

Cain and Abel

First off, let's go ahead and get it out of the way: *Don't murder. Practice self-control.*

Of course fratricide is horrible. Cain is a murderer, and in a sense all murder is fratricide. Cain's punishment is swift and just. Let that be a lesson to all. Having said the obvious, we can take up where many studies of this text leave off.

The focus of this text is not on a moral lesson, like some story out of Aesop's fables. To read the text with a moralizing eye is to flatten and simplify it. These points are made more clearly, after all, in the Ten Commandments and the book of Proverbs.

We have entered a "strange new world," and we do well to explore it fully. What interests the storyteller? Where are we drawn into the text? Our answer focuses us on the speech of God. This speech is found in two scenes: (1) In 4:6–7, God addresses Cain before the murder occurs. The subject is sin, and attention is paid to Cain's troubled state of mind. Cain is silent. (2) In 4:9–15, God addresses Cain in a trial after the murder of Abel. God questions, Cain answers, and a verdict is rendered. Cain responds in anguish to the sentence, and God responds to Cain, mitigating the punishment.

What do the speeches tell us? What are the real problems here? What is the relationship between the sibling issue (which is ethical and horizontal) and the mystery of God (which encloses theological and vertical issues)? We will look carefully at 4:1–16 for answers. Then, we will ask how this episode is linked to what comes before and after it.

A Sibling Rivalry

Humans have a competitive nature. Superpowers vie for economic supremacy. Ethnic groups try to establish whose ancestry is older, who has squatter's rights, what language is to be preferred. Lines in the sand are drawn between north and south in Korea, Vietnam, Ireland, the United States.

"How old are you?" children ask each other, and the six-year-old child knows she is somehow better than the one who is only "five and a half." Put any group of strangers together and they will exhibit subtle and not-so-subtle ways of gaging who is the prettier, stronger, smarter, wealthier, more powerful. If there were only two people left in the world, they would compare belly buttons and the "innie" would declare himself superior to the "outie."

The story of Cain and Abel could be our story, speaking to temptations and feelings we all share. As Elizabeth Achtemeier says, "Like Cain, how envious we become of God's grace poured out on someone else." *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 71.

An Instigating God

Cain and Abel are brothers and, placed where they are in the narrative, the only two siblings around. Yet there is no hint of conflict between them. They are content to have different occupations (4:2). They come together in a simple act of worship (4:3–4). It is not until God steps in that a problem arises. Were it not for God, these two would be at peace. There is, standing above or between the brothers, that mysterious third party named "the LORD." And what an enigmatic presence! What puzzling behavior! God sets the competition in motion.

"And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard" (4:4–5). That is all there is to it. Commentators and readers turn back flips trying to make sense of this choice: God prefers sheep to fruit offerings, or shepherds to

"Life is unfair. God is free. There is ample ground here for the deathly urgings that move among us."—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 56.

farmers, or God knew the hearts of both brothers and Abel's was purer. None of these explanations will suffice. No reason is given in this passage because there is none to give. God's regard for Abel and his offering is simply a fact of life. Such is the mysterious freedom of God.

Getting Even

"So Cain was very angry" (4:5). We can understand that. The choice was arbitrary. Life isn't fair. Whether Cain was angry at God, Abel, the system, or the situation is not stated; indeed he probably does not yet know the target of his anger.

Conventional wisdom says the human emotions are basically four: glad, sad, mad, and afraid. Look deeper, and we know that sadness is fear turned inward. Internalized fear becomes depression, listlessness, and ennui. Sad is the debilitating side of being afraid, while mad is fear turned outward. Angry persons are driven by fear to irritation and insult, bigotry and aggression. Anger is always a cover for fear, the most primal of emotional responses, and we do well to ask what it is Cain fears most.

A triangle exists between Cain, Abel, and God. In this particular instance God chose Abel. On another day perhaps God would choose Cain. But what if not? The future is uncertain here (as it always is). This is scary stuff. God initiated this particular choice for no particular reason whatsoever. Such is the freedom of God. Cain's face falls because he is alarmed. Created "with the help of the LORD" (4:1), Cain now fears the very Source of his life.

Challenging the Beast

God's first speech addresses Cain directly, perceptively, intimately. It is, in a sense, an answer to his fear. God immediately identifies Cain's anger for him (v. 6). Then (v. 7) God holds out two possibilities. Note that these choices are within Cain's control. First, "If you do well" means that the future is wide open. Cain may choose to do rightly, and God will accept him. Cain has this power, which God promises to bless. Second, after God graphically identifies for Cain the power of sin, God offers him a challenge and an invitation. The verb form of *timshel* is ambiguous: "you *must* master [sin]" is one translation;

"you *may* master [sin]" is another. God gives Cain counsel and information. More importantly, God expands the repertoire of responses available to Cain, opening up a future of real possibilities.

While Augustine saw "original sin" in Genesis 3, it is here in 4:7 that we have the first mention of the word "sin" in the biblical narrative. It is forcefully described: sin is like a wild beast, a hungry desert lion, hidden in cover of darkness by the door. You might think you are heading out for a breath of fresh air, when Wham! The beast pounces and the night will never be the same. Sin is not breaking the rules; the commandments have not yet been given. It is not missing the mark of perfection or righteousness or godliness; such a report card mentality does not do it justice. Sin is a force larger than life. It takes on a life of its own, and what it wills is death.

Who has not seen it happen? Everything is going just fine; a person steps out for a breath of air, and some inexplicable destructive force seems to take hold. There's the politician who is at the peak of his career, the businessman who has no need to swindle the company, the star athlete who plays by the rules on the field, and Wham! We see them topple and self-destruct before our eyes. We shake our heads in amazement. What scandalous behavior! How stupid! How foolish! Just when he had everything going for him, he shot himself in the foot. Nightly, the six o'clock news bears witness to what the Greeks identified as a love of *thanatos*, the desire for death.

In Genesis 4 we are led by the image of the wild animal who may tear us apart. Sin is a lethal power at work in our lives. What is amazing, then, is God's offer to Cain. "You may master it." Cain has power even over this murderous, aggressive force.

The choice he makes is tragic, whether it be a premeditated act or manslaughter (4:8). But it is still a choice. Other possibilities existed. In this first speech God challenges Cain, even taunts him. It's a gamble and the stakes are high. But the outcome is not predetermined. Cain is human, free, and able to win. He could arm himself with that knife by the door, or pick up a rock and hurl it into the night. He could turn on headlights and freeze the animal in its tracks. He could master the beast, wrestle with it deep in the dark side of his soul. But he is stony, sullen, and silent.

"Here is a picture of virulent sin: it is a power that desires to have you. Sin is a hungry lion waiting, ready to pounce. In other words, Cain, your anger is a devourer and envy will eat you alive. You must master it or it will be your master."—H. Stephen Shoemaker, *GodStories: New Narratives from Sacred Texts* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1998), 30.

What he chose to do instead was to use a knife or stone against his only brother. Such is the logic of anger: find someone to blame! Throw a stone and you'll feel release! The real target of Cain's anger is this arbitrary God, but Abel is the convenient scapegoat. The murder is dealt with quickly. It is fear, clothed in anger, hurled at the brother.

A Brother's Keeper

The second speech of God is a trial wherein Cain is questioned and a verdict is given. "Where is your brother?" (4:9) echoes "Where are you?" of Genesis 3:9. While Adam admitted that he was afraid, Cain counters with the famous question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God should know where God's favorite is. Cain's anger rages still.

His counterquestion is ignored. Instead God shouts, "What have you done!" (the exclamation point is closer to God's speech than the question mark) The blood (4:10) of the murdered brother cries out from the ground! The Hebrew word is in the plural—"bloods"—which the rabbis understood to mean the blood of Abel's unborn descendants as well. Cain is responsible not only for the victim, but for the generations coming from him whose lives he has also destroyed. Indeed, what has Cain done!

Cain is sentenced by God to wander the earth as a fugitive (4:12). The farming land, land near Eden and near God, has no more life in it for Cain. He quickly and rightly senses the horror of this verdict. In a cry of real anguish he exclaims, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" He is divorced from all that truly matters: the good earth, the company of others, the presence of God. "I shall be hidden from your face." Abel was the scapegoat for Cain's anger toward God, but now Cain realizes he cannot live without this God. It is the hiddenness and mystery of God that first angered him because it scared him so. He identifies his true fear, which is to be bereft of God's presence. At last Cain speaks sincerely.

A Negotiating God

God is moved by Cain's plea. God responds and *the verdict is changed*. God responds to Abraham's haggling in Genesis 18:22-33 and to Moses' shaming in Exodus 32:11-14. In view of what humans have to say, God is open to taking a different way into the future. But the

plea here isn't coming from Abraham or Moses, who were after all interceding with God on behalf of others. We aren't talking about the prayers of the righteous. We are talking about Cain, a murderer, who is concerned for his own skin. The mystery and wonder is that God really listens at all.

Yet God responds to Cain. God marks Cain as God's own forever. It is a permanent mark of God's guardianship and custody. While hardly a badge of honor, it is incorrect to read the "mark of Cain" as folklore has mistakenly interpreted it. It is neither a bull's-eye for hit men nor a brand of shame. The mark is a sign of God's continued protection and mercy, like the clothing in 3:21. God is in effect saying, "This mark tells the world you are mine. If anyone comes after you, he'll have to answer to Me."

What is the relationship between the sibling issue and the mystery of God? The metaphor of a three-sided figure, with God at the "top," is helpful. The triangle is the most stable of geometric forms (witness the pyramids) as long as the horizontal base is solid and the vertices meet at the apex. Cain's business is to connect horizontally, in relationship and reconciliation with the brother. It is also his business to connect vertically, to give his offerings to the Lord and to "do well" before God. When he chooses to do otherwise, the potentially stable triangle falls apart; the pyramid disintegrates into a rubble of murder and banishment.

Dealing with Envy

There is one other business Cain did not attend to, and that was the mastery of that lion "sin." He did not take the beast or himself seriously. He did not wrestle with the dark side within that wishes to have its way. An internal connection was called for ("you may master it"), but Cain did not listen.

There is always a triangle between siblings and the parent. "Mama always liked you best." "You were always Daddy's girl." If the spotlight

What was the mark of Cain?

The use of this verse to support slavery or the submission of one race to another ignores the biblical witness. Even without a specific description, the text is clear that the mark signified God's protection, and not God's shame. Probably the mark was an easily recognizable tattoo, perhaps like that mentioned in Ezekiel 9:4. Some suggest that the mark may have identified Cain and his descendants as worshipers of Yahweh. For a complete discussion, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, Continental Commentary series (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 312-14.

turns on one (even for a second), the other cries “That’s not fair!” or “Look at me too!” The biblical narrative speaks to this competi-

tiveness with Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:19–33:17) and, more poignantly, the prodigal and the elder brother (Luke 15:11–32). The elder brother hated the attention given to his wayward sibling, not because he hates parties or even because he hates the brother, but because *it was not attention given to him*. “You are always with me,” the father reminds him. “All that is mine is yours” (Luke 15:31). Both of you are mine, and we have a homecoming here. I choose to throw a party; now come on in.

God says to Cain: Mind your own business, and mind it well. I choose to accept Abel’s offering; that’s my business. Your job is to do well before me and to be brother to Abel. This you can do; now let’s get on with it. Never mind the spotlight on Abel. Both of you are *mine*.

In the New Testament, Matthew records a parable of Jesus which few can read without a twinge. It’s the story of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16). At the end of the day, the first-hour laborers grumble (read: the eldest child is vexed). They feel penalized; the landowner isn’t being fair. How could he show such favoritism to these eleventh-hour workers? The

landowner heaves a sigh and replies:

Friend, I am doing you no wrong. . . . Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? (Matt 20:13, 15)

Indeed God’s goodness can make us murderous, if we let it. But how God relates to the brother or sister, to other workers or worshipers, is not our concern.



Want to Know More?

About the nature of sin? See Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, revised ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 212–27; for a technical discussion of Old Testament perspectives on sin, see Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Old Testament Library (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 170–77.

About God changing a decision? See Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1991), 286–87; for a detailed discussion of the Old Testament presentation of humanlike attributes of God (including changing one’s mind), see Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, Old Testament Library, 244–49.

About God’s name? See James D. Newsome, *Exodus*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press, 1998), 15–25; Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, 62–67; and James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1994), 65, 101.

About dealing with anger? See Carroll Saussy, *The Gift of Anger: A Call to Faithful Action* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), and Andrew D. Lester, *Coping with Your Anger: A Christian Guide* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983).

The Separation of Sin

How is this episode linked to what comes before and after it? Placed where it is in the morning of the world, the story of Cain and Abel intensifies the human problem first seen in the garden. If instead of “sin” we use the word “separation” (as Tillich does), the primeval stories of Genesis 1–11 show the spread of sin throughout the earth. Beginning in Eden, we see:

1. Separation between the humans and God (“I heard the sound of you in the garden . . . and I hid myself,” 3:10)
2. Separation in the relationship between human lives (which is expressed in blaming and shame)
3. Separation between the humans and the earth (“cursed is the ground because of you,” 3:17)

The separation between humans and God is deepened in Genesis 4. In response to God’s first speech, Cain is silent. In response to God’s question in the second speech, Cain is surly and insolent (“Am I my brother’s keeper?”).

The separation between human lives is deepened as well. While Adam and Eve’s relationship is fractured, there is still life together outside the garden. With Cain and Abel we see that fractured relationships can become deadly. The ultimate separation between humans is murder. Within one generation, just one hour after the dawn of time, sin spread quickly, profoundly, and horribly. With Genesis 4 we know the reality of fratricide.

At the end of Genesis 3, Adam and Eve left the “automatic” earth of the garden. Henceforth Adam must work the soil with the sweat of his brow, and his connection to the earth is toil and drudgery. In Genesis 4 the earth, like a living thing, can no longer bear the presence of the human being. The blood of Abel cries out from the soil like someone buried alive. The earth opened up its mouth to receive the blood and then closed it forever. Henceforth the ground will no longer yield to Cain (4:12). He will roam the land, leaving the area just outside of Eden and heading (geographically and metaphorically) even further away from the garden to the land of Nod, which means “Wandering.”

“[Cain] picked his destiny for time to come. He is protected, but far from home and without prospect of homecoming.”—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation, 61.

Grace Abounds

When did the Jews learn God's name?

The mention in Genesis 4:26 (as well as 12:8; 13:4; 26:25) of invoking the name of the Lord stands in some tension with the story of the giving of the divine name to Moses. In speaking to Moses in Exodus 6:3, God confirms that though Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew God, they did not know God by the name Yahweh. The references in Genesis to invoking the Lord's name may be intended to show an early awareness and reverence for the God whose name was not yet revealed.

But the story is not over yet. In spite of the presence of sin in the world, the presence of grace continues. God marks Cain as God's own forever. Cain marries (4:17; see note at end of chapter). Cain and his wife have a son; indeed seven generations flow from Cain (4:18–22), paralleling the seven days of creation. The gift of life and family persists. The arts, here music and metal work, are born as well. Civilization is problematic but it is not cursed. Civilization and culture can be for us a source of vitality, after Cain's name (Hebrew: *qanah*, "to get, to create").

Finally, with the birth of Seth to Adam and Eve (4:25–26), the spirit of Abel is revived. The line continues through Seth to Noah (Genesis 5), making Seth the biblical link to the people of promise. Seth has a son named Enosh, and "At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD" (Gen. 4:26).

Cain's anguished cry to God became, with Seth and his descendants, a call of praise and a summons to which God will respond. Life is problematic. We are beset with fears. Yet the human spirit continues to yearn for the God who continually meets us, wherever we may wander.



Questions for Reflection

1. The actions of Cain we understand. Under the same circumstances, we probably would have the urge to act as Cain did. But God acts in unexpected ways with Cain. How does God respond to Cain in this story? What does this story affirm about God and God's dealings with humanity?
2. In part, this is a story about anger vented in violence. This unit states that "anger is always a cover for fear." Think of times when you get angry. What is the fear behind that anger? What are constructive ways to react to anger?

3. Both this unit and the previous unit (about Adam, Eve, and the garden) present stories in which the human participants make hard choices with dire consequences. What are some other similarities between the two stories, both on the part of the human participants and of God's reactions to them?
4. This unit includes the statement: "How God relates to the brother or sister, to other workers or worshipers, is not our concern." If that is so, what *is* our concern?

Note on Cain: The woman Cain marries and the enemies out there whom he fears present a problem for those who wish to read the Bible as recorded history. Clearly the editors of Genesis intended otherwise: scientific history was not their purpose. The richness and breadth of the text extend far beyond a mere chronicling of events. Those who insist on reading it as such find problems, but those problems are theirs and not the Bible's.