is it the one autonomous God - or our many self-made idols?! This is an important question not only legitimate but absolutely necessary, if a religion is not to 'go astray'.

And yet, I believe that Feibusch is showing us Moses not on his first descent from the mountain, but only after he had returned to God in repentance, and asked forgiveness for himself and his people. This time, Moses himself had to write the words on the tablets (Ex 34:28). A small but not unimportant shift in the history of religion, which now presents us with 'God's Word in men's words' (as do the Gospels). That is to say: instead of approaching God's word with slavish fidelity as something inviolable, we are always obliged to uncover its divine core. For even Moses – as we have just seen – is not infallible. This may sound like complex hermeneutic theory, but Feibusch finds a simple and effective image to put it across: the veils of cloud which envelop not only the new tablets, but also, partly, Moses. The cloud which no human can touch or see through has always been an image of God in the Bible. In Feibusch's work, the wisps of cloud now point to the origin of the tablets. Moses seems to have just received them from the cloud. Even if they are inscribed by him, they breathe the spirit of God. And even he, with whom God spoke 'as a man talks to his friend' (Ex 33:11) — even the greatest of the prophets remains literally subject to Him. It seems that Feibusch originally had a different posture in mind for Moses, as we can see if we compare this painting with his earlier sketch, which still survives. Here, Moses is still holding the tablets with both hands in front of his left breast. It is important to know that pious Jews put on the 'tefillin' for prayer, that is, they bind to the front of their forehead and around their left arm a small box containing a scroll on which the Shma Israel is written. This is the central creed of the Jews, which begins with the words: 'Listen Israel, Yahweh our God is the one, the only Yahweh.' (Dt 6:4-9). It is meant to shape the head and heart of the person praying and be close to him always.



It is not by chance that these words remind us of the first commandment of the Decalogue. And so it probably made sense to Feibusch to make Moses hold the tablets like tefillin against his heart. Even if he ultimately decided on a different representation, the sketch still gives us an idea of the way Feibusch was thinking, not wanting to show us an angry Moses who destroys the Word of God, but a mediator who brings it close to us and entrusts it to us as a treasure. Feibusch, who crosses the border between Judaism and Christianity, is also entirely in tune with the New Testament Gospel, where the account of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount is analogous with the episode of Moses on Mount Sinai. Both men have in mind a directive from God, which seeks not to oppress or command, but to create a safe place to live for everyone, not least for those who are too often denied dignity and justice. They should be in our midst. They should be the centre of attention. In God's eyes, that would be a real reason to dance!



‘…your God will be my God.’
Rut 1:16



Naomi’s homecoming

Reading: Rt 1:7-10-14-17, Gospel: Mt 8:18-22

Naomi, Ruth und Orpah at the crossroads

The Old Testament usually has two prejudices to contend with: Firstly, people say it is all about men, and merely reflects the patriarchal society of its time; secondly, they argue that it defines God and His people Israel only by distinguishing them from other peoples or making them their enemies. The Book of Ruth, however, refutes both claims in such an impressive way, that a thousand years later, no less a figure than Goethe spoke of it as the 'loveliest little tale ever handed down to us in epic and idyllic form'. (West-Eastern Divan) Now, from a literary point of view, this may well be so, but the subject matter of this little book is anything but lovely or idyllic: the story begins with a famine and a flight from home, the women lose their husbands and children, and have to fight for survival, with little legal or economic protection: an existential drama that sounds to me more like Job's sufferings than the 'loveliest little tale ever handed down to us in idyllic form'.

The narrative must have struck Feibusch differently, too, not least in view of his own flight from Nazi Germany, and the economic and cultural challenges of his English exile. In any case, I am not surprised that he engaged creatively with this episode and included it in his series of five Old Testament stories. And so the women, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah now hang in our Church alongside the better-known greats — Abraham, Moses, Jacob and David — and that's a good thing. Not because of gender justice (a well-intentioned tick-box exercise) but because these women tell us an important story about what it means to be human.



The story goes like this: back then, the Israelites and the Moabites were not allies – far from it. It was there in black and white in the Torah (Dt 23:5) that the Moabites refused to give the people of Israel bread and water on their way through the desert. And evil tongues even said the Moabites owed their existence to an incestuous liaison of Lot (Gn 19:36 f). In short, for Israelites to find shelter, food and a future in neighbouring Moab because of a famine was nothing less than social dynamite in Israel. But this is exactly how the story of Naomi and her family begins. And we can see how embedded they felt in hostile Moab, from the fact that both Naomi's sons married Moabite women. However, the two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion, which in Hebrew mean 'sickly one' and 'weak one', and any reader who knows the language can guess that disaster is waiting to happen. First Naomi's husband dies, then her two sons, and she is left with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. This constellation, already problematic by the standards of the time, is made more

Naomi's homecoming

difficult by another famine, this time in Moab, so that Naomi decides to return to her old home in Judah. By now, the bond between the three women is so strong that Ruth and Orpah accompany their mother-in-law and literally find themselves at a crossroads where they are forced to choose which direction to take: either turn back or keep going. And it is precisely this personal life choice moment that Feibusch has picked out of the narrative and placed before our eyes. The slightly defensive expression of the older Naomi, in the foreground, and the position of her right hand say clearly: Go back to your mothers! But Ruth, wrapped in a sky-blue robe (which we have already seen Feibusch's Moses wearing, and which is probably meant to express closeness to God) stands behind her: 'Do not press me to leave you. Wherever you go, I shall go; wherever you live, I shall live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Only death shall part me from you.' No wonder that even today, many bridal couples still choose this oath as a wedding vow. But since what we have here is a daughter-in-law binding herself to her mother-in-law, we are dealing not only with the affection and love of two people, but also with the relationship between two generations. The older woman unselfishly wants the younger ones not to feel tied down, because she knows they would have a hard and uncertain fate as strangers in Israel, and simply sees a better future for both of them in their home environment, but the younger woman doesn't want to give way to the elder, perhaps out of social obligation (Ruth means 'the one who feeds'), perhaps because their shared history of grief and suffering has forged a bond between them, but perhaps also because the life experience of older people is something of value, and Ruth wants to learn what she can from Naomi, not least about her God.



Originally, Feibusch wanted to confine himself to this oath of allegiance between two women, two generations, two nationalities, and to depict the highly unusual scene only in the moonlight of a mysterious night. But somewhere along the line, as he moved from his sketch to the big canvas, he decided to flood the action with brighter sunlight and add Orpah, the second daughter-in-law, into the picture. This turned a slightly kitschy love tableau into the depiction of an inner conflict that could end either way. Both daughters-in-law are crying, torn between their home and their attachment to Naomi,

Each is allowed — indeed, expected — to make her own decision. And neither knows in advance what the right decision will be. The biblical narrative steers clear of any moral judgement and also shows great understanding of Orpah's choice of returning home ('Orpah' translates as 'she who turns away', as Feibusch also paints her). However, only Ruth's story is continued and rewarded with a happy end. And not just a happy end, for Ruth transcends her own story. Ultimately, she even becomes the ancestress of King David and is explicitly mentioned in Jesus's family tree (Mt 1:5). Ruth, a woman who was originally also a Moabite, became part of Judeo-Christian salvation history. And why? With the Gospel we could perhaps say, because she is a follower entirely in the spirit of Jesus, whose main interest is not in building a nest, and who does not linger with the dead, but follows her heart.

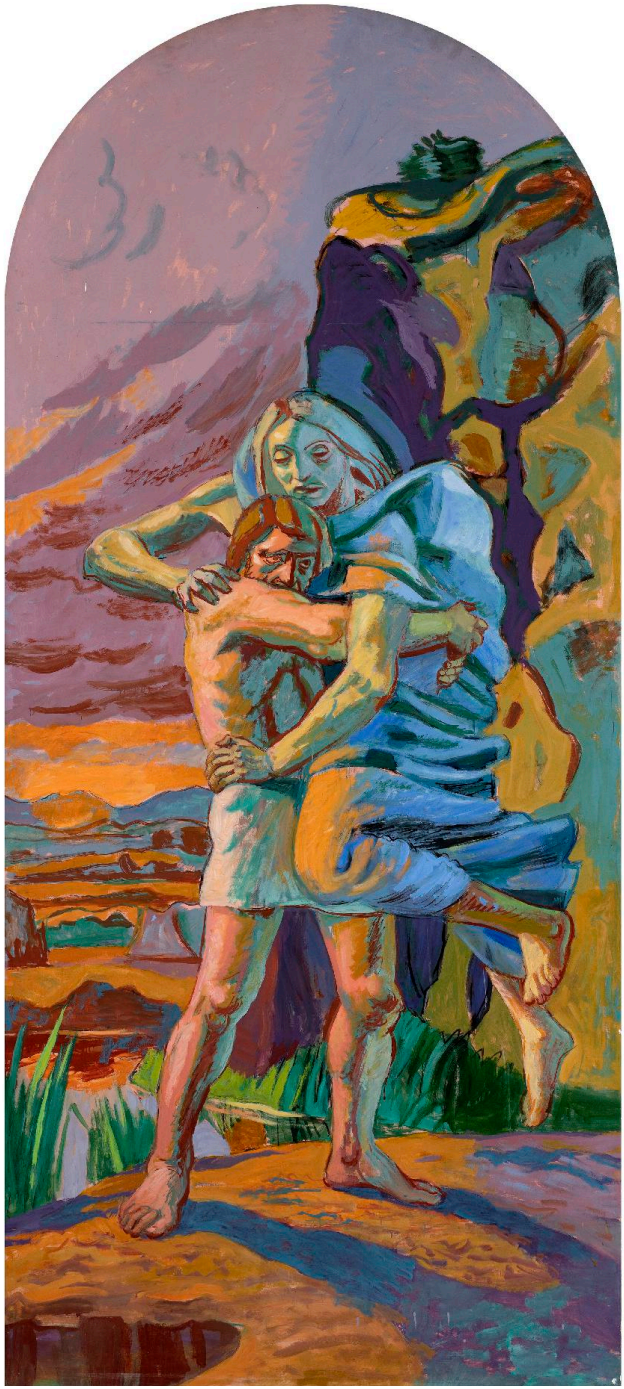
When Jesus — much like Naomi — asks His apostles in the Gospel whether they too would not rather turn back and leave Him, as so many others have done, Peter replies: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life.'
(Jn 6:67 f) He could just as well have said: 'Your God is also my God.'



‘And he blessed him.‘
Gn 32:30

Jacob’s Fight at the Jabbok

Reading: Gn 32:23-33, Gospel: Lk 22:39-45



Fighting with God

Night-time is when the inexplicable happens, the incomprehensible, the mysterious, things which we cannot control or understand. Sleep and dreams take us to the dark side of our consciousness. But nights also reveal what is otherwise hidden; they put us in touch with innermost truths and deep realities, which the Bible also tells us about in holy nights without number. In the night at the Jabbok, however, the mysterious becomes even more puzzling and the inexplicable almost absurd. Two individuals are fighting. No one knows why, no one says a word. Then some words are spoken, but the answers don't match the questions. In the end, neither wins, both are hurt, and we are completely in the dark. We understand neither attacker nor attacked, let alone the circumstances that brought them together. The Bible sketches what happens with its usual magnificent sparseness, and ever since, rabbis, theologians, artists and poets have tried to shed light on it — not that they have ever been able to fully work out the point of the story.

Hans Feibusch, in his series of Old Testament stories, has also taken up this enigmatic episode and given it a rather unusual and peculiar slant, as I hope we shall see in a moment. But let's start with Jacob: God knows, he is no figure of light. His grandfather was Abraham, the founding father, who once went forth at God's command to establish a great nation. His father, Isaac, the long-awaited child, whose life God first demanded and then spared. And now, in the third generation, we have Jacob, the deceiver, who is rather a disappointment — in fact, an embarrassment. His name can be translated as 'heel-dragger', for even in the womb he is said to have grabbed the heel of his twin brother Esau in a vain attempt to secure the important rights of the first-born. Later he lies to his father, cheats on his brother, and has to flee to his uncle, whom he also deceives. He abandons the woman he loves, and accepts without complaining the one foisted on him on his wedding night. The Bible glosses over none of it, and if you take all Jacob's appearances together, you can't help but see him as a rather superficial man who always takes the easy way out and seeks his own advantage, who would rather run away than face the consequences of his actions, and who has no great ambitions or plans for the future. When, at some point, many years later, he wants to return home, his brother Esau comes out to meet him with a large company of men. Jacob is afraid of the confrontation — for good reason. He sends gifts on ahead to appease Esau, and takes his family, possessions and goods to safety on the other side of the river. And now he sits there. Alone with himself and his life. And night is falling … when a man comes out of the darkness and starts to fight with him. Only, who is he? ... What is he up to? ... Why does he attack Jacob without a word? Even in the rabbinical tradition, opinions differ widely. 'It was a shepherd,' some say, and others: 'a sorcerer', 'a wise man', 'a robber'. Most end up agreeing that it was an angel, a messenger of God.

But why would an angel attack Jacob? To give him courage, say the clever rabbis. A man who can fight with an angel need not fear other men. In this light, the fight

at the Jabbok would be a kind of training for the next morning. But that still doesn't explain why Jacob does not (as usual) simply flee, or at least let the attacker go when he declares the fight over. That night, perhaps for the first time in his life, Jacob shows some backbone. This time, he doesn't look for the easiest way out, but struggles on, and asks to be blessed: he feels that something good needs to be said; the fight ought to have some good outcome.



Is Jacob ultimately wrestling with himself? With his other self? With the man he could be, but has never become? In that case, we would be witnessing an inner struggle and conflict, and a turning point in his life, a new beginning, a maturing. From this point on, Jacob is a man who has come to terms with himself and his destiny, albeit with the scars of a past that never simply fades away, and the lingering traces (in his hip) of the night's lonely fight. If we are to take the biblical text seriously, however, then Jacob was struggling not just with a man or an angel, or with himself, but with none other than God: for he is given the name Israel (he who fought with God). Jacob's great ancestors, Abraham and Isaac, had done what God told them to. But Jacob, of all people, opposes God and wrestles with Him. Or, the other way round: despite everything, God engages with this man, lets him live, and, what is more, blesses him.

Are we gradually realising what a monstrous scene is unfolding here? Long before any Enlightenment, the Bible itself questions God in its opening pages, and makes a man wrestle with Him and — cling to Him. A few weeks ago I saw a play in the West End: Bad Jews. One character was a young, pushy, religious woman (almost as unlikeable as our Jacob) who was trying to defend her Jewish faith against the accusations of her own family. In the end, confronted by all the seemingly outdated and ineffectual rules of the Jewish scriptures and her faith, that have nothing to do with the modern world, she blurts out, hurt and desperate: 'Do you really think you are the first to be offended by this? To question it? No, many, many generations before us have done the same. But they still held on to it. Do you want to be the first to let all this die?' Whether or not this was the intention of the author (Joshua Harmon), I recognised something of Jacob/Israel in this woman's attitude. Now, as then, engaging with God is neither comfortable nor easy, it does not make life simpler, as atheists glibly allege. On the contrary: any serious struggle with God always leads to injuries. At the Jabbok. In the Garden of Gethsemane. In Nazi Germany. In the Landseer Studio.

This last, in St John's Wood, was the place where Hans Feibusch depicted the struggle of Jacob, nearly 30 years after being expelled from his native Germany. He had asked himself more than once, in the face of the horrors of Hitler and Stalin, if God could possibly be all-loving or all-powerful, or if He even existed at all. His Jacob not only adheres to God, but literally holds Him fast. God Himself, in the heavenly blue we already know from Moses and Ruth, unmistakably bears the features of a woman, even more clearly in the preliminary sketch. God and Jacob are like mother and child, one giving comfort, and the other seeking support. A model for the merciful father whom Jesus will later describe welcoming his prodigal son with open arms. But above all: God is suspended in air. His feet do not touch the ground. In this context, it's important to know that in 1937, Feibusch's early painting entitled 'Schwebende' ('The Suspended One') was selected by the Nazis and exhibited in Munich as 'degenerate'. It therefore stands at the beginning of his history of suffering, when he started to question his faith in God. Many years later, when Feibusch returned to the idea of a suspended figure, and visualised God like this at the fight at the Jabbok, what is at stake is more than just a belated satisfaction, a victory over Nazi barbarism. What we see here is Feibusch's reconciliation with his fate, with his God, to whom he clings, despite being wounded. My dear sisters and brothers, the night at Jabbok was not unique. Perhaps there is such a night in every life. Perhaps there even has to be.



And even if it hurts:
Let us not give up, let us hold fast, let us not allow night to give way to dawn without leaving us with a blessing.

‘Here I am.’
Gn 22:11



The Binding of Isaac

Reading: Gn 22:1-13.19, Gospel: Mt 9:9-13

Obedience or resistance

Hans Feibusch was in his mid-thirties and at the start of his career, when he experienced the rage of the Nazis at first hand (in 1933): he could go home and paint his own four walls, he was told, but he would never, ever be able to exhibit again. He was publicly threatened and his art was denounced as 'degenerate'. Feibusch immediately escaped to England, but since, at the time, there was little interest in modern art in general – and German art in particular – he had to survive by making posters for the London Underground, which was a death blow to his artistic ambitions. At least, that is how the young Feibusch must have felt, for at about this time, he painted a picture of the Binding of Isaac, which can hardly be surpassed in drama and brutality: the young Isaac is lying on the logs, his limbs and head hanging to the ground, his neck stretched out, his mouth open in pain. Abraham holds Isaac's throat tightly with one hand, with the other holding the knife. He is already swinging his arm back, and the angel is only just able to stop him. The image is in black and white; even the contrasts are harsh. It doesn't take much imagination to see Feibusch as identifying with the biblical figure of Isaac, placing himself and his art on the altar of world politics, powerless and defenceless. The early picture virtually shouts out the reproach of injustice, but later, Feibusch was able to formulate his incomprehension more reflectively, in words: 'Sometimes, in the face of the terrible things that Hitler and Stalin were able to accomplish, I am seized with a cold horror: is God not all-loving?'



Which brings us directly to the heart of the story of the Binding of Isaac. It is a monstrous story that begs for explanation. But the text is provocatively unemotional and explains nothing at all. It gives an account of what happened as if it were quite commonplace. Yet a drama is unfolding here in which everything is at stake. What makes the story so distressing for us is the fact that the guilt-atonement pattern, so tried and tested in religion, does not apply here: if Abraham were guilty of a terrible crime, or Isaac of an unforgivable transgression, then, of course, the story would still not be pretty, but we would understand: God is not to be trifled with. However, Abraham is a righteous man, one of God's allies. According to Jewish legend, God even owed him a lot, because before Abraham's time, God ruled only in Heaven, and it was Abraham who first made His name known on earth. Abraham was also not too cowardly to haggle with God. Let us remember Sodom and Gomorrah, for example, and the way Abraham pleaded with God to spare the cities for the sake of the righteous few. Why was he willing to do for the inhabitants of a wicked city, whom he does not know, what he fails to do for his own son: ask God for mercy? The question is: why do we have to ask God at all? Had He not Himself promised that He would make Abraham a great nation and multiply his descendants? What weight does His word still carry if, by calling for the sacrifice of chil-

dren, He not only proves Himself a cruel and inhuman God, but also, without cause, gives the lie to His own promise? For without Isaac, there will be no descendants and consequently no great nation. The death of Isaac would spell the end not only of Abraham's family, but also of God.

Why should one still have faith in even one of His words? Later, St John's Gospel will say: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God.' But if His word is a lie, then He Himself is also a lie. Thus, the binding of Isaac really puts everything at stake: Isaac's life, Abraham's faith, and God's truth. One cannot even imagine the story ending otherwise than well. Or could it have ended any way other than well? The introduction to the story says: God only wanted to put Abraham to the test.

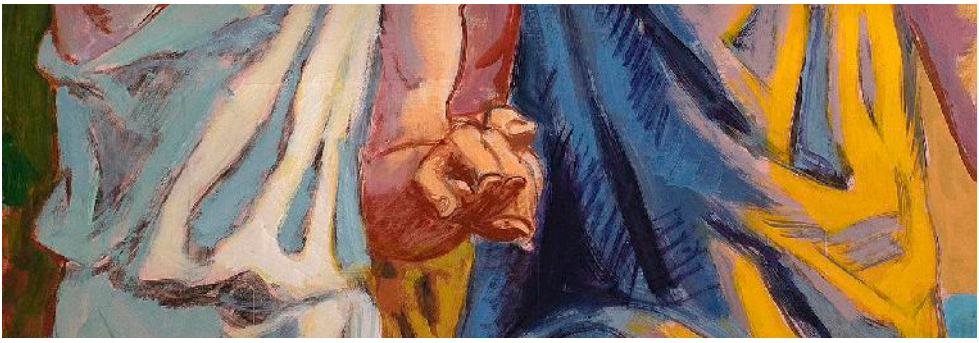


And we generally think that this is about proving his unconditional obedience, in line with the saying, 'the Lord gave, the Lord has taken back', And indeed, Abraham's obedience is proven. But why then, after Abraham has successfully passed the test, does God send an angel as his representative, rather than praising Abraham Himself? Shouldn't the two of them now celebrate their unshakeable covenant together? Jewish scholars read into this that God was anything but happy. And that the test had essentially failed. God's intention, they say, was not to test obedience, but to see whether Abraham had understood by now that, unlike other gods, He did not want human sacrifices. We know today that in Ur, the home of Abraham, human sacrifices were indeed performed to appease the gods. On this reading, God would have wanted to see if He had led Abraham not only out of the old country, but also out of the old way of thinking; and He would have hoped for his opposition, his resistance, as proof that Abraham followed Him alone, as the God of life. He would have rejoiced as a father rejoices, when his son first beats him at a game, or gets the better of him in an argument. It would have shown the strength and maturity of Abraham.

But Abraham offers no resistance, raises no objection, speaks not a word. The test comes to nothing. God is disappointed. He has to back away. A more extreme interpretation is that Abraham simply turns the tables here and now puts God to the test in his turn, almost challenging Him wordlessly: Will you really let it come to this, God? Don't you know that you are digging your own grave? Abraham and Isaac are so sure that God simply can't let it go so far, that (according to another legend) they even climb the mountain hand in hand.

And that is exactly how we see them in our church today. About 40 years after his first picture of the Binding of Isaac Feibusch chooses not the dramatic moment of the sacrifice, but the calm, upright and determined walk of two people, who support each other in the confidence that God does not — cannot — want their death. His colour palette is correspondingly warm. The young artist had defiantly reflected his suffering in Isaac, but the older one seems to have made peace with the God of his fathers, who, while not sparing us the confrontation with death, ultimately saves us from its abyss. It is easy to connect Jesus and His Gospel with this: here we are expressly told that God does not want sacrifices. He wants mercy. For Jesus, the response to sin is not atonement — but repentance. And His death on the cross means nothing other than the end and futility of any sacrifice. For could a human sacrifice add anything to what God's own sacrifice has already accomplished? To believe that we could outdo God's sacrifice would be absolutely presumptuous and downright absurd.

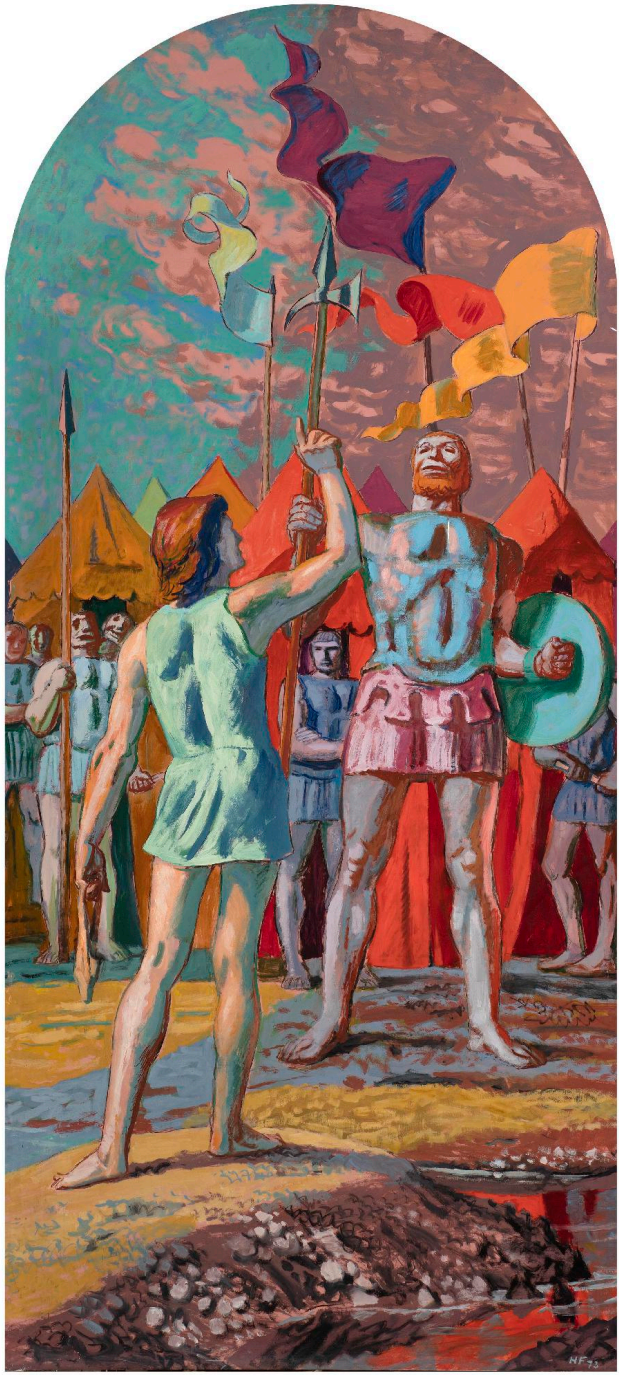
My dear sisters and brothers, the motives and motivations of all those involved in the story of the Binding of Isaac remain conjecture. But perhaps the text is deliberately kept so sparse and left so open, that we can enrich it and draw nourishment from it by linking it to our own lives (as Feibusch did) or our own thoughts (as did the Jewish scholars). No interpretation changes anything about the outcome of the narrative. And my hope would be that if anyone still believes that what his God wants or approves of is a human sacrifice — his own or another — he may clearly and distinctly hear the voice of the angel of the Lord from Heaven, the voice which has sounded since the days of Abraham and Isaac, saying: 'Do not raise your hand against your neighbour, and do not harm him'. That alone is God's will.



‘Choose your best man…’
1 S 17:8

David and Goliath

Reading: 1 S 17, Gospel: Joh 18



Against the culture of death

Do you remember Naomi, Ruth and Orpah? Naomi wanted to return to her home in Bethlehem, and her two non-Jewish daughters-in-law said they wanted to follow her. Naomi tried three times to dissuade them. But Ruth refused to be dissuaded and stuck to her decision. Orpah, on the other hand, ‚weakened', left the two of them and turned back. And while Ruth's story continues to unfold (right up to the family tree of Jesus), Orpah's comes to nothing – not even her name appears again. This happens so often in the Bible: people stand at crossroads and on thresholds, and if they once take a 'wrong turning', we hear little more about them. Nevertheless, we would love to know what became of the 'rich young man' or the Prodigal Son's elder brother. The Rabbinic storytellers understand this human curiosity, and so we find an interesting retelling of Orpah's story in the Talmud [a collection of rabbinic interpretations of biblical texts, in this case: Sotah 42b]. After saying goodbye to Naomi, Orpah not only turned back and left her friends, but also abandoned the Jewish faith again. And – by a whole battalion of soldiers – she fathered a son, Goliath. And, as coincidence would have it, in the Bible, Ruth is David's great-grandmother, so that in David and Goliath, the descendants of the two women meet, and we are once again made aware, in retrospect, of how decisive the crossroads was at which the three women stood, and what their decisions led to. [This is why the two images hang side by side in our church and must be read in Hebrew fashion, from right to left.]

David and Goliath – they could not be more different. One a shepherd boy, the other with a manly soldier's physique; one skilled with shepherd's crook and harp, the other with spear and shield. The giant Goliath took his sobriquet from the 'giant' discrepancy between the two. And there were others to be feared besides him. The Philistines were a seafaring people from across the Mediterranean who already had bronze swords and shields. (How often this is emphasised in the biblical account, with something approaching awe and reverence!) They also had spearheads of iron, so that they were far superior to Israel in terms of weaponry. No wonder, then, that people were petrified of them, and that they all fled in terror from Goliath as soon as he loomed up in front of them. All, that is, except one, a boy who had no call to be in the army camp. He was there because his father had asked him to bring bread and cheese. But in the end, in his youthful naivety, the refreshment he brought was of a completely different kind. The Israelites had endured Goliath's scorn for 40 days, which is of course a symbolic number. His mockery was all-encompassing, and directed not only at the warriors but at all the Israelites, including their God.



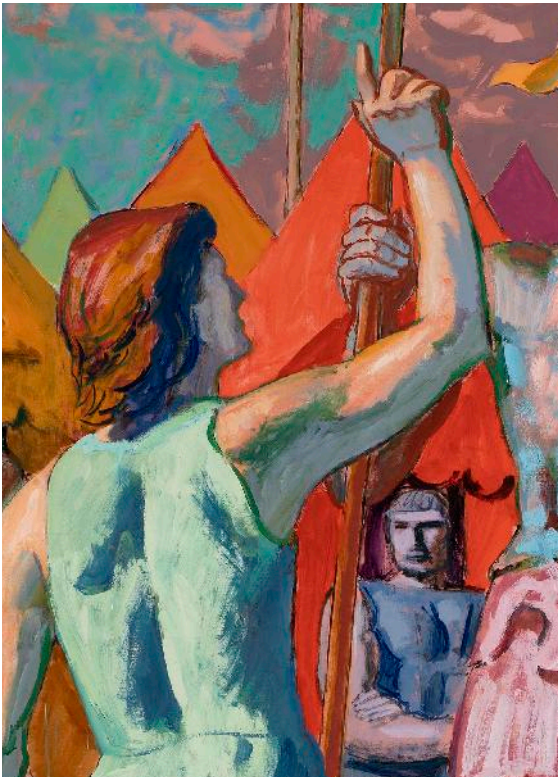
And it was precisely this, as the Bible tells us, that roused David and made him go into battle without fear, blind to the realities, equipped with nothing but his familiar slingshot (which sounds more harmless than the deadly weapon it actually is), his experience defending grazing sheep against wild animals, and, last but not least, a mighty self-assurance that God would stand by him. And thus, you could also say, there are now two giants facing each other: one mighty in strength and force of arms; the other in trust in God. I say two giants, but I also mean two world views. We know who won. And we usually like hearing it. Who doesn't enjoy a tale about an underdog who against all odds makes the impossible possible? There's a good reason why we find echoes of this story so often through the centuries, whether in old sayings like 'Pride goeth before a fall' or modern-day maxims such as 'Believe in yourself and anything is possible'. But I think it can also be misleading and fatally dangerous. The easiest way to approach the story is to look for a spiritual meaning in it. On this reading, Goliath stands for our own demons and fears, at whose mercy we are, and which we can then face with God's help, from our inner strength alone, equipped with nothing but our own resources – because a foreign, ill-fitting armour, which protects only the outer man was no use to David. And there is nothing wrong with personal encouragement like this.

But in this tale, the victory achieved and celebrated "in the name of the Lord" is also explicitly military – going to war for God and with God. And whatever the circumstances, the victory is ours. We all know the bloody trail left through human history by this way of seeing things. And it's still very much with us. Hamas, nothing other than a death cult, is one example among many. Article 7 of its Covenant states for everyone to read: 'We aspire to the realisation of Allah's promise. For the Prophet, Allah, has said: "The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews and kill them; and if the Jews hide under a stone or behind a tree, the stone or the tree will say, 'O Moslem, O Servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.' Only the Gharkad tree will not say it, because it is the tree of the Jews.'" This is not just pompous poetry, but bitterly serious, as we – no, as Israel in particular - experienced on the seventh of October, 2023. No one can say they couldn't have known. Hamas made no secret of perpetrating terror and murder – in the name of Allah.

If ever there was a blasphemy against the name of God, then this is it. This is not the God whom the three Abrahamic religions invoke. And I wish more Muslims would admit that, instead of styling themselves as victims in this conflict and trying to excuse it. Of course, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has a history, and any solution to it must take this history into account; but when it comes to the slaughter of people in the name of God, there can be no 'Yes, but …' but only a "No!" The cult of death and extermination mania to which Hans Feibusch and his generation were exposed was that of the German National Socialists. His Goliath bears the unmistakable features of the Aryan master race. And the fertile grass of the mothers is stained blood red. The picture was painted barely 30 years after the end of the War, but rather than depicting the triumphant moment of Goliath's defeat, Feibusch reminds us of the reference to God that David has just made. The

slingshot in his left hand is hard to make out, but his index finger, stretched towards the sky, by contrast, is all the more visible.

If only humans – including the conspicuously pious ones – really paid attention to God, from His Ten Commandments to the Sermon on the Mount, the world would be a more peaceful place. Oh yes, the Sermon on the Mount. I know, it talks about loving your enemies. Jesus, of the house and lineage of David, asks us to do this. As a personal approach to life, it is impressive ('Simon, put your sword into its sheath'), but rushing to call victims to sacrifice themselves is perverse. The commandment to love our enemies is not a free pass for bullies and aggressors. It is not the cementing of injustice, it does not require us to cling onto suffering, nor does it forbid defence and resistance or the saving of one's own life. Inhuman attacks can never be justified by the Gospel, whose every fibre is concerned precisely with uplifting the downtrodden and supporting those who suffer. It was love of the enemy when the Polish bishops reached out to the Germans after the war; it was love of the enemy when Bishop Tutu and the Truth Commission overcame apartheid in South Africa; but it is not love of the enemy when Hamas, its henchmen and sympathisers are allowed to run wild. Love of the enemy is at work where blind revenge or retaliation are prevented, but not where we encounter a culture of death and destruction.



When I look at our two pictures here side by side, when I read about Ruth, Orpah and Naomi, as well as David and Goliath, when I simply compare the landscapes in which Feibusch has set these scenes, I ask myself: why is it that we always let it come to this? How differently the story could have unfolded, if Orpah hadn't turned away and Naomi had been more welcoming, if they had stayed together and continued to support each other? Only if we recognise the beginnings of conflict in casual words and gestures, and don't just carelessly let them pass, can we ultimately prevent a greater disaster.

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Hans Feibusch
David And Goliath, 1973

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