

Lessons from Chapter 4

Umberto Cassuto

Why is the Cain and Abel story in the Torah? There are several lessons, but the primary ones are that life is precious and blood revenge is anathema. Excerpted from *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part One, From Adam to Noah*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem.

Whereas many interesting parallels have been found to the account of Creation and the story of the Garden of Eden, both in Israelite literature and in the writings of the other peoples of the East, we possess so far nothing corresponding to the narrative of Cain and Abel. The motif of fratricide does, it is true, occur in pagan mythology. There is an Egyptian legend, for instance, about Seth, who slew Osiris; there is, likewise, a Canaanite story, to quote another example, concerning Mot, who murdered Baal. But these parallels are remote and, apart from the motif mentioned, they have nothing else in common with our section....

Many different theories have been advanced on the subject in our time. The hypothesis that has gained the widest acceptance among scholars is the one that connects the narrative with the tribe of the Kenites, and asserts that the original purpose of the story was to explain the causes underlying the destiny and mode of life of this tribe. [B.] Stade worked this theory out in full detail....

In broad outline, the hypothesis may be summarized thus: Cain is not an individual but represents the tribe designated by the name Cain, or by the appellative Kenite, which is mentioned several times in Scripture; it was a nomadic tribe, which dwelt in the land of the Negev, and from there part of it spread to other places in the Land of Israel.

The name of the tribe indicates that it engaged in metal work. Hence, the tribe of the Kenites was utterly despised in the eyes of the neighboring tribes, just as in Arabia today the wandering tribes of smiths are held in the utmost disdain by the Arabs. The fact, too, that the tribe of the Kenites is sometimes associated with Israel and at other times with Amalek or Midian shows that it was a weak and insignificant clan, incapable of maintaining its independence.

The story of Cain and Abel reflects the contempt of the cultivators of the soil, or of the aristocratic cattle-owners, for this tribe of herdsmen-smiths, who ceaselessly wander from place to place without having a fixed abode, and its aim is to explain the lowly status of the Kenites by the curse put upon their progenitor because of a great and terrible crime that he had committed. The sign mentioned in v. 15 refers to the special mark of the tribe, the incision that distinguishes all the members of the tribe and obligates all of them to avenge the blood of any of their brethren who may be slain.

Other scholars have proposed different explanations; for example, Ehrenzweig.... On the basis of v. 17, where it is stated, and he built a city, the writer developed the theory... that originally the narrative had some connection with the story of Romulus, the founder of the city of Rome, who killed his brother Remus, and that the two tales flow from an ancient ritual legend that has the etiological purpose of seeking to explain the origin of the custom of offering human sacrifices at the laying of the foundation of a city or of some notable edifice; the recension before us changed, he contends, the original form of the myth out of deference to the Israelite view, which regards human sacrifice as an abomination....

[According to a theory recently advanced], our narrative reflects the course of certain events in the religious life of primitive [and very definitely pre-Israelite] man: in a period of dearth, the farmers desired to restore the fertility of the soil by the sacrifice of a man, whom the members of the Kenite clan, a tribe of inferior temple ministers, offered up. But the higher order of priests,

who opposed human sacrifices, banished these Kenites from the vicinity of the shrines and sentenced them to exile.

All the theories enumerated encounter difficulties. Against Stade's view, it is possible, in the first instance, to raise the following objections:

(a) It is true that in a number of passages in the Book of Genesis certain individuals represent whole tribes, the clans of their children and children's children; but in the present instance Cain's descendants are mentioned, and they are not vagrants and wanderers like him; it follows that this characteristic is peculiar to him and not to his offspring.

(b) There is nothing to indicate that the sign belongs also to his children after him; apparently this, too, appertains only to him.

(c) Even if we assume that this sign was a tribal emblem, we must realize that many clans had a distinctive mark, and it would be unreasonable to regard the possession of a sign by the tribe of Cain as a feature unique to this clan.

(d) The Kenite tribe was treated with esteem and friendship by the Israelites, and it is impossible to suppose that the Torah accepted a story designed to denigrate it.

(e) Smith is only one of the secondary and incidental connotations of words derived from the root קני... Although recent archaeological investigation has shown that in the Land of Midian, near the earliest sites occupied by the Kenites, there existed very valuable copper mines, which were undoubtedly exploited already in antiquity, this fact is insufficient to make Stade's theory more plausible....

As for the further conjectures referred to, it is difficult to find manifest support for them in the text. Two general observations may be made in regard to them, which, in part, are applicable also to Stade's thesis.

The first is that these theories are based on the assumption that our present text has given the story, be it from a definite motive...or through misunderstanding..., a different form and significance from those of the ancient tradition...; we must admit that, in our present state of knowledge, we are not in a position to determine the original form and significance of the pre-Torah tradition relative to the story under discussion.

The second point to be noted is that the...aim to establish the original meaning of the ancient narrative, have given only casual and limited consideration to the pentateuchal account, thus confusing primary and secondary tasks. For the Bible student, the elucidation of the scriptural text is of paramount concern. Although to reach back, wherever possible, to an older stage of tradition and to determine what was known to the Israelites and their neighbors before the biblical books were written is of undoubted value for the understanding of the scriptural text, yet in cases such as the one under consideration, where there is no clear evidence bearing on the oldest phase of the tradition, we must forgo this exegetical method, and we cannot accept fanciful conjectures as a substitute for it. In such instances, the Bible scholar has to rely solely on exact and profound study of the text itself.

In the first place, an examination of the passage reveals that there is a noteworthy difference between the verses describing events (vv. 3-5, 8, the second half of v. 14, and v. 16) and those that comprise speeches and dialogues (vv. 6-7, 9-15 as far as the word יקוי [yuqqam — “vengeance shall be taken on him”]). The account of the episodes is presented in summary form, the main points only being mentioned; no details are given, and even interesting and important particulars are passed over in silence. We are not given the slightest inkling, for example, how the two brothers discerned that the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering but not for Cain and his offering, or what occurred between the brothers before the murder, or what kind of sign was given to Cain.

On the other hand, the speeches and dialogues are reported in detail and at length, constituting about two-thirds of the whole of the two paragraphs under discussion. Their style is exalted and solemn, and in part is even marked by poetic rhythm; whilst the style of the narrative verses, though beautiful and distinguished, is nevertheless quite light and simple. From all this we must conclude that the focal point is to be sought in the spoken and not in the narrative portion. The latter gives the impression of being an epitome; as if it were summarizing a tale that had been told at length elsewhere. There seems to have existed an ancient tradition, setting forth fully the story of Cain and Abel, whose details—and even its purpose—can no longer be determined. The Torah recounts this saga briefly, in general outline only, since it regards the story as intrinsically of no great importance and not worth relating in detail, but yet one that can appropriately serve as a factual basis for valuable instruction....[T]he Torah is accustomed to clothe its thoughts in concrete description and to impart its teachings through the narration of events from which it is possible to draw, or to which it is possible to append, the lessons in question. This is the method it has used in the present instance, too. Irrespective of the details of the original story, and of its primary object, the doctrines that the Torah wished to inculcate here are not comprised in the episodes it relates, but in the words of the Lord that it connects therewith.

These teachings...are easily discernible even by the superficial reader; there is no need, therefore, to consider them in detail), are as follows:

(a) emphasis of the principle that human life is sacred and may not be violated, and that the crime of murder is inexpressibly terrible, having no atonement;

(b) the general moral, inculcated also by a number of other sections, that no deed of man—be it even performed secretly, even out of human sight, as, for example, in the field far from human habitation—is hidden from the eyes of God, and that God calls man to account, awakening within him the voice of conscience, and requiting him according to his works....

Other lessons

There are also other lessons, forming the second category, that, upon careful examination, can be discovered in the text, to wit:

(a) the conclusions to be drawn from the Lord's utterance in v. 7 (we shall discuss these fully later on when we come to explain the verse, since the moral depends on the meaning attached to the words in their context)¹;

(b) the specific teaching of these passages, which constitutes the main new concept that they come to expound, namely, the protest against the practice of blood-revenge.

It would be out of place to unfold here the whole complex chapter of the history of this custom among the Israelites and the relationship of the Torah statutes thereto. It will suffice to indicate that there is a noticeable trend in the Pentateuchal legislation to restrict the practice and reduce it to a minimum. The blood-avenger becomes little more than the executor of the community's

¹ Cassuto, in discussing verse 7, which everyone admits is difficult to fathom, goes through a lengthy exposition which I will not burden you with to come up with the following *contextual* translation of God's statement to Cain: "Why, my son, are you grieved, and why do you hang your head? There is no cause for it; you have only to do well and then you will be able to stand firmly on your feet, with upright stature. But if you fail to do well and begin to sin, then the sin shall become a *צבר* [ro-vetz] unto you, and this *צבר* will long to bring you low and cause you to couch upon the ground like itself. Nevertheless, you are not delivered into its power, and if only you have the desire, you can oppose it and overcome it and free yourself from its influence (but you will be able to master it)." In making his case, Cassuto determines that a *צבר* is sin epitomized as a crouching demon that, the more one gives in to it, the more one is sucked down to its level.

sentence, whilst for unintentional homicide the penalty of exile to a city of refuge is substituted for blood-revenge. Now this trend finds expression in our section in connection with the first case of murder in the annals of mankind. Cain, who took his brother's life, is the prototype of the murderer, for all human beings are brothers, and whoever sheds the blood of man sheds his brother's blood. Hence, Cain's punishment is the primary precedent for murder sentences. Cain was afraid of blood-revenge (v. 14: and whoever finds me will slay me), because all mankind, both those already in existence and those still to be born, were relatives and avengers of the murdered man. But the Lord delivered him from their hand and sentenced him to exile; blood-revenge is not pleasing in the sight of the Lord....

The 'missing' text

In the Lord's words to Cain, there is no reference to Abel, nor any appraisal of his actions and intention; nevertheless, Cain does not forget that the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, whilst for him and his offering he had no regard, and he is jealous of his brother.

This verse [4:8] raises a difficult problem: it states, *and he [Cain] said* [the usual meaning of רמאיו -- vayomer], but we are not told what he said. The verb אָמַר 'amar is not used absolutely—without an object—as is the verb דִּבֶּר dibber ['he spoke']....An ancient exegetical tradition, reflected in the old versions, completes the verse by attributing to Cain the additional words *Come, let us go forth into the field* or some similar sentence.... The divergences between [those] recensions and translations prove that we have here not a common original reading, but a common exposition....

Other attempts have also been made to determine the nature of Cain's words to his brother Abel. Rashi, after alluding to the well-known haggadic stories about the contentions that broke out between the two brothers, adds that in his view the natural explanation of the verse is that Cain started to quarrel and strive with his brother in order to have an excuse for killing him. Some expositors take the view (so, for example, Ibn Ezra, Kimchi and other exegetes down to our own time) that the meaning of our text is that Cain related to Abel what the Lord had said to him, or a part thereof.

All these interpretations are forced....But there may be a more authentic solution to the problem, namely, to explain the verb רמאיו not in the usual sense of "speaking," but according to another signification. The Arabic words 'amarun, 'amarun, 'imaratun signify a sign or token, and, more particularly, tu'murun, denotes a heap of stones placed one on top of the other to indicate the way in the desert, like the Hebrew מִיָּדָם תָּמְרוּרִים *tamrurim* [the word means signposts; see Jeremiah 31:20, for example]. In Ethiopic the verb 'mr, in the intensive conjugation, signifies to show, to indicate. All this is related, apparently, to the regular sense of the verb *amaru* in Akkadian, to see. It should also be noted that the word 'amarun sometimes means 'an appointed place, a rendezvous,' and is used as a synonym of maw'idun ['appointed place' or 'time']. Accordingly, we may understand the word רמאיו in our verse (as a play on the word רמאיו in vv. 6, 9, 10, 13, 15, 23) in the sense of *fixing a place for meeting*: Cain arranged to meet Abel his brother, and when they were in the field, in the place that he had appointed for this meeting, Cain rose up etc....

The [lack of] punishment

The question may be asked here: why was not Cain sentenced to death like any other murderer? To find the answer to the question we must consider the special circumstances of this episode. First, it must be realized that the purpose of capital punishment is not only to purge the world of existing evil, but to serve also as a preventive example: *and all the people shall hear and fear*. Now in our case there were in the world, apart from Cain, only Adam and Eve; there were as yet no people who could learn the lesson of the murderer's death. On the other hand, if people still to be born would see the bitter fate that Cain endured throughout his days, they might possibly draw the moral therefrom. Furthermore, what kind of death penalty could have been imposed in this instance?

Death at the hands of Heaven is not the penalty for murder, and, in any case, it would not have been right for the Lord to have slain Cain as well, and thus to have inflicted on Adam and Eve, who were guiltless, a twofold tragedy.

Judicial execution is indeed the usual punishment of the murderer, but at that time there were no established courts of law. To be put to death by the blood-avenger is a method of punishment to which the Torah is opposed, as we have already stated, and as we shall note in greater detail later. Where the court cannot sentence the murderer to death because he did not kill wittingly, the Torah imposes on the slayer, as we know, the penalty of banishment to one of the cities of refuge. Similarly in this case, since the death-sentence does not apply to Cain for the reasons mentioned, it is replaced by exile....

The Song of Lamech

This poem (vv. 23–24) is linked to the story of Cain and Abel both in outward form and in content. The formal link is found in the expression *If Cain is avenged sevenfold* (v. 24), which recalls— although, perhaps, with a somewhat different meaning—the words of v. 15 above. The thematic connection consists in the fact that Lamech follows in the steps of his forefather and also slays a person, boasting of his cruel deed with a brazenness reminiscent of Cain, who did not hesitate to say to the Lord's face: *Am I my brother's keeper?*

Why did the Torah incorporate this poem in its text? Its aim appears to have been to introduce at this early stage a subject that could serve as a preparatory proof of what was to be stated later (6:5): *that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*, and thereafter (6:11): *and the earth was filled with violence*, and again (6:13): *for the earth is filled with violence through them*. The poem provides evidence of this. See how far the wickedness reached, and in what people gloried at that period! Lamech boasts to his wives of the murder that he committed, which shows that the women also found satisfaction in such deeds, and honored and cherished their husbands just because of their barbaric and cruel valor. In very truth, the earth was filled with violence....

The Mark of Cain

Sir James George Frazer

In this excerpt from his "Folk-Lore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion Legend and Law," the early 20th century social anthropologist Sir James George Frazer attempts to understand the purpose of the sign God is said to have placed on Cain following the killing of Abel. Even as he equates it with primitive practices we civilized folk may think silly, he notes that the effect of such practices was to instill the concept that human life had value. Elected as a Fellow of Trinity College in 1879, Frazer was made a professor of social anthropology at the University of Liverpool in 1907, and continued teaching until 1922. His work covered a wide array of anthropological research. The study of myth and religion became his areas of expertise. In the preface below, taken from his introduction, he explains his overall thesis. Please keep in mind that he did his work nearly a century ago. Footnotes that appear herein are mine, not Frazer's.

Modern researches into the early history of man, conducted on different lines, have converged with almost irresistible force on the conclusion that all civilized races have at some period or other emerged from a state of savagery resembling more or less closely the state in which many backward races have continued to the present time; and that, long after the majority of men in a community have ceased to think and act like savages, not a few traces of the old ruder modes of life and thought survive in the habits and institutions of the people. Such survivals are included under the head of folklore, which, in the broadest sense of the word, may be said to embrace the whole body of a people's traditional beliefs and customs, so far as these appear to be due to the collective action of the multitude and cannot be traced to the individual influence of great men. Despite the high moral and religious development of the ancient Hebrews, there is no reason to suppose that they formed an exception to this general law. They, too, had probably passed through a stage of barbarism and even of savagery; and this probability, based on the analogy of other races, is confirmed by an examination of their literature, which contains many references to beliefs and practices that can hardly be explained except on the supposition that they are rudimentary survivals from a far lower level of culture. It is to the illustration and explanation of a few such relics of ruder times, as they are preserved like fossils in the Old Testament, that I have addressed myself in the present work.

We read in Genesis that when Cain had murdered his brother Abel, he was driven out from society to be a fugitive and a vagabond on earth. Fearing to be slain by any one who might meet him, he remonstrated with God on the hardness of his lot, and God had so far compassion on him that he "set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him." What was the mark that God put on the first murderer? Or the sign that he appointed for him?

That we have here a reminiscence of some old custom observed by manslayers is highly probable; and, though we cannot hope to ascertain what the actual mark or sign was, a comparison of the customs observed by manslayers in other parts of the world may help us to understand at least its general significance.

Robertson Smith thought that the mark in question was the tribal mark, a badge which every member of the tribe wore on his person, and which served to protect him by indicating that he belonged to a community that would avenge his murder. Certainly such marks are common among peoples who have preserved the tribal system.... In many parts of the world, notably in Africa, the tribal mark consists of a pattern tattooed or incised on some part of the person....

But even if we concede the protective value of a tribal mark, still the explanation thus offered of the mark of Cain seems hardly to fit the case. It is too general. Every member of a tribe was equally protected by such a mark, whether he was a manslayer or not. The whole drift of the narrative tends to show that the mark in question was not worn by every member of the community, but was peculiar to a murderer. Accordingly, we seem driven to seek for an explanation in another direction.

From the narrative itself we gather that Cain was thought to be obnoxious to other dangers than that of being slain as an outlaw by any one who met him. God is represented saying to him, "What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now cursed art thou from the ground, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; when thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a wanderer shalt thou be in the earth."

Here it is obvious that the blood of his murdered brother is regarded as constituting a physical danger to the murderer; it taints the ground and prevents it from yielding its increase. Thus the murderer is thought to have poisoned the sources of life and thereby jeopardized the supply of food for himself, and perhaps for others.² On this view it is intelligible that a homicide should be shunned and banished [from] the country, to which his presence is a continual menace.³ He is plague-stricken, surrounded by a poisonous atmosphere, infected by a contagion of death; his very touch may blight the earth.

Hence we can understand a certain rule of Attic law. A homicide who had been banished, and against whom in his absence a second charge had been brought, was allowed to return to Attica to plead in his defense; but he might not set foot on the land, he had to speak from a ship, and even the ship might not cast anchor or put out a gangway. The judges avoided all contact with the culprit, for they judged the case sitting or standing on the shore.

Clearly the intention of this rule of law was to put the manslayer in quarantine, lest by touching Attic earth—even indirectly through the anchor or the gangway—he should blast it....

The quarantine which Attic law thus imposed on the manslayer has its counterpart in the seclusion still enforced on murderers by the savages of Dobu, an island off the south-eastern extremity of New Guinea....

Certainly the notion that a manslayer can infect other people with a malignant virus is held by the Akikuyu of British East Africa. They think that if a man who has killed another comes and sleeps at a village and eats with a family in their hut, the persons with whom he has eaten contract a dangerous pollution (thahu), which might prove fatal to them, were it not removed in time by a medicine-man....

Similarly among the Moors of Morocco a manslayer is considered in some degree unclean for the rest of his life. Poison oozes out from underneath his nails; hence anybody who drinks the water in which he has washed his hands will fall dangerously ill....

But in the Biblical narrative of the murder of Abel the blood of the murdered man is not the only inanimate object that is personified. If the blood is represented as crying aloud, the earth is represented as opening her mouth to receive the blood of the victim. To this personification of the earth Aeschylus offers a parallel, for he speaks of the ground drinking the blood of the murdered Agamemnon.

But in Genesis the attribution of personal qualities to the earth seems to be carried a step further, for we are told that the murderer was "cursed from the ground"; and that when he tilled

² Frazier's point here is not as far-fetched as we may think. There is an echo of this in the Torah. Numbers 35:33-34 states: "So you shall not pollute the land in which you are, for blood pollutes the land; and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed there, but by the blood of him who shed it. And you shall not defile the land which you shall inhabit, in which I dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the people of Israel." There also may be an echo of this in Leviticus 17:13: "And whoever there is of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among you, who hunts and catches any beast or bird that may be eaten; he shall pour out its blood, and cover it with dust."

³ Here, too, there is an echo to be found, in this case via the institution of the cities of refuge. Not only does it protect the accidental murderer from vengeful next-of-kin, it removes him from the immediate area in which his crime was committed.

it, the land would not yield him her strength, but that a fugitive and a wanderer should he be in the world. The implication apparently is that the earth, polluted by blood and offended by his crime, would refuse to allow the seed sown by the murderer to germinate and bear fruit; nay, that it would expel him from the cultivated soil on which he had hitherto prospered, and drive him out into the barren wilderness, there to roam a houseless and hungry vagabond....

The ancient Greeks apparently entertained similar notions as to the effect of polluting earth by the shedding of human blood, or, at all events, the blood of kinsfolk; for tradition told how the matricide Alcmaeon, haunted by the ghost of his murdered mother Eriphyle, long wandered restlessly over the world, till at last he repaired to the oracle at Delphi, and the priestess told him, that "the only land whither the avenging spirit of Eriphyle would not dog him was the newest land, which the sea had uncovered since the pollution of his mother's blood had been incurred"; or, as Thucydides puts it, "that he would never be rid of his terrors till he had found and settled in a country which, when he slew his mother, the sun had not yet shone on, and which at that time was not yet dry land; for all the rest of the earth had been polluted by him"....

The belief that the earth is a powerful divinity, who is defiled and offended by the shedding of human blood and must be appeased by sacrifice, prevails, or prevailed till lately, among some tribes of Upper Senegal, who exact expiation even for wounds which have merely caused blood to flow without loss of life....

The foregoing facts suggest that a mark put on a homicide might be intended primarily, not for his protection, but for the protection of the persons who met him, lest by contact with his pollution they should defile themselves and incur the wrath of the god whom he had offended, or of the ghost by whom he was haunted; in short, the mark might be a danger-signal to warn people off, like the special garb prescribed in Israel for lepers.

However, there are other facts which tend to show that the murderer's mark was designed, as the story of Cain implies, for the benefit of the murderer alone, and further that the real danger against which it protected him was not the anger of his victim's kinsfolk, but the wrath of his victim's ghost. Here again, as in the Athenian customs already mentioned, we seem to touch the bed-rock of superstition in Attica. Plato tells us that according to a very ancient Greek belief the ghost of a man who had just been killed was angry with his slayer and troubled him, being enraged at the sight of the homicide stalking freely about in his, the ghost's, old familiar haunts; hence it was needful for the homicide to depart from his country for a year until the wrath of the ghost had cooled down, nor might he return before sacrifices had been offered and ceremonies of purification performed.

If the victim chanced to be a foreigner, the slayer had to shun the native land of the dead man as well as his own, and in going into banishment he had to follow a prescribed road; for clearly it would never do to let him rove about the country with the angry ghost at his heels. Again, we have seen that among the Akikuyu a murderer is believed to be tainted by a dangerous pollution (thahu) which he can communicate to other people by contact.

That this pollution is connected with his victim's ghost appears from one of the ceremonies which are performed to expiate the deed. The elders of the village sacrifice a pig beside one of those sacred fig-trees which play a great part in the religious rites of the tribe. There they feast on the more succulent parts of the animal, but leave the fat, intestines, and some of the bones for the ghost, who is supposed to come that very night and devour them in the likeness of a wild cat; his hunger being thus stayed, he considerably refrains from returning to the village to trouble the inhabitants. It deserves to be noticed that a Kikuyu homicide incurs ceremonial pollution (thahu) only through the slaughter of a man of his own clan; there is no ceremonial pollution incurred by the slaughter of a man of another clan or of another tribe....

This fear of the wrathful ghost of the slain is probably at the root of many ancient customs observed in connection with homicide; it may well have been one of the principal motives for inflicting capital punishment on murderers. For if such persons are dogged by a powerful and angry spirit, which makes them a danger to their fellows, society can obviously protect itself very simply by sacrificing the murderer to the ghost; in other words, by putting him to death.

But then it becomes necessary to guard the executioners in their turn against the ghosts of their victims, and various precautions are adopted for this purpose. For example, among the Bakongo, of the Lower Congo, when a man has been executed for murder, his body is burnt to ashes [thereby destroying his spirit so that it cannot seek revenge on the executioner]....

At Porto Novo, on the coast of Guinea, the public executioner used to decorate the walls of his house with the jawbones of his victims in order to prevent their ghosts from troubling him at night. At Issini, on the Gold Coast, executioners used to remain in seclusion for three days after doing their office; during that time they lived in a hut built for the purpose at a distance from the village. When the three days were up, they proceeded to the place of execution, and there called thrice by name on the criminal whom they had put to death. The invocation was probably supposed to protect the executioners against the ghost of their victim....

[A variation of this theme, with attendant corollaries cited here, is that] the mark of Cain may have been a mode of disguising a homicide, or of rendering him so repulsive or formidable in appearance that his victim's ghost would either not know him or at least give him a wide berth. Elsewhere I have conjectured that mourning costume in general was originally a disguise adopted to protect the surviving relatives from the dreaded ghost of the recently departed. Whether that be so or not, it is certain that the living do sometimes disguise themselves to escape the notice of the dead. Thus in the western districts of Timor, a large island of the Indian Archipelago, before the body of a man is coffined, his wives stand weeping over him, and their village gossips must also be present, "all with loosened hair in order to make themselves unrecognizable by the nitu (spirit) of the dead"....

In like manner we may suppose that, when Cain had been marked by God, he was quite easy in his mind, believing that the ghost of his murdered brother would no longer recognize and trouble him.

What the mark exactly was which the divinity affixed to the first murderer for his protection, we have no means of knowing; at most we can hazard a conjecture on the subject. If it is allowable to judge from the similar practices of savages at the present day, the deity may have decorated Cain with red, black, or white paint, or perhaps with a tasteful combination of these colors. For example, he may have painted him red all over, like a Fijian; or white all over, like a Ngoni; or black all over, like an Arunta; or one half of his body red and the other half white, like the Masai and the Nandi.

Or if he confined his artistic efforts to Cain's countenance, he may have painted a red circle round his right eye and a black circle round his left eye, in the Wagogo style; or he may have embellished his face from the nose to the chin, and from the mouth to the ears, with a delicate shade of vermilion, after the manner of the Tinneh Indians. Or he may have plastered his head with mud, like the Pimas, or his whole body with cow's dung, like the Kavirondo. Or again, he may have tattooed him from the nose to the ears, like the Eskimo, or between the eyebrows, like the Thonga, so as to raise pimples and give him the appearance of a frowning buffalo. Thus adorned the first Mr. Smith—for Cain means Smith—may have paraded the waste places of the earth without the least fear of being recognized and molested by his victim's ghost.

This explanation of the mark of Cain has the advantage of relieving the biblical narrative from a manifest absurdity. For on the usual interpretation God affixed the mark to Cain in order to

save him from human assailants, apparently forgetting that there was nobody to assail him, since the earth was as yet inhabited only by the murderer himself and his parents. Hence by assuming that the foe of whom the first murderer went in fear was a ghost instead of a living man we avoid the irreverence of imputing to the deity a grave lapse of memory little in keeping with the divine omniscience....

To this explanation of the mark of Cain it may be objected, with some show of reason, that the ghost of the murdered Abel is nowhere alluded to in the biblical narrative, according to which it was not the ghost, but the blood of his victim which endangered the murderer by calling aloud from the ground for vengeance. It is true that the conception of blood thus endowed with a voice and with a thirst for vengeance differs from the conception of a ghost, being a simpler and possibly a more primitive idea; yet in practice it perhaps made little material difference to the manslayer whether he believed himself to be pursued by the bloody phantom or only by the dolorous voice of his victim's blood shrieking after him....

The belief that unavenged human blood cries aloud from the ground is still held by the Arabs of Moab. A Bedouin of that country told a preaching friar that "the blood cries from the earth, and it continues to cry until the blood of an enemy has been shed"....

We may smile if we please at these quaint fancies of vengeful ghosts, shrieking gore, and Earth opening her mouth to drink blood or to vomit out her guilty inhabitants; nevertheless it is probable that these and many other notions equally unfounded have served a useful purpose in fortifying the respect for human life by the adventitious aid of superstitious terror. The venerable framework of society rests on many pillars, of which the most solid are nature, reason, and justice; yet at certain stages of its slow and laborious construction it could ill have dispensed with the frail prop of superstition.

If the day should ever come when the great edifice has been carried to completion and reposes in simple majesty on adamantine foundations, it will be possible, without risk to its stability, to cut away and destroy the rotten timbers that shored it up in the process of building.

Cain vs. Abel: A critical essay

Schneir Levin

The fruit of the forbidden tree has long interested biblical readers and commentators. It is assumed that the fruit was an apple and a piece of this fruit got stuck in Adam's throat, hence the name Adam's apple for the larynx. The biblical translator who gave birth to the idea of the apple was St. Jerome, a Hebrew scholar who lived in Caesaria and Bethlehem about 400 C.E. In this essay, Levin, a pediatrician, offers an interesting take on that forbidden fruit and the role it may have played in the Cain and Abel tale. Reprinted from *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, January 2004 issue.

At this time Jerome had translated the Hebrew Bible into Latin and it came to be known as the Vulgate, for the vulgar, that is, the ordinary people. When Jerome encountered the Hebrew for the fruit as טוב-good, and ער-bad, he translated ער into the Latin *malum*, hence words like malice and malevolent. Now it just happens that the Latin word for apple is also *malum*, so that medieval Italian painters, encountering the word *malum*, drew the inference that the forbidden fruit was the apple. A more attractive theory is that it was the banana, a (dangerous?) fruit foreign to the Middle East and growing originally in Africa and India. Banana leaves are longer than small fig leaves for making a genital covering. To this day in Israel bananas are sometimes called "the fig of Eve." In botanical terms, the banana is the *Musa sapientum*, the fruit of wisdom....

Was even *Homo "primitivus"*—before his sapient eyes were opened (3:7)—forbidden to know the difference between good and wicked conduct (2:17)? How can that be? No, the prohibition is not against knowing the difference between good conduct as compared with evil conduct, but between good and evil—and that encompasses something quite different. The threat is to the divine knowledge of just about everything: just as day and night, male and female are all encompassing, so good and evil knowledge encroaches on the breadth of divine knowledge, and hence the prohibition.

But there is also an alternative understanding of the tale of the forbidden fruit, generated by a scientific rather than a moralistic perspective, and it could conceivably throw some light on the later feature of the Cain-Abel clash. Knowledge is ידע and from this root we have ידעו-knew, and Adam knew (4:1) his wife as a result of which she birthed Cain, and again in the case of Seth (4:25); and Cain also knew his wife (4:17).

Note, however, there is no mention of [to know] in the case of Abel. ["To know" in Hebrew] also means intimate knowledge, carnal experience, sexual knowledge; the tree of the knowledge of good and evil can also be translated and understood as the tree of the carnal experience of good and bad. For while ער can mean evil, it can also mean bad [as in spoiled, or "gone bad"] which would include some toxic effect on pregnancy.

But consider that Abel was bad, physically, intellectually, socially, and perhaps genetically.

Cain is universally branded as the evil murderous killer of an innocent Abel....One can make out a better case for Cain as the innocent party who accidentally, not intentionally, killed Abel. Just about everything in the story of Abel brands him as the aggressor. Consider:

(1) The Lord is thanked for the birth of Cain (4:1) and Seth (4:25), but not Abel; he simply arrived (4:2).

(2) Neolithic agriculture preceded pastoral—sheep, goats, cattle—and Cain is the elder, called after stalks of grain (הנק) for baking bread. His name, supposedly given at birth, stems in fact from later experience. Abel, a herder of tamed animals, is not called a shepherd. Strange! His name, at birth, is also an example of eisegesis, reading back into earlier times the experience of adult activities, and he was diagnosed by his parents as, Abel, being לבה

[meaning worthless or, perhaps, vain, thereby suggesting that Abel was] disabled, defective, handicapped....Parents happily experience the birth of a normal baby and expect the next pregnancy to bring equal joy, but no! Often there arrives an offspring who is physically, intellectually, socially and perhaps genetically defective.

What could have been the matter with Abel? It could be that the forbidden fruit, conceivably a generic term for other toxic materials or chemicals (e.g., alcohol taken by the pregnant mother) could have damaged the embryo or fetus, or a virus present on the fruit (such as the German measles virus) could have infected the growing embryo, or there might have been something sparking a genetic aberration such as Down's syndrome (earlier known as Mongolism), or more likely a chromosomal aberration called the XYY Syndrome which, although it generally features normal individuals, sometimes presents as tall strong men with limited intelligence and social instability.

Surprisingly, Rabbi Yohanan (Midrash Genesis Rabba 22:7, 8) labels Abel as "bigger and stronger" than Cain and hence well capable of attacking him. Did Abel have an XYY?

(3) Both Cain and Abel gave sacrificial gifts to God and Abel's was accepted above that of Cain. But this was not because of miserliness by Cain. It was because, as is usual, a kindly and sympathetic father (in this case God) makes special allowances for a handicapped child or adolescent and favors him (4:4).

(4) And lo, when they were in the field, Cain's field, with grain to be protected, Abel came with his sheep or goats to graze on the fields of Cain. And the result? "And Cain said unto Abel his brother ..." (4:8) What did he say? It is not stated in the Hebrew text but there can be little doubt: "Get off my field!" Abel refused (4:8 implied). And the result? The aggressive and strong Abel attacked the smaller Cain. "And Cain rose up...." How come? Because he had been knocked down (Midrash Genesis Rabba 22:7, 8).

(5) So Cain retaliated in some manner, for "Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him, slew him." Note: not "murdered him...." Cain slew Abel, unintentional killing, manslaughter, in self defense.

(6) And God asked, "Where is your brother Abel?" And Cain replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9). Has it been my duty all these years to care for a bully, a disturbed youngster?

(7) With Abel dead a replacement was needed, hence the birth of Seth, and this word means replacement. For what, the dead Abel (4:25)? No, the *defective* Abel, for it specifically states that Seth was from רחא ערד (4:25), a different seed, genetic material, normal genetic constitution (karyotype, genotype) unlike that of Abel.

(8) And what punishment was meted out to Cain? After all, he had killed and others (from where?) might want to take revenge on him (4:14). God's punishment was no more than a slap on the wrist, no more than he inherited from Adam (3:17-19, 4:12). Cain was then banished to the land of Nod (4:16) where he built a town (4:17), perhaps a place of asylum, like the biblical towns of refuge (Numbers 35:6f) for those who inadvertently had killed someone. Moreover God guarded Cain and put a protective mark on him (4:15) and he continued his line in the birth of Enoch (4:17).

The fruit of the tree of the carnal experience of good and bad refers to the physically, intellectually, socially and genetically normal, good while bad here refers to the disabled. The fruit tree command is not to be translated and interpreted in moral or legal terms but in genetic and medical terms as the fruit of the tree of the sexual experience of good and bad.

Some toxic material may be transmitted from merely touching a potentially contagious and harmful substance (the forbidden fruit) and this includes the entry into the pregnant woman of various chemicals (the fetal alcohol--grape-derived syndrome), micro-organisms (notably the

German measles virus), and the transmission of other viruses (chiefly the HIV AIDS virus) which may injure both fetus and mother and may indeed give some truth to the consequence that it may result in death (2:17). Also forbidden is the sexual transmission of known genetic or hereditary disorders such as hemophilia. Touching or eating a forbidden substance is a prophylactic warning focused largely on the sexual transmission of multiple disorders that could indeed end in death, certainly of the fetus.

SCHNEIR LEVIN is a physician for children in Johannesburg, South Africa. He writes on medical and psychological aspects of biblical and religious issues.

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