



Murders Are People, Too

Kari Allegretto
Religion 113: Old Testament
Dr. Knauth
Fall 2007

A person who knows of the Abrahamic faiths knows of the story of the brothers Cain and Abel. One of the reasons the fourth chapter of Genesis fascinates readers is because of God's treatment of Cain after the murder of Abel. The story of Cain and Abel has an underlying message that murderers can also be creators. While one would expect God to heavily punish Cain and forfeit his life after he killed Abel, God continues to act the part of a strict parental figure in Cain's life and deals kindly with him, allowing him to live with and create a family.

Cain is introduced in the Bible as "a tiller of soil" (Genesis 4:2), meaning that he became a farmer. This meant that Cain followed in the steps of his father, who became a farmer after his banishment from the Garden of Eden. It is doubtful, though, that Cain learned how to farm under Adam's instruction, since Adam is not mentioned by name

in the fourth chapter of Genesis. If this is the case, then Cain created the job of farming. Abel became "a keeper of sheep" (Genesis 4:2). While he created the post of a shepherd, Abel's job required no other acts of creation. Cain's job required the creating of farm land through plowing and the creation of vegetation through planting seeds. By caring for the land, Cain raises plants from the dirt as God had created human life from the mud (Swenson 373). This creation of life appears to be a connection between God and Cain. When Cain is banished to a life of wandering from the land for murdering his brother, he laments, "Today you have driven me from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face" (Genesis 4:14). Cain mourns the fact that he will be separated from God, the one who was similar to him.

Never in the Bible does God request Cain and Abel make a sacrifice to Him. The

text clearly explains that Cain brought his offering to God first, sacrificing fruits of his harvest. Abel only makes an offering after Cain makes his (Breitbart 122), and he offers to God the firstborns of his flock. By some sign God reveals that he prefers the sacrifice presented to him by Abel over the sacrifice presented by Cain. The Bible never gives any indication as to why Abel's sacrifice was preferred, though the scholar Julian Morgenstern argues that Abel's sacrifice is rewarded by God because his job would have been more favorable to the nomadic, herding Israelites who told the story (61). However, since the Bible itself fails to present a reason to God's choice, it means that the reason why one sacrifice was preferred over the other was not as important as another message in this portion of the story. It is considered more important to know who sacrificed first than who gave the better sacrifice, as the order of sacrifice is given in the Bible. It was Cain who gave the first sacrifice without God's prompting. Thus, Cain created the concept of making sacrifices to God. His sacrifice may not have been as good as his brother's, but without Cain there may never have been the concept of religious sacrifice. This would also explain the severity of Cain's anger after Abel's sacrifice is rewarded by God. Cain's jealousy would have been fueled by anger that his brother gained a compliment from God for doing something that he had created.

After banishment to the land east of Eden, Cain continues to create. He eventually comes to the land of Nod and finds a woman who becomes his wife. She bears him a son, whom he names Enoch. Since Cain's wife is never named, the focus is on Cain when it comes to the idea of creating this child. Af-

ter the birth of his son, Cain builds the first city and names it Enoch, after his firstborn. The act of single-handedly building a city would be a huge accomplishment for a man of any era. To build a city when there were no previous blueprints or ideas to be worked from makes Cain's act even more amazing. By giving Cain credit for the creation of the first city, the Bible also makes Cain the possible creator of roads, public buildings, city walls and fortifications, and water works. Of course, this would be a large number of things for a single man to create, but nothing can be discredited, as the Bible gives no description of Enoch.

Through his son Enoch, Cain creates a line that bears creators of many different forms of livelihoods and arts (Litke 197). In the blood line of Cain there is Jabel, who was "... the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock" (Genesis 4:20). This makes Jabel the creator of nomadic herders and the methods that are used in herding. Jabel's brother was named Jubal and he became "... the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe" (Genesis 4:21). This makes Jabel creator of a line that created music, instruments, and musicians. Jabel and Jubal have a half-brother called Tubalcain, who "... made all kinds of bronze and iron tools" (Genesis 4:22). This makes Tubalcain the creator of the art of metallurgy. Tubalcain can be used as the link between Cain and the closely named tribe of Kenites, who were a group of wandering metal smiths in the ancient near East (Hess 807).

Names in the Bible often have significance, and Cain's name is no exception. In Hebrew the name can be interpreted to mean "spear" (Von Rad 99). This name links him once again to the wandering tribe of smiths, the Kenites (Hess 807). Those two names also

sound similar if the vowels that were given to them in modern time are removed as they would have been in ancient Hebrew. Spears create as well. As weapons, spears lead to the creation of warfare. Warfare creates newer and more advanced weapons. With newly created weapons, new forms of warfare are created. To counteract this, even newer and more advanced weaponry is created. This cycle of lethal creation has continued into our modern world. Though it is an abstract interpretation, it is one that cannot be dismissed.

Lines in Genesis 4 seem to contradict the underlying message of Cain being a creator. After all, the plot revolves around the fact that Cain killed his brother. The Bible leaves no doubt to this, as it clearly states, "And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him" (Genesis 4:8). There is no ambiguity in the statement; the two brothers had gone out into the field and Cain killed Abel. To kill is to destroy, and destruction is the complete opposite of creation. What this argument does not address is that prior to Abel's death there had been no murder. Out in the field, Cain committed the first murder (Wiesel 21). In this action Cain created not just murder, but fratricide (Sarna 340).

Another seeming contradiction to the message that Cain is a creator is that the land will no longer bear fruit for him after his brother's death, as Abel's blood soils the land. Due to this, God condemns Cain to the life of a drifter. But, if it were not for his time as a wanderer, Cain would never had built Enoch, the first city, nor would he have met his wife, who bore him his son similarly named Enoch, whose line created the crafts of the musicians, metal smiths, and nomadic herders (Litke 197). Also, Cain had sinned and had to be punished,

but instead of implementing the "eye for an eye" concept familiar to later parts of the Old Testament, God makes the land unyielding to any of Cain's attempts of cultivation.

The most important thing that Cain created was created unintentionally. After his brother's murder, God comes to Cain and asks where Abel is. Cain responds with the now legendary line, "I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). God does not give this question a direct answer, but responds with a much more emotional answer by crying out that Abel's innocent blood called out to him from the ground of the field. Such an answer reveals that Cain was much more than the keeper of his brother. He had been the keeper of another human being. He would have been Abel's keeper even if they had not been related. He was supposed to feel joy for the other's triumphs, sadness for the other's defeats. He was expected to protect his fellow man from danger. He had not been expected to do all of this because Abel was his brother; rather, he was expected to do all of this because Abel was another human being. Hicks' theory that Abel represents all human beings (4) solidifies the idea that each person is a keeper for mankind.

God does not answer Cain's question directly because of the complexity of the duty being presented. To directly confirm that Cain was his brother's keeper would be permitting cruelty between those who were not related by blood. By decrying the deed that has been done instead of answering Cain's question, God reveals that Cain had never been the keeper of his brother, but he had been put in the position of a keeper of a human being, a job that every person was expected to uphold (Morgenstern 61). Cain created this

post by asking God about being his brother's keeper. If he had not asked, the subject may not have been addressed until much later in the Bible. The placement of mankind's duty to each other in such an early stage of the Bible reveals that this law is a very important one. It is mankind's failure to follow through with this job created by Cain that caused the flood that nearly destroyed humanity.

In today's world a great many lessons can come from the message that Cain, the world's most famous murderer, was in fact a creator. In our society, one of the most debated ideas in the government is the death penalty. Those who are for the death penalty will sometimes use examples from later texts in the Bible that mandate "an eye for an eye" style of retribution, such as God's covenant with Noah after the great flood. In this story God declares that, "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed..." (Genesis 9:6). Yet, God protects a murderer when he places his mark upon Cain, claiming that "Whoever kills Cain shall suffer sevenfold vengeance" (Genesis 4:15). The story of Cain and Abel shows that a murderer can be also be a creator. Had God enacted "eye for an eye" vengeance upon Cain for the murder of Abel, then some of the most important pieces of society and culture may never have been created. After all, it was only after Cain murdered his brother that he execute some of his greatest creations. With the aid of Genesis chapter four, one could argue that by killing a murderer, society chances destroying a possible contribution that the murderer may be able to make.

The text shows that murderers can be human beings. Cain was capable of expressing the same emotions as people of the

modern world. He showed hatred, jealousy, remorse, and love just like any other person. He married and had a child just like many in today's society. Cain loved his family and his life, and he loved God above all else. People often pride themselves on how much they can love and on how much they are loved in return. God cared for Cain as he had cared for Abel and as he continues to care for his people today. This makes the world's first and most famous murderer as human as any other person, past or present. It proves that murderers are people, too.

Throughout history Cain is given the stigma of a destroyer. Future references of him in the Bible denounce him. Literature throughout the ages makes him and his descendants despicable. These sources seem to forget that without Cain's descendants there would not be metal craft, herding, or music. They seem to forget that it was Cain who created the rule that asks mankind to protect and watch over each other. These references choose to ignore that Cain created cities and farming. For these creations and much more, the story of Cain and Abel carries the important message that Cain is not a destroyer, but rather a creator.

Bibliography

- Attridge, Harold W., ed. *The Harper Collins Study Bible, Revised Edition*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006. Print.
- Breitbart, Sidney. "The Cain and Abel Narrative: It's Problems and Lessons." *Jewish Bible Quarterly Volume 32* (2004): 122-124. Print.
- Fretheim, Terrence E. *Interpreter's Bible: Genesis*. Vol. 1. Nashville: Abingdale Press, 1994: 370-378. Print.
- Hess, Richard S. "Cain." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Ed. David Noel Freedman. Vol. 1 A-C. New York: Doubleday, 1992: 806-807. Print.
- Hicks, L. "Abel." *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. A-D. Ed. George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962: 4. Print.
- Litke, Joel. "The Message of Chapter 4 of Genesis." *Jewish Bible Quarterly 31* (2003): 197-200. Print.
- Morgenstern, Julian. *The Book of Genesis*. New York: Schocken Books, 1965: 61-73. Print.
- Sarna, Nahum M. "Cain." *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Vol. 4. 2nd ed. Ed. Fred Solnick. New York: Thomas Gale, 2007: 340. Print.
- Swenson, Kristin M. "Care and Keeping East of Eden, Gen. 4:1-16 in the Light of Gen. 2-3." *Interpretation*. 60 (2006): 373-384. Print.
- Von Rad, Gerhard. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961: 99-106. Print.
- Wiesel, Elie. "Cain and Abel: 'He who kills kills his brother.'" *BR* (Washington D.C.) 14 (1998): 20-21. Print.

*Title art by Cody Ensanian