

Shared Stories, Rival Tellings

Early Encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims

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Preview, Chapters 1-3: The First Murder

Brotherly love—marked by bonds of affection and loyalty—was much prized in the ancient cultures of Israel, Greece, and Rome, but, as scholar Jan Brenner noted, it was also recognized by these peoples that solidarity between and among brothers was strained by issues like inheritance rights, a father’s preference for one of his sons, or political ambitions: “in some cases, rivalry could end in fratricide.”¹ While a Roman tradition preserves the tale of Romulus’s murder of Remus, his twin, the Hebrew Bible’s Cain and Abel story captured this tragedy of brotherhood for Jews—and Christians and Muslims had that story too.

What happened between the world’s first brothers? What grievances sparked the anger and led to the murder? The narrative describes the origin of human violence. How much more does it tell?

Surprises are to be found in the following three chapters. Qabil (as the Qur’an names Cain) does not know what to do with Habil’s (Abel’s) body after he has murdered him. How was this first human corpse to be treated? Was the strife between Adam’s sons about women—about their competition for a potential mate? What female candidates were available to them? Muslim and Jewish interpreters raise and pursue the question.

Where a break in the text of the Hebrew Bible’s account of Cain and Abel kept the reader or hearer from knowing what the brothers said to each other prior to the killing, that gap would be filled in, differently, by the story’s varied interpreters. And about the terrible event itself, some asked why God did not intervene, saving the good son of Adam from the bad son’s assault. For them the question was about theodicy—the justice of God.

Meeting the saga of the first murder in the biblical account in *Genesis* 4:1-16 or the Qur’anic narrative in Surah 5:27-31, moderns find their minds turning to the collapse of trust

between fellow beings, to the causes of discord and conflict. We ponder the forces, ideas, strivings, and emotions that affect dealings between human beings, whether as individuals face-to-face or as peoples gathered into their families, groups, religions, races, and nations. How did Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the early and formative periods of their faith communities hear, tell, and picture the story of the first murder?

The making of humankind, part of God's work on the sixth day of creation that was, according to *Genesis* 1:31, "very good," is followed two chapters later by the terrible story of Cain's killing of Abel (*Genesis* 4:1ff). In between, tellingly, falls the account of Adam's and Eve's disobedience and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. From the biblical point of view, the fall from innocent goodness and peace enjoyed in Paradise has been drastic, resulting in the degradation of human existence, and a life-environment subject to violence.

Islam also registers this crisis on its own terms. When in the Qur'an God commands Muhammad to recite "the story of the two sons of Adam" (Surah 5:27), the narrative ends with words weighing the extreme gravity of a single murder—it is tantamount to killing all of humanity.

It is possible to approach the Cain and Abel story as an etiological tale, conforming to a pattern set in *Genesis* 3, where it is written that *because* of the sin committed in the Garden of Eden, Adam was to spend the rest of his days laboriously tilling the earth, Eve would suffer pangs in childbirth, and the Serpent, once able to stand, was doomed forever to slithering. Read in this light, the tale of Cain and Abel explains how murder entered human existence.

The intrinsic drama of the clash between the world's first brothers immediately demanded, however, that various other questions be posed—about motivations, about decisions to act, about the tensions in relationships, and even about God's reactions to the result of the brothers' conflict. What in Cain's circumstances or personality led him to commit fratricide? For what reason was Abel's offering to God acceptable, and Cain's not? How were Adam and Eve affected by this tragedy? Was Cain adequately punished?

Rabbinic discussions of *Genesis* 4 circle around the contrast between Cain's evil and Abel's righteousness, with most attention falling upon a range of possible causes and motivations for Cain's evil. Was Satan at work in Cain's thoughts and deeds—and if so, does

the blame for his act of murder fall only upon him? When God asked Cain, “Where is your brother, Abel?” why did Cain play the innocent? (A rabbi likens Cain to a man raiding a mulberry garden who, when confronted, denied he was stealing, even though his hands were stained.)

Treatments of Abel’s innocence are also popular, but special discussion centers on the fact that after his death, Abel’s “bloods” (plural) still cry out, audible to God. What does this mean, the rabbis ask, about the state of Abel—does he live still? If so, in what condition? (Again, this is the first mortality; curiosity abounds.)

Philo Judaeus’s *Questions and Answers about Genesis* show this philosophical scripture interpreter making the brothers examples of two ways: one path leading to virtue, the other to vice. Cain and Abel also represent two contrasting kinds of love—of the self, and of God—a theme that continues into the theology of St. Augustine’s *City of God* five centuries later. Philo’s portrait of Abel as sacrificed and triumphant (his continuing voice a sign of his immortality) allows him to speak of the victim as the first of God’s martyrs: an innocent who in suffering, was true to his God.

Early Christian artists and writers also wrestle with Cain’s murderous act, and like their Jewish counterparts speculate about the influence of Satan, the tempter, in this momentous crime. The appearance of the serpent in a fourth-century catacomb painting of Abel and Cain reveals the artist’s investment in this explanatory theme. But more than on any other aspect in the biblical story, interpreters focus upon Abel’s death, which they Christianize in striking ways. One author presents Abel’s death as a predictive prototype of what would befall Christ—the execution and resurrection, upon which Christians’ belief and trust in God depended. In the context of competition between Christians and Jews, this line of reasoning also enabled a harsh anti-Jewish polemic: Cain, it was argued, stood at the beginning of Israel’s history of killing God’s favored and chosen ones, the prophets—most notably Jesus, God’s messiah.

Chapter 2 concludes with the work of three Christian writers who shared a singular interest in the troubled family relations within the household of Adam and Eve. In their pursuit of deeper psychological insight into the tragedy of Cain’s fratricide, these

authors/preachers gave additional words and emotions to the members of the first family, exposing more fully Cain's criminality, Abel's victimhood, and the impact of this tragedy upon their parents.

Muslim perspectives on the story of Qabil and Habil were both like and unlike those called in the Qur'an "the people of the Book": the Jews and Christians. With their Jewish counterparts, Muslim commentators shared a number of strong interests—the first murder's implications for legal judgments on subsequent killings (i.e., capital crimes), the important theological question of whether Cain's act was "free" or whether it was predetermined by God, and that set of speculations mentioned earlier about the role of their preferences for mates in the clash between Qabil and Habil.

Especially important in Islam's understanding of the story of Adam's sons is a piece of the Qur'anic narrative that is not found in the biblical account: Qabil, burdened with the corpse of his brother, receives a sign from God and comes to a realization about himself. This final episode gave grounds for some interpreters' reassessments of Qabil's character.

In tracing trajectories of each community's interpretations of the first murder, we look for evidence of their interactions—and for the element of competition in their ways of framing and maintaining the story's meanings. To discern where and why Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interpretations of Adam's two sons part company—that is, become particular to their own religion, and conflict with the views of their rivals—is to begin to gather significant clues about the historical relations of the religions which counted Abraham their father.

¹ Jan Brenner. "Brothers and Fratricide in the Ancient Mediterranean: Israel, Greece and Rome." Pages 77–92 in *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*. Edited by Gerard P. Luttikhuisen. Leiden: Brill, 2003.