

“A father had two sons”. We do not need to har any more to know what is going to follow - if we are familiar with the Hebrew Bible, especially the Book of Genesis, which is a series of stories of fathers with two (or more) sons, and the chilling and uplifting consequences.

How many sons did Adam have? Adam had two sons, initially – Cain and Abel, and we all know what happened: Adam lost both his sons; Abel to death at the hands of his brother, and Cain to exile, to be a wanderer on the face of the earth. Then Eve gives birth to a third son, Seth whom she greets as a replacement for Abel whom she had lost. It is a strange idea for us, but in the Hebrew mind Seth could be seen as another Abel, Abel come-back-to-life; and from this resurrected child the human generations continue down to Noah and onwards to Abram. We are not told about Adam's death and burial.

How many sons did Abram, renamed Abraham have? Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Actually he had lots of sons, twelve by his third wife. After Hagar's departure and Sarah's death, Abraham married Ketturah with prolific consequences. But he is known for his first two sons, two sons he lost, almost. Ishmael and his mother were driven away by the wrath of Sarah; Ishmael to become a bowman, marry an Egyptian, and be the father of twelve sons and many nations; and Isaac whom he came within an instant of killing in order to offer him as a burnt offering, at God's command. Isaac was saved by the word of an angel, and so the promises to Abraham would be fulfilled. The two sons come together to bury their father Abraham.

How many sons did Isaac have? Isaac had two sons and they were at war within their mother, Rebekah's, womb. And the rivalry continues through their lives until both are in their middle years. After Jacob has tricked his brother Esau out of his birth-right as first-born son, for the second time, Esau threatens to kill him. He is forced to flee up-country and Isaac loses him for twenty years. Rebekah who helped in the deception loses him forever. He was the son she loved and she never sees him again. Isaac loved Esau, and no doubt added to the sibling rivalry. The two reconciled sons come together to bury their father.

How many children did Jacob have? Jacob had thirteen children (one daughter, Dinah, and twelve sons). But by his beloved wife Rachel he had, eventually two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. And he loses both. Joseph, famously, was sold as a slave by his jealous brothers and Jacob spent his remaining life in mourning his beloved child. When the brothers return from Egypt, having encountered Joseph unknowingly, they tell their father that he must give up Benjamin if they are to survive as a family. Reluctantly Jacob agrees. He gives up Benjamin and both his sons are restored to him. All the brothers bury their father with a sumptuous funerary procession from

Egypt back to the family mausoleum, the cave of Macpelah in Canaan.

How many sons does Joseph have? Joseph has two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, but they need not trouble us.

A series of sons, many of whom are lost and some are restored. That is in the Book of Genesis. If we look further, we note that David had many sons but two sons by his beloved Bathsheba. The first son, the child of their adultery died; a second son followed and was, like Abel, a replacement for the deceased child as his names announce – Solomon (=replacement) and Gedaliah (which echoes the name of a beloved but doomed son of 'El', God). Death and a form of resurrection is a recurring family motif through the Scriptures.

“A father had two sons.” When we hear those words a myriad of others stories should come to mind; and so we know that at least one, if not both the sons will be lost; and there is the expectant hope that one, or both, will be restored. What happens: one son, the younger is lost – he goes to a far country and, resources gone, he gets the sort of job no Jewish boy should ever do, he feeds pigs. He is a total out-caste, who surely should be cast out. His father welcomes the prodigal, with best coat, and ring and party Why? Because 'this son of mine was lost and is found. Was dead and has come to life.' It is the classic story of Israel down the generations retold.

But what of the elder boy? Petulant, he casts himself out; refusing to join the party. Will he change his mind and come in? The story ends before it is concluded. We are left wondering.

If the younger son represents the sinners with whom Jesus eats, and if the elder are the sneering Pharisees and scribes, who is the father in the story? The father is Jesus, the host of the party. When Jesus dies, who will come to his funeral? It will be representatives of those at table with him, the women who have supported him from their own resources. Where are the others? Even then, they will not join the party. Sadly we do know how the story ended.