

THE INNOCENT VICTIM

Jaki Leckman

Introduction

The story of Cain and Abel is of foundational significance in many ways. It is the first act of violence and, within that, it is the first murder – specifically fratricide, it is also the first mention of blood. After Cain has killed Abel, he becomes the founder of the first city which is not unique to the Bible, “The myth of Cain is presented in a classic fashion. One of the two brothers kills the other, and the Cainite community is founded” (Girard, “Things Hidden”146). In the Roman myth, Romulus kills his brother Remus and the city of Rome is founded. However, the Scriptures tell the story differently. The murder is presented as deeply wrong and affecting of the world. Cain is not seen as a hero for founding a city, but he faces the consequences of his sin. God, in response to Cain’s actions, clearly pronounces murder as prohibited, but yet, does not engage in retribution. Through this discovery of Genesis 4:1-16, I will show the significance of the first violent act and how it prefigures Christ. Within this foundation I will discuss the blood of Abel and its cry from the ground, the breaking of the interconnectedness of humanity with the land as well as God’s shockingly non-retributive response. I will then show how Hebrews chapter 12 takes these archetypes of righteousness and wickedness and states that we are the guilty party and Christ the innocent victim – his blood speaks a better word than Abel’s. This paper will examine the themes of violence and vengeance in the Cain and Abel story and show how the author of Hebrews argues that Christ’s blood has the final say.

I. The Founding Murder

The Violence of Cain

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Genesis 4:8

There are many assumptions and studies that question the nature of Cain’s sacrifice and what made it so that God did not look upon it like he did Abel’s. However, the focal point of the story is Cain’s response. Detail is spent in the story on Cain’s response and then YHWH’s response to Cain. Little detail is given elsewhere: we are not told why Cain’s offering was

rejected or perceived to be, we are not told Cain's motivations in killing his brother, or what might have ensued in their time in the field. What we have is a portrait of Cain. His attempt to give to God. His hurt. God's warning to him that his disposition may allow space for sin, his violent action, Cain's response to God, the response of the ground with Abel's innocent blood and God's response.

In the garden, Adam and Eve choose against God. This is the first story that depicts the fall of humanity. The next story that is written in parallel to the first is Genesis 4:1-16. This explains violence as the first outflow of the fall. By Genesis chapter six, violence is cited as the reason for the ruin and collapse of creation (v.11). Cain had a choice just like Adam and Eve, and after being warned by God, Cain chose violence. It is notable that YHWH does not describe the sin living in Cain, it is something that is "crouching at your door; it desires to have you." (v7), animal-like just like with Adam and Eve. The violence of Cain is depicted as a human who does not master his desire and so strikes his innocent brother whom he is meant to be "keeping" (v.9b) and so in shedding innocent blood, it foreshadows the innocent blood shed by Christ on the cross (Morris). Cain becomes the archetype of the wicked and his brother the innocent.

Cain's violence and the taking of his brother's life can also be described within the framework of mimetic theory. As Cain and Abel were both desiring of God's favour – so they are desiring the same thing. To Cain's perception, Abel became the object that was in the way of his peace and his feeling of having God's favour: if Abel were not there, then his countenance would be lifted. Cain's conflict was internal, "all humans desire in this way, and that the way by which we produce peace is by the expulsion of someone held to be responsible for our conflicts" (Alison 21).

The Blood of Abel

The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. Genesis 4:10-12a

When the Lord addresses Cain, two more characters come into play, that is the blood and the ground. The blood is crying out to YHWH and the ground is opening its mouth receiving the

blood. These poetic personifications are intentional and reveal humanity's interconnectedness with each other and with the earth itself.

As Cain stands before the Lord, his brother's blood cries out from the earth. Now, "cries for vengeance by those who have been persecuted to the point of death are a common theme in Jewish and Christian literature. Often they are combined with a prayer requesting retaliation for the murder of the righteous" (Byron 747). I argue that this reflects clearly not on God's desire for vengeance, but on human need to blame and destroy the scapegoat— or their perceived source of conflict (Girard, "Violence" 4). In 1 Enoch 22:7, in a vision of a type of purgatory, "This is the spirit which went forth from Abel, who his brother Cain slew, and he makes his suit against him till his seed is destroyed from the face of the earth, and his seed is annihilated from amongst the seed of men." Here the blood of Abel is no longer evidence of his guilt like in Genesis four, but it is Abel's spirit which is asking for vengeance. In the Targum Ongelos translation and additions, Genesis 4:10 states, "And he said: 'What is this you have done? The voice of the blood of the righteous multitudes that were to arise from Abel, your brother is crying out before me from the earth'" (Tg. Ong. Gen 4:10). In these passages, their seed continues: Abel's as the righteous and Cain's as the wicked. If we view this from a Girardian standpoint: they have made the seed of Cain the problem – vengeance must be taken to wipe the unrighteous out and bring peace. This is reflection of human desire for vengeance and an innate conviction that one can obtain peace from violence.

Abel's blood continues crying because it symbolizes the blood of the innocent shed over and over again by the hands of human beings with the hearts of Cain. This is no different than the cry of the Israelites in slavery going up to God (Exodus 2:23). Their cry is heard not because YHWH is wanting to take violent vengeance out on the perpetrators, but because he is attuned to the victim: the cry of the vulnerable.

Interconnectedness with the Land

In Genesis 2:7, it says, "YHWH formed the man from the dust of the ground" – a foundational statement of human interconnectedness with the land. Cain, like his father, was a worker of the land, his identity and his livelihood came from it. As the ground opens its mouth to receive the blood of Abel, and the blood cries out from the ground, so also the ground will no longer yield its crop to Cain. "the fourth chapter of Genesis narrates the unravelling of the

ecological unity between humans and the land featured so prominently in Genesis 1-2” (Lynch 23). The interconnectedness of land and human action reveals itself all through the Hebrew Scriptures. The land is destroyed by violence and only Jesus will make all things new: destroying violence itself. “Violence distresses, disrupts and destroys the land. ... violence tears at the moral bonds holding together humans and the land, and in some cases tears the entire fabric holding together God, humans and the land” (Lynch 17). The natural consequence that came from Cain’s violence was the ground not yielding its crops for him – that which once gave him his identity and livelihood (McEntire 24). God didn’t force the ground to do that – God created the humans deeply connected with the land, so when the violence happened, there were immediate repercussions to the land-human relationship.

God’s Non-Retributive Response

When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” But the Lord said to him, “Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the Lord’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Genesis 4:12-16

The mark of Cain has been abused through history with many horrible ideas of what this might have been. It is best to understand it just as what the Bible allows us to see: it was God’s protection. “It is of course a mark of protection, not a stigma as the English idiom, ‘mark of Cain,’ suggests” (Alter 18). The mark does act to announce the guilt of Cain, but is also marks Cain as safe (Brueggeman 60), and in time, Cain builds the first city, “in effect, that sign of Cain is the sign of civilization” (Williams 23), a civilization built upon mimetic desire and violence.

Cain did have consequences for his actions – these are woven into the fabric of creation – everything is interconnected, so when one of those connections is deeply broken or damaged, there is a chain reaction. The ground would no longer produce crops for Cain and he had to leave God’s presence and become a wanderer. God, however did not exact vengeance. “Although Abel’s blood cry signalled bloodguilt by judicial standards – and usually justified blood revenge

– YHWH does not avenge Abel’s blood in accordance with any known blood-avenging law” (Lynch 32). Instead of retributive justice – God allows Cain life. He cannot work the land anymore, but he does marry and continue with the blessing of family and arguably community within the city. If God were to follow human logic, Cain would have been killed, yet in God’s response “he enunciates the law against murder” (Girard, “Things Hidden” 146). “In the myths, mimetic conflicts lead to the sacrifice of a scapegoat, after which the scapegoat is often deified, because with the sacrifice the mimetic violence ends, albeit temporarily. In the Bible, however, the victim is not deified but rehabilitated” (Duyndam 238). Biblical stories continue in the vain of Cain – Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers – and they all display a mimetic desire that leads to violent intent. God’s response is redemption and restoration. Moses becomes a Cain in Exodus chapter two— he is then restored and made the leader to bring God’s people out from injustice (Webb 54).

As the Foundational Murder in the Scriptures, the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16 presents a mimetic rivalry that ends in human violence. The two become archetypes of good and evil, but the response of God is not the retributive justice, or vengeance that would have been expected.

II. The New Foundation

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” Hebrews 12:22-24

In Hebrews chapter 12, the author gives us a definitive end to the Cain and Abel saga that has ruled humanity since the beginning. Abel, as is implied elsewhere in scripture, is seen as a picture of innocence and faithfulness often juxtaposed against the wickedness of Cain. In Hebrews 11:4, he is listed among the heroes of faith, “By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.” Abel still speaks – he testifies

as a victim of violence. “Abel functions as the paradigmatic innocent victim” (McCruden 507). As the Hebrew understanding of Abel’s blood cried out “condemnation against his murderer... In rabbinic tradition, the blood of all the descendants who have been born from Abel cried out to God against Cain, and Cain thus had no share in the world to come. ... Jesus’ blood thus speaks ‘better things’ than Abel’s blood (Keener 664) because Jesus’ blood allows Cain, too, to be welcomed into the Kingdom.

The sign of Cain was for protection, the sign of salvation is “revealed as the overcoming of mimetic desire and violence through the nonviolence of love and forgiveness” (Williams 23). Just as the High Priest symbolically went into and out of the Holy of Holies (representing Heaven and back to earth) sprinkling the blood of the goat that is “the Lord,” to symbolically set people free (Alison “Atonement”), Jesus’ blood is sprinkled to set all humanity free. The ultimate innocent victim has allowed himself to be killed to end the sacrificial system and speak a better word: that we no longer have to desire in competition with one another, and that we no longer have to use violence in pursuit of peace. Jesus unifies us all in true peace. “In the Old Testament we never reach a full revelation of the innocence of the victim... That fullness of revelation occurs only in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus” (Alison 23). Jesus blood cries out for the restoration of all things and the interconnectedness of humanity and the earth to heal and rebuild.

James Alison, in his book *Raising Abel*, invites the reader to imagine Cain old and afraid in his home, and young Abel entering in the night. The two are face to face and instead of reaching out in vengeance and retribution, Abel, the picture of Jesus, reaches out in reconciliation and restoration as not just “victim but also attorney and judge.... the return of Abel not only as a decree of forgiveness for Cain, but as an insistent presence which gives Cain time to recover his story” (Alison 134). This releases us to reimagine Abel’s blood cry as one for restoration – as a cry for Jesus. We stand before a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29) that is the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 12:24 contrasts the blood of Abel and “is to be understood as the definitive bringing to an end of the world order which was born with Cain, the order of the world since the first victim” (Alison 196). There should be no more victims of violence for any reason.

III. Personal Reflection

I remember being a leader on a youth trip and the pastor gathering all the garbage and joking as he put the cans in the trash that we Christians need to help speed up the end of the world. “According to a Pew Research Center poll from May 2020, while 62% of religiously unaffiliated U.S. adults agree that the Earth is warming primarily due to human action, only 35% of U.S. Protestants do – including just 24% of white evangelical protestants” (Bardon). It is interesting to me that there seems a separation between earth care and protestant faith. Our interconnectedness has been lost. I was taught that this earth will fade away anyways, so let’s use it up. I don’t think that reflects the heart of Jesus, I also see that even the Cain and Abel story teaches us that our violence, in itself, damages the earth. As our violence is interconnected with our mimetic desire – it increases our need to want and consume more. Only through Jesus as the innocent victim can we begin to restore what is broken. “The time in which the innocent victim is made present to us as forgiveness, and thus, little by little, allows us to let go of all the sacred mechanisms of which we lay hold to fortify ourselves against our own truth” (Alison 135). Slowly, through Christ, I believe that even our interconnectedness with the land will be restored.

Driving this morning I was listening to a reporter interview people who had fled Mariupol as it has now been under siege for about a month: the heartbreaking descriptions, the pain in their voices. As I imagine my own family hiding, and starving; as I imagine finding my own child’s body under rubble, what I am aware of is anger and hate. The enemy: the other is out there and I am Cain. I cannot pretend that I am better when my fear can fuel the same hate and the same othering. The mark of Cain was for protection, “In a simple way, the narrative articulates the two-sidedness of human life, in jeopardy for disobedience and yet kept safe. The acknowledgement of *guilt* and the reality of *grace* come together in this presentation” (Brueggemann 60). We live this way before the Lord, the acknowledgement of guilt: our need to be forgiven. It is not just that we must forgive but that we desperately need to be forgiven. “We are the heirs of Cain because we murder our brothers. This original violence makes a more modest claim than original sin: we do not kill one another *because* Cain did; rather, we kill one another for similar reasons” (Schwartz 2). I am not better than the other.

Hebrews 12 is a final say on the blood of Christ. We are set free from the sacrificial system, from having to act violently and we can come together around our perfect victim who died to unify all of humanity. “It is only late that Jesus resolves the founding murder *hidden since the foundation of the world*, as James Alison theologically elaborates. Jesus becomes like

an Abel brought back to life, in forgiveness through resurrection” (Gerada 16). I went through Bible College learning that there are multiple theories of atonement, but that the right one is penal substitutionary atonement. But, James Alison doesn’t believe atonement is a theory at all, it is a liturgy. And, Jesus is the ultimate innocent victim. “In other words, who is the angry divinity in the story? *We are*. That is the purpose of atonement. *We* are the angry divinity. *We* are the ones inclined to dwell in wrath and think we need vengeance in order to survive. God was occupying the space of *our* victim so as to show us that we need never do this again” (Alison “Atonement”). In other words: we are Cain. Jesus invites all people, for all of time, into the time of Abel. As peacemaker, I have been transformed by this understanding – that when I look to find fault – it is within me and Jesus, in his grace and mercy has dealt with it and continues to deal with it.

Conclusion

The Cain and Able story is the foundational act of violence in the Bible. It presents violence as an offense that effects human relationships with God, each other and the earth. Abel’s blood produces a cry from the ground that continues through time as the cry of the vulnerable. Cain and Abel are set up to characterize the wicked and the innocent, and yet, God does not enact vengeance on Cain, but works to protect him from future violence, pronouncing the foundational law against murder. In Hebrews, the author states that Jesus’ blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. He ends the need for a sacrifice created by our mimetic desires by becoming the perfect innocent victim that can unite all of humanity in true peace. We live in the time of Abel: where we desperately need forgiveness as we recognize within ourselves the heart of Cain.

Works Cited

- Alison, James. *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996.
- _____. *Some Thoughts on Atonement*. A transcript of a Talk Given in Brisbane, Australia, August 2004. jamesalison.com/some-thoughts-on-the-atonement/ Accessed March 26, 2022.
- Alter, Rober. *Gensis: Translation and Commentary*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1996.

- The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. Ed. R.H. Charles. The Clarendon Press. https://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH_1.HTM Accessed March 25, 2022.
- Bardon, Adrian. "Faith and Politics Mix to Drive Evangelical Christians' Climate Change Denial." *The Conversation*. September 9, 2020. theconversation.com/faith-and-politics-mix-to-drive-evangelical-christians-climate-change-denial-143145 Accessed: March 28, 2022.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
- Byron, John. "Abel's Blood and the Ongoing Cry for Vengeance." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 4, Catholic Biblical Association, 2011, pp. 743–56, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43727117>.
- Duyndam, Joachim. "Girard and Levinas, Cain and Abel, Mimesis and the Face." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, vol. 15/16, Michigan State University Press, 2008, pp. 237–48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41925309>.
- Gerada, Mario. *Uncovering Idolatry: James Alison in dialogue with Scripture and John of the Cross*. 2012. University of Malta, dissertation.
- Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer, Stanford University Press, 1987.
- . *Violence of the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
- Holy Bible*. New International Version, Zondervan, 2014.
- Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. IVP Academic, 2014.
- Lynch, Matthew J. *Portraying Violence in the Hebrew Bible: A Literary and Cultural Study*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- McCrudden, Kevin B. "The Eloquent Blood of Jesus: The Neglected Theme of the Fidelity of Jesus in Hebrews 12:24." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 3, Catholic Biblical Association, 2013, pp. 504–20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43728234>.
- McEntire, Mark. *The Blood of Abel: The Violent Plot in the Hebrew Bible*. Mercer University Press, 1999.

Schwartz, Regina M. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

The Targum of Onkelos. Genesis Section I. Translated by J.W. Etheridge, 1862.

http://targum.info/onk/Gen1_6.htm Accessed March 25, 2022.

Webb, Marvin W., and L. Szondi. "Thanatos and Cain." *American Imago*, vol. 21, no. 3/4, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964, pp. 52–63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26302176>.

Williams, James G. Forward. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, by René A, Translated by James G. Williams, Maryknoll, 2001.