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CAIN AND ABEL:

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JEN DRESSER

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PREFACE

I have had a life-long passion for peace and justice. I remember, as a child, making the same wish every year when I blew out the birthday candles: “I wish for world peace.” As an adult I see a direct connection between the human ability to work for peace and the theology which underpins so many social, political and cultural institutions. The idea of peace seems, to many, far-fetched and impossible. I firmly believe that in order to create a culture of peace in the world it is necessary to re-imagine theologies which contribute to supporting violence and maintaining the status quo. This work is one attempt to do just that. I hope that you, the reader, will find this re-imagining as fascinating as I do.

I give thanks for Arthur Walker-Jones who read multiple versions of this thesis, helped me to clarify and articulate the arguments, pointed me towards other sources that I would not have found on my own and helped to develop a stronger thesis. I also give thanks for James Christie stepping in and offering additional feedback, making connections to several modern events and deepening the work.

ABSTRACT

This thesis uses a close reading of the Cain and Abel narrative to offer an interpretation grounded in feminist theology, which imagines a world with less violence. It draws on sources from the social sciences, peace and justice studies as well as theology and biblical studies. The cycle of violence and concepts of restorative and punitive justice are examined as they relate both to the Cain and Abel narrative and current issues such as war crimes, the conflict in Palestine/Israel, capital punishment and internment. This thesis also examines how the Cain and Abel narrative speaks to the current environmental crisis using an understanding of the earth as God's body. The Cain and Abel narrative continues to provide a context for reflecting on violence and responses to violence. The Cain and Abel narrative, not only describes an early story of violence, it offers a model for breaking the cycle of violence and creates the possibilities for peace within creation. This focus continues to speak to many current situations of violence.

Introduction

The Cain and Abel narrative has become, in Western culture, synonymous with the first murder and has been used to suggest that violence is inevitable because of its early appearance in the canon of scripture. There have been many approaches and attempts at using the story to understand and make sense of violence. Fewer commentators and interpreters have used the narrative to reflect on ending the cycle of violence. This thesis will use a variety of sources along with my own observations to interpret the story of Cain and Abel and relate it to current situations of violence.

Regina M. Schwartz argues, in *The Curse of Cain*, that there is a scarcity of almost everything—blessing, land, power—and this perception of scarcity comes from the development of monotheism and scripture. She traces this scarcity from the Cain and Able narrative through modern psychoanalysis. She suggests that this scarcity is at the root of the violence found in the Can and Abel narrative and within contemporary culture. She also suggests that the Bible, and the stories it contains, continues to influence both conscious and unconscious views of the world, even within a predominantly secular culture and that this influence allows the Bible to be used to justify abuse and violence.¹ I agree that scripture continues to carry a wide influence within North American culture regardless of how secular the dominant culture claims to be. Where I diverge from Schwartz is in the assumption of scarcity. The Creation narratives offer an image of abundance which comes from God and God's breath. It is as the first people leave the garden that scarcity leads to violence. In the Cain and Abel narrative, violence is the

1. Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 9.

outcome of a perception of scarcity—specifically the scarcity of acceptance and produce from the land. However, the Creation narratives affirm that there is enough. The Cain and Abel narrative shows how this perception of scarcity leads to violence and then suggests that this perception does not *need* to lead to violence. This thesis will focus on the ways in which the Cain and Abel narrative speaks against violence and God’s role in ending the cycle of violence.

Throughout the thesis I will be writing of both peace and justice. Definitions of these concepts will be important for understanding the work of this thesis. For the purposes of this thesis peace and justice cannot be taken separately and are assumed to be related concepts which support and nurture each other. Peace deals specifically with the absence of violence between humans, against the self and against the earth. All of these forms of violence result from some type of injustice so the work of justice creates the conditions for peace. Working for justice means working to eliminate those conditions which create inequality between humans and contribute to a sense of scarcity as described by Schwartz. These conditions include, but are not limited to, poverty, racism, sexism and homophobia and may occur between individuals or may be part of systemic discrimination in which law and policy are used to maintain inequalities. In working for peace the causes of injustice must be examined and eliminated while minimizing and ending violence. These concepts will be supported throughout the thesis.

Review of Literature

Following the creation stories, Cain and Abel follows next in the collected canon of scripture and as such, is one of the foundational stories of faith and theology which

shapes world view and action, often unconsciously. The interpretation of this foundational story is crucial to re-shaping world views with a focus on peace and justice. Throughout the history of interpretation there have been many different approaches to biblical interpretation generally and specifically in regards to the Cain and Abel narrative. Many of the ancient interpreters were concerned with the nature of good and evil and used the Cain and Abel narrative to describe and articulate the difference between two types of people.² These commentators often interpreted the Cain and Abel narrative in light of references within the Christian scriptures and the focus of these interpretations is on portraying Abel as good and Cain as evil. The Genesis text does not make the distinction between good and evil but focuses instead on behavior and its impact on the individual and the surrounding relationships.

In more recent times there has been a focus on textual and literary criticism which is helpful in drawing out the nuances of various words and phrases in the text.³ The debate surrounding translation and interpretation of words allows for a rich diversity of possibilities for understanding the text. Over a period of time, particular translations have

2. Augustine of Hippo, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I*, ed. Andrew Louth (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); Origen, "On Prayer 29:18", in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I*, ed. Andrew Louth (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001); Salvian the Presbyter, "Governance of God 1.6" in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I*, ed. Andrew Louth (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

3. Alan J Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links Between Genesis 4:16 and Genesis 2:3," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23 (1980): 297–305; James Kugel, "Cain and Abel in Fact and Fable: Genesis 4:1-16," in *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament*, ed. Roger Brooks and John J. Collins, 167–190, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); Ed Noort, "Genesis 4:1-16. From Paradise to Reality: The Myth of Brotherhood," in *Eve's Children: the Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, 93-104, (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Ellen van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study," *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 52 (1991): 25-41; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion S.J., (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

become generally accepted however, closer examination reveals that in some cases there may be alternative translations that help to create alternative readings of the text.

Still other commentators have focused on the nature of violence and how violence is portrayed within the Cain and Abel narrative.⁴ Since the Cain and Abel narrative is the first story of violence in the canon of scripture, the observations from these scholars help to articulate the sources of violence in the world and how stories about violence shape contemporary understandings of violence.

In recent years, several commentators have connected the Cain and Abel narrative with particular contemporary stories of violence using liberation theology.⁵ These interpretations offer contextual reflections on the story with a focus on re-imagining or re-interpreting the narrative in ways that bring about a more just world. In addition to interpretations that have focused on human violence, other scholars have a particular focus on violence directed at the earth.⁶ These types of interpretations are particularly relevant for contemporary culture as more awareness is focussed on environmental concerns and violence becomes mainstream in both news and popular media.

4. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory, (New York: Continuum, 1972); Forrest Wood, Jr., "Averting Violence: Social and Personal," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 14, (1987): 29-37.

5. Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990); Gerald O West, "Two Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context of Liberation," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 73, (1990): 34-47.

6. Kristen M. Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden: Gen 4:1-16 in Light of Gen 2-3," *Interpretation* 60 (2006): 373-384; Gunther Wittenberg, "'Alienation and 'Emancipation' from the Earth: The Earth Story in Genesis 4," in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shriley Wurst, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 105-116.

Methodology

For any interpretation it is important to take seriously the social location and context of the interpreter. My own background is one of diaconal ministry in the United Church of Canada and I have been influenced by feminist, liberation and eco theologies among others. The United Church has a long history of involvement in and commitment to social justice in Canada and around the world. Diaconal training has an emphasis on exploring theology, along with the practice of justice, in ways that work towards transformation. The theologies mentioned above bring perspectives from the margins of society, both Canadian and global, with a clear focus on supporting and working for justice and peace. These influences shape the bias I bring to my own interpretation with a focus on non-violence, justice and care for the earth. These theologies also bring a commitment to relationship which will be evident in this thesis.

Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza uses a model of asking questions to interpret and expand the text⁷. This follows the tradition of Jewish Midrash which also expands the text. Rabbi Melvin Glatt describes Midrash as having three tasks: to expand the text, to build up the community, and to develop moralism and ethics.⁸ Feminist and Liberation theologies follow a similar pattern and I will be drawing on these traditions of expanding the text with a focus towards imagining a less violent world.

The Midrash and feminist traditions acknowledge multiple lenses of interpretation. Schwartz indicates that multiple stories and interpretations offer an

7. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 149.

8. Melvin Jay Glatt, "Midrash: The Defender of God," *Judaism* 35 (1986): 87. When this article was written Glatt was rabbi and director of religious service, The Jewish Geriatric Home, Cherry Hills, N.J.

opportunity for the present and the past to connect and that new stories may be added over time without conflict.⁹ My perspective is one of these voices brought to scriptural interpretation and is not intended as an absolutized interpretation.

Throughout this thesis, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible will be used as this is a translation from the original texts and was developed by a team of American biblical scholars from thirty-five denominations. In addition to theological texts and biblical scholarship this thesis will draw on selected work from the areas of psychology, peace and justice studies. An attempt has been made to survey a wide range of material related to the Cain and Abel narrative however not all texts were accessible.¹⁰ These resources will be used to examine current situations of violence in light of the Cain and Abel narrative with a focus on developing a theology that takes seriously the nature of violence and attempts to minimize violence within contemporary culture.

9. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 160.

10. See Ricardo J Quinones, "The Cain-Abel Syndrome: in Theory and in History," in *Destructive Power of Religion*, vol. 3 of *Models and Cases of Violence in Religion*, 81–125, rev. ed., (Westport: Praeger, 2004).

Chapter 1

Sin is Lurking: The Cycle of Violence

One hot morning Cain was clearing some heavy rocks from the ground. A sheep from Abel's flock trampled on Cain's newly planted field. Abel was lying in the shade of a nearby tree while his sheep grazed lazily. Cain tried to speak to Abel, but the words wouldn't come. Cain hated that his brother was resting while the sheep made a mess of all his hard work. Cain was so angry that he felt as if he were on fire inside. His heart was beating so strongly that he covered his ears to make the pounding stop, but it just got louder. He couldn't even look at Abel anymore; he could only stare at the ground. At that moment, Cain noticed a large rock sitting right by his feet. Without thinking, he lifted the rock and instead of tossing it aside as he always did, he threw it at Abel and hit him on the head.

—Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Cain and Abel*

It seems fitting in a thesis regarding re-imagining stories of violence to begin by understanding something both of the story and of the nature of violence. This chapter will use Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's model of imagining what is underlying the story and examine the family dynamics, motives and emotions which may have been in play during the narrative. This chapter will also introduce the cycle of violence and begin to examine how it functions within the narrative.

The Context

Reading from a different context different from that of the text creates the opportunity to imagine what might be happening behind the scenes. In addition, it is important to remember that the narrative was written within a different context than in which it is purported to have occurred. According to Peter Enns, an evangelical biblical scholar, "The Pentateuch [the first five books of the Bible] and the Bible as a whole do not accurately recount events in neutral fashion, but tell us *what the writers understood or*

believed about those events.”¹ It is necessary to examine both the historical context of the events and the context of the writers and editors in order to interpret the Cain and Abel narrative.

The Cain and Abel narrative was written as a “J,” (Yahwist) document which reflects the authors attempt to explain their own context by re-remembering the beginning. It does not reflect the historical reality of Cain and Abel. “The Pentateuch as we know it . . . is the end product of a complex literary process—written, oral, or both—that did not come to a close until sometimes after the return from exile.”² The authors and editors of Genesis reflect on their own experiences and understanding of the world while drawing together written and oral sources to create what is currently known as the book of Genesis. Cain and Abel is the result of this reflection and editing.

With this time frame and process in mind it is important to acknowledge that the writers and editors have knowledge of the events which follow the Cain and Abel narrative and make their own assumptions about cause and effect. The benefit of hindsight offers the opportunity for reflection and refinement and changes in perception.

Karen Armstrong describes the formation and use of scripture this way:

From the very beginning, the Bible had no single message. When the editors fixed the canons of both the Jewish and Christian testaments, they included competing visions and placed them, without comment, side by side. From the first, biblical authors felt free to revise the texts they had inherited and give them entirely different meanings. Later exegetes held up the Bible as a template for the problems of their time. Sometimes they allowed it to shape their world-view but they also felt free to change it and make it speak to contemporary conditions.³

1. Peter Enns, “*When Was Genesis Written and Why Does it Matter?*” BioLogos Foundation, http://biologos.org/uploads/resources/enns_scholarly_essay3.pdf (accessed March 2, 2012), 6.

2. Peter Enns, “*When Was Genesis Written and Why Does it Matter?*” 8.

3. Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: A Biography*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), Kobo e-book. intro para 6.

In the instance of Cain and Abel the writers of the narrative would be writing from within a well-established culture with a focus on both relationship and physical needs. While the narrative indicates that Adam and Eve, along with their sons, are the only humans the authors would be writing the narrative from a context with well-defined expectations of family roles which shapes the narrative. The story begins with the conception and birth of Cain.

The Family

The story reflects an ancient understanding of the family and the role of family members. In Genesis 4:1 several significant things may be identified. Eve seems to be in charge. She is the one who produced Cain—with God’s help. Cain is mentioned second and is introduced as a man who is already grown. Eve is mentioned again as bearing Abel and then disappears from the narrative until she bears Seth (Gen 4:17).

The fact that Eve appears as the first animator in the story suggests that she has power to shape the narrative, the family unit and, to a certain extent, the behavior of her sons. It becomes quickly apparent, however, that Eve’s role is limited to child bearing. Adam, who is not mentioned by name until verse 25, has only one role—the conception of Cain, presumably Abel, and then Seth. The two primary characters become Cain and God, along with the earth.

At his birth, Cain is identified as a man. This indicates that he is born with all the rights, responsibilities, knowledge, experience and skills of a full-grown man. He does not, according to the narrative, have a childhood or adolescence. Childhood, as a distinct entity is a relatively modern phenomenon in the “Western” world. According to Jeremy Rifkin, Sir Thomas More, a humanist in the sixteenth century, was one of the first to

identify that children should be treated differently from adults and treated with compassion and empathy.⁴ With the lack of a concept of childhood, Cain would have been treated like a tiny adult with adult responsibilities. As soon as Cain was able, he would have participated in the survival of the family/tribal unit.⁵ The introduction of Cain as an adult reinforces the need for him to behave as an adult. Cain does not grow into this task of providing for the family; it is placed on him from an early time. The root of Cain's name means "to possess; to acquire."⁶ This could indicate not only how Cain came to be, but also the expectation that he would produce and Cain goes on to build the first city.

Abel is introduced with the statement that he is Cain's brother. This introduction places Abel in relationship with Cain and indicates that his role in life is to be Cain's brother. Many places in scripture use relationship to identify characters.⁷ This practice carries an implicit assumption about the importance of family relationships in defining the individual and their role. In addition to his role as a brother, Abel's name indicates something about his status within the family unit: it means "breath in the sense of transience, transitoriness or worthlessness."⁸ In Ecclesiastes and elsewhere⁹ breath is used

4. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness*, (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009), Kobo e-book. ch 8 (Creation of Childhood) para1. Jeremy Rifkin is an economist with an interest in how technology is changing the world.

5. Victor H. Matthews, "Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell, InterVarsity, <http://www.ivpress.com/title/exc/2737-1.pdf> (accessed September 30, 2011).

6. *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names*, s.v. "Cain."

7. Gen 10:21; Gen 14:12; Jgs 3:9; 1 Sm 6:26; 1 Chr 1:42; Mt 4:18; Mk 3:17; Jn 6:8.

8. van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel," 29.

9. Eccl 3:19; Eccl 11:15; Eccl 12:7; Ez 37:9.

to denote God's spirit within humans. As the narrative plays out, Abel's role is limited and serves as the focus of Cain's violence. Schneir Levin suggests that Abel was born with some type of disability, perhaps Down's syndrome or XXY syndrome¹⁰ and Rabbi Yohannan suggests that Abel was bigger and stronger than Cain, which fits the description of XXY syndrome.¹¹ There was no celebration at Abel's birth. Abel does not appear as a main character and his voice is never heard. All of these things reinforce the perception of Abel's lack of importance within the family unit and his minimal role in the narrative. However, Abel is important because the interaction between the brothers changes the course of Cain's life and ends Abel's. In order to examine the relationship between the brothers, I want to begin with what the narrative says about the brothers.

In addition to being identified as a man, Cain is also identified as a brother.¹² His identity as a brother, however, is secondary to his identity as man and his ability to produce. Cain's focus is on what is necessary for physical survival: providing for the family unit. Cain's vocation is to be a "tiller of the ground," (Gen 4:2). Only here and in Zechariah 13:5 'bd is translated as *tiller*. In most cases it is used to describe any work activity including slave labour or forced labour and may also include worship.¹³ The next event in the narrative involves an expression of worship. In the creation narratives, the work of tilling is combined with the task of keeping (Gen 2:15) which becomes a

10. Schneir Levin, "Cain Versus Abel," *Judaism* 53 (2004):52. Levin was a physician for children in Johannesburg when this article was written and writes on medical and psychological aspects of biblical and religious issues.

11. Rabbi Yohanan, "Midrash Genesis Rabba 22:7, 8," quoted in Schneir Levin, "Cain Versus Abel," *Judaism* 53 (2004):52

12. Kristen M. Swenson, "Care and keeping East of Eden: Gen 4:1-16 in Light of Gen 2-3," *Interpretation* 60 (2006): 380.

13. James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), s.v. "6268."

response to the Creator and an act of worship. In translation a variety of interpretations may indicate that Cain felt like a slave in his quest to provide and produce and that his work was not an act of worship. This may indicate that both his work and his relationships are tainted by separating them from his worship.

In Psalm 121, *keeper* (šmr) appears in reference to God who helps, does not sleep and protects from sun, other dangers and evil. In Genesis 2:15, God gives the tasks of tilling and keeping the earth to the humans. The references to keeping suggest that Abel, in his role of keeping, is to help and protect as a responsibility given by God.

These nurturing tasks also reflect the God-human relationship. Armstrong describes the creation stories as reflecting wholeness and relationship between God and humans. “God and humanity were not divided but lived in the same place; men and women were unaware of gender difference; they lived in harmony with animals and the natural world; there was no distinction between good and evil.”¹⁴ This description of creation offers a reflection of relationship and wholeness which is a helpful frame for the reading and interpretation of scripture. Unfortunately, many interpretations of scripture reinforce the splits mentioned in Armstrong’s position and Cain’s behavior of separating his work from relationships and worship reflects this split.

John Holder suggests that the brothers cannot survive unless they are able to respect each other’s work and share the land. If they cannot do this then “jealousy, exploitation, tension, and conflict” may develop.¹⁵ He goes on to argue that the conflict develops not because there is not enough, but because those with power (in this case

14. Armstrong, *The Bible*, intro. para 10.

15. John Holder, “The Issue of Race: A Search for a Biblical/Theological Perspective,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 49 (1992-1993): 48.

Cain) see the other as a threat to their own dominance (Abel). He suggests that this split between those with and without power is at the root of racism.¹⁶ In considering the relationship between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in Canada there is a perception amongst some that European people work hard and deserve the land while the Aboriginal people are lazy, do not use the land productively and therefore do not deserve the land. There are different historic understandings of land and relationships with the land that continue to shape how each community interacts with and perceives the other in their stewardship of the land. Historically, First Nations communities had close human relationships and a close relationship to the land while Europeans had an expectation of using the land for what it could produce. The tension between these values resulted in treaties that have not been honoured and residential schools that attempted to impose European culture and Christianity on Aboriginal people. This history created a structure which limited interaction between Europeans and Aboriginals to one in which many Europeans perceived themselves as superior. This fueled stereotypes and racism which continues to be perpetuated in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians.

Good and Evil

Over time, the narrative of Cain and Abel has been identified as indicating the origins of violence and as an example of evil (Cain) and good (Abel). This becomes evident in the Christian scriptures as Jesus refers to this story. Abel is referred to in Matt 23:35 and Luke 11:51. In the Matthew text, Jesus identifies Abel as righteous and as the

16. Holder, "The Issue of Race," 48.

first person whose blood was shed. These words are within the context of Jesus denouncing the scribes and Pharisees. Similarly in the Luke passage, Jesus is denouncing the Pharisees and lawyers. He charges the generation in which he lives with having killed all the prophets, including Abel. These passages tell us several things relevant to this thesis:

1. The authors of the gospels identified violence as having been present since early in human history.
2. According to the gospel writers Jesus identified that the violence would continue in his own time.
3. Abel is identified as righteous and a prophet by Christian Scripture writers.

The Genesis narrative gives no indication that Abel is either righteous or a prophet, however, the Palestinian Targums (2nd Temple period, 538 BCE to 70 CE) include an expansion of the Cain and Abel story which may shed some light on this development.

Cain answered to Abel: ‘Therefore your offering was accepted with delight, but my offering was not accepted with delight’. Abel answered: ‘The world was created by love and is governed according to the fruit of good deeds. Because the fruit of my deeds was better than yours and more prompt than yours, my offering was accepted with delight’. Cain answered and said to Abel: ‘There is no Judgment, and there is no other world, there is no gift of good reward for the just and no punishment for the wicked’. Abel answered and said to Cain: ‘There is Judgment, there is a Judge, there is another world. There is the gift of good reward for the just and punishment for the wicked.’¹⁷

In this translation and interpretation of the narrative, the conversation indicates that Abel’s offering was given in love and that his behavior was good. It also indicates that Cain’s offering was not given with love and that Cain did not believe in judgement

17. “Targum Pseudo-Jonathan 4:8 -11,” quoted in Mark Bredin, *Jesus, Revolutionary of Peace: A Nonviolent Christology in the Book of Revelation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003), 80.

for behavior. This may further indicate that Cain's focus on producing prevented him from offering his best. Cain's comments regarding judgment and reward suggest that, in his opinion, humans are free to behave in any manner with no consequences. As a result of these beliefs, Cain does not understand that there are consequences for murder and he may be genuinely surprised when he is called to account.

This theme is continued in 1st John with Cain being described as being "from the evil one" (1 John 3:12). This description suggests that Cain's nature is evil and voids the goodness that is inherent in humans in the creation story. It also eliminates the possibility of redemption for Cain. The further implication is that anyone who murders is "from the evil one" and beyond redemption. The possibility of redemption is a central theme of the Christian faith. In his writings, Paul of Tarsus places a strong emphasis on grace through faith. According to Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, known for their work on the historical Jesus, Paul's grace was primarily concerned with "transformation of ourselves and of the world in this life."¹⁸ If Cain is evil, can grace, the possibility of transformation exist for him? This is one of the struggles that the narrative of Cain and Abel highlights: is it possible for those who perpetrate violence to be redeemed? The text does not fully answer this question but it does attempt to offer a partial understanding.

Interpretations of the Cain and Abel narrative have attempted to illustrate the division of people into righteous and unrighteous and to make the suggestion that the good will suffer at the hands of the unjust. Augustine's interpretation suggests that because Abel is younger he is good and Cain is older and therefore evil.¹⁹ Augustine's

18. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 156.

19. Augustine, *The City of God, 635, Against the Pagans*, 15:1.

interpretation attempts to create a straightforward dichotomy between good and evil, yet the Cain and Abel narrative is not as straightforward as later references in scripture would make it seem. As modern readers know, the fields of psychology and medicine have shown that humans are shaped by both genetics and by various relationships. Much human behavior is learned and human responses to various situations are complicated. I assume that similar dynamics are at work within the lives of Cain and Abel. I will continue to explore these dynamics following Schüssler Fiorenza's model of imagination which asks questions of the text and imagines what may be happening within the characters minds or what may be happening behind the written text.

In the Targum passage quoted earlier, Cain is portrayed as evil prior to the murder. As a result of his inherent evil, his offering is rejected and Abel is murdered.²⁰ These writings do not address where the evil comes from or why Cain behaves the way he does and most commentaries follow suit.

The Offerings

The rejection of Cain's offering has been a point of speculation for many scholars but may in fact be Cain's perception and not God's rejection. As an act of worship, Cain brings an offering of the fruit of the ground (which may have been any produce, crop or offspring) and Abel brings the fat portions from the firstlings of his flock as his offering. No reason or structure is given to the offerings but the naming of the gifts reflects that of

20. Origen, "On Prayer 29:18" quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I*, ed. Andrew Louth (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 104-105.

the sacrificial system. Neither the reason nor the background of this practice of offering is mentioned.²¹

Both “fruit of the ground” and “firstlings of the flock” appear in Leviticus and Numbers as part of the sacrificial system which forms a portion of scripture identified as “P” (Priestly) because it was formalized within in a time when the religion of Israel was becoming more structured. As the sacrificial system developed, hindsight allowed the experience of the sacrificial system to influence the interpretation of the Cain and Abel narrative. The laws surrounding sacrifice and cultic practice would not have applied to Cain and Abel.²²

The writer’s purpose in including the offerings of Cain and Abel may be to create the illusion that these offerings have been offered since the beginning. It may also indicate an assumption that God needs the offerings and that the offerings need to be given in a particular way. However, Augustine has suggested, and I would concur, that “God does not derive any benefit from our worship, but we do.”²³ Therefore the events that follow the offerings say more about humans than they do about God—in this case the writers and editors of the narrative. The description in the narrative of God choosing Abel over Cain based on the appropriateness of an offering suggests that the author is placing his own cultural assumptions onto a story which developed orally prior to the laws. There is no explanation offered in the text, although many commentators have attempted to

21. H. G. L. Peels, “The World’s First Murder: Violence and Justice in Genesis 4:1–16.” in *Animosity, the Bible, and Us: Some European, North American and South African Perspectives*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 24.

22. Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” in vol. 1 of *New Interpreter’s Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 373.

23. Augustine, “Letters 102.3” quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I*, ed. Andrew Louth (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 104.

supply explanations. Laurence Turner, suggests that Abel's offering was more generous than Cain's²⁴ and von Rad offers that a blood sacrifice is more pleasing to God²⁵ as described in Leviticus.

Both grain and fat offerings are described elsewhere in scripture and may be used as sin offerings. However, in the case of sin offerings, the grain offerings come with the caveat "if you cannot afford two turtledoves or two pigeons, you shall bring as your offering for the sin that you have committed one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour for a sin offering."²⁶ It is clear that the preferable offering is two turtledoves or pigeons and that the grain offering is for those who cannot afford the birds. If this is a sin offering, Abel's ability to make an offering from the flock may indicate that Abel is wealthier than Cain. Abel's ability to offer from the flock could also be an indication by the author that God blesses those who are good and refuses wealth to those who are bad.

If Abel has become wealthier than Cain, it is possible that Cain is jealous of Abel's ability to produce. Gunther Wittenberg, who developed Resistance Theology which challenges the power of the state, suggests that outside of the garden the land was arid and Cain's work of growing crops would have been difficult in this environment. Within this context, it would appear to Cain that Abel's work does not require the intensive labour and yet would yield greater results. As a result, Cain may have felt that the curse from Genesis 3 landed only on himself.²⁷ However, if the land was not

24. Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 37.

25. von Rad, *Genesis*, 104.

26. Lev 5:11.

27. Gunther Wittenberg, "Alienation and 'Emancipation' from the Earth: The Earth Story in Genesis 4" in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shriley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 107.

producing then the flocks would suffer and be undernourished. Abel's offering should also be affected by this curse and therefore neither offering should be adequate.

Claus Westermann, simply says it is God's preference with no further explanation.²⁸ If this is the case, God appears arbitrary choosing one person over another for no apparent reason. If this is the case, God cannot be trusted to love unconditionally and there is no way of knowing what behavior God expects.

None of these explanations are really satisfactory but Wittenburg's explanation seems the most plausible when he suggests that Cain himself is feeling rejected because he has worked hard and the harvest is still poor.²⁹ The text does not say why the offering was rejected so any explanation must be supplied by interpreters.

Following Schüssler Fiorenza's method of expanding the story, imagination may suggest some insights into the rejection of Cain's offering. What are the signs that Abel and his offering were accepted and Cain and his offering were not? There is no indication that God spoke to either brother at this point in the story. It is common for people of faith to attempt to listen for God and see God in the world around them in order to make sense of a particular situation. Sometimes the explanations that humans place on God are faithful and sometimes they are the human's ego misleading them or misinterpreting God. I wonder if this type of interaction is at work here. Perhaps Cain sees Abel's offering and starts second guessing himself and begins to wonder if he and his gift are adequate. If this is the case, then the disregard for Cain's offering lies with Cain himself and not with God. These speculations fall within the realm of imagination and within the

28. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 303.

29. Wittenberg, "Alienation and 'Emancipation' from the Earth," 107.

history of scriptural and theological interpretation described earlier by Armstrong. The suggestion that Abel was accepted and Cain was not is one of the places in the narrative in which I believe human expectations have been placed on God in order to make sense of why Cain murdered Abel.

If it is understood that it is Cain who feels rejected and not that God actually rejected him, the phrase “his countenance fell” (Gen 4:5b) reflects the shift in his mood and self-perception. While this particular phrase does not appear elsewhere in scripture, countenance is used in regards to humans as well as God. In reference to humans, it is used to contrast the necessity and reality of joy and sorrow or to indicate a change in emotion. In Genesis 4:5 Cain’s anger is linked to his change in countenance. The Midrash tradition indicates that Cain’s face “became like a firebrand” and that his face was blackened or burnt up.³⁰ These terms express the physical nature of anger that is observable and visceral in way that a change in countenance cannot.

There is an indication that a change of countenance may be responsive to both human action and God’s action. For example, in 1 Samuel 1:18, Hannah is in distress and spends time in prayer. After being re-assured by Eli, she returns home, eats with her husband and her “countenance was sad no longer.” Eli’s words and Hannah’s own actions indicate that a person’s countenance may be influenced by human behavior and the outcome of this change in countenance affects an individual’s emotional state.

Cain also has the ability to change his countenance. He appears angry after offering his gifts and his countenance falling may be an initial reaction to his perception that his offering was rejected. God’s question to Cain, “Why are you angry and why has

30. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, trans. and ed., *Midrash Rabbah*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 of *Genesis* (London: Soncino, 1961), pdf e-book 184.

your countenance fallen?” (Gen 4:6) offers an invitation for Cain to respond and change his countenance.

Imagination

The narrative does not offer a satisfactory explanation of what actually happens. I want to offer imagination, which follows both the midrash tradition and the work of Schüssler Fiorenza, as a way of exploring what might be happening that is not recorded in the text.

In re-imagining the narrative, I can imagine that Cain and Abel have worked hard. They come to offer the meat and fruit offerings to God that are the result of their hard labour. Abel is able to offer more, and it smells delicious as it burns and the family gets to eat the slaughtered animal. There’s also hide for clothing and wool for blankets. Cain’s offering can only be eaten and does not offer the satisfying smell.

Overall, it may seem to Cain that Abel’s is a better offering. Cain expects that God will be more pleased with Abel’s offering. For this, Cain becomes angry at himself and angry at his inability to provide for his family. This is supported by the indication in the texts of law (eg. Lev 5:11) that grain offerings are made by those who cannot afford a meat offering. The result is that Cain’s countenance falls and he is left wondering what to do next.

Scripture carries a tension between God’s love as conditional and unconditional and this is seen in how the Cain and Abel narrative has been interpreted. The text indicates that it is God who rejects the offering. This may reflect the authors’ attempt to describe God as an arbitrary judge. In this line of thinking God’s love and acceptance then appear arbitrary. There is no reason for anything except that it is God’s will. If, on

the other hand it is Cain who rejects his own offering, Cain's countenance falling may instead reflect his own sense of inadequacy. If this is the case, Cain is in control both of his emotions and his response to those emotions. Thomas Brodie, suggests that the falling of Cain's face reflects what is going on deep within Cain. "Cain is down, and waiting for him like a crouching animal is 'sin.'"³¹ I imagine the conflict and struggle inside Cain as he tries to figure out how to respond to his intense emotions. The narrative places the responsibility for the outcome of the story on Cain's shoulders. The outcome hinges on Cain's ability to respond to his emotions and, either, behave responsibly or with violence. This continues to reinforce the indication that Cain is an adult.

Sin

One of the key words in understanding and interpreting this passage is sin. Sin is something that, for many people of faith, carries a strong sense of guilt and unworthiness. The Hebrew that is often translated as *sin* has a meaning in Hebrew closer to "missing the mark."³² I find this a helpful definition because it suggests that no human is perfect all the time and that improvement and learning are always possible. Evil exists in behavior that is violent and destructive. The evil is created by human behavior and choices and does not exist outside of human behavior. I also understand that evil feeds itself so that one violent act often leads to another violent act in retribution. I understand sin as anything that leads to a brokenness of relationship: brokenness with God, with myself, other people or the creation. Within this context, sin becomes something that I have the

31. Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical & Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 153.

32. Adams, *From Literal to Literary*, s.v. "sin."

potential to control. I also know that I will not always be perfect in maintaining and nurturing relationships and that there will be factors beyond my control which affect my ability to hit the mark. The concept of “missing the mark” similar to an arrow shot from a bow, speaks to me of the possibility of redemption and the ability to be closer to the mark next time a particular situation or relationship challenges me.

As many humans have pointed out, making appropriate choices in the face of strong emotions can be extremely difficult. Don Mason reflects on Cain from his own experience as a murderer: “Jealousy had taken root and grown into a lush tree in [Cain’s] heart. The concentration on jealousy, and its companion that eventually follows, hatred, results in a burgeoning self-centeredness.”³³ Humans need a certain amount of self-centeredness for healthy self-esteem and self-preservation. Mason is suggesting that in Cain’s case and in his own experience, when healthy self-centeredness is replaced by jealousy and insecurity, the responses to these strong emotions may lead to violence. As a result of his own inner turmoil, I imagine that Cain may not feel able to take responsibility for his emotions.

Cain continues to experience God’s presence and as he struggles with his experience of rejection and his feelings of anger at being the displaced brother, the text says that God speaks to him: “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” (Gen 4:7). God is not suggesting that the offering will be accepted but that Cain himself will be accepted. Forest Wood, Jr. suggests that the struggle within Cain is the struggle between his sense of acceptance and his non-acceptance of self. This is a common theme in humanity and

33. Don Mason, “What Murder Did to Me,” *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 60 no. 3 (Fall 2006): 297.

individuals seek the acceptance of people around them. This need for acceptance is then projected onto God.³⁴

Cain's countenance falling suggests that he is visibly and terribly upset. Then God asks him a question and offers some advice: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it," (Gen 4:7). In this question and advice Cain is being given the opportunity to choose. The choices and their consequences are not out of his control. Cain has the ability to control his own destiny and that of Abel. To *do well* comes from the Hebrew *yataw* "to be good." This includes "performing an expected function."³⁵ One of Cain's expected functions is to be a brother. The implication in this context is that he will be a better brother than he has in the past and it seems that the expectations being placed on him are being raised. Cain is being given an opportunity to make a good choice, a choice that will land him closer to the mark with regards to his relationship with Abel. There is room for mistakes and disappointments but Cain needs to remember that one of his primary roles is to be a brother.

Cain needs to choose well. He needs to choose what will give life to himself and to others. As Cain struggles with this choice he enters the place where "sin is lurking," (Gen 4:7). This is the first place that the word *sin* appears in the edited canon of scripture.³⁶ This is a new phenomenon and so understanding the nature of sin is important. Throughout biblical interpretation there have been many understandings of sin and this particular passage offers some unique insights into the nature of sin.

34. Forrest Wood Jr., "Averting Violence: Social and Personal," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 14, (1987): 29.

35. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*, s.v. "3512."

36. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 143.

Van Wolde suggests that *lurking* should be translated as “‘to lie in wait for’ . . . ‘to lie in ambush for’ or ‘to be on the lurk’ or, perhaps better still, as ‘to crouch’ or ‘to prowl.’”³⁷ These images suggest that sin is waiting for Cain and that sin is something outside of Cain that behaves similar to a wild animal in that it hunts and ambushes a person when they are not suspecting it. In the narrative, God is trying to warn Cain of the danger that is approaching and Cain is unable to respond to that warning. As indicated earlier, I understand sin as the result of choices which lead to violence and harm. In the moments before the choice is made sin is outside the human. Once the choice is made, the response is one similar to a wild animal attack and the result is violence. If the human chooses the better choice, the one that leads away from violence, the attack of sin is avoided. In Cain’s situation, sin has not attacked him yet but it has its eye on him. In these moments Cain has an opportunity to decide whether he will respond with sin, which leads to violence, or with calm and responsibility.

In any attack, how a person responds determines the outcome of the attack. In order to fend off attacks effectively, it is necessary to learn certain skills such as patience, disarming techniques, offensive, and defensive techniques. The situation in which Cain finds himself is no different. He needs particular skills—what might be called coping skills—in order to respond effectively to the potential attack. The image of sin as a wild animal suggests that sin is unpredictable and lacks empathy. Brueggemann supports van Wolde’s argument: “Sin is not the breaking of rules. Rather, sin is an aggressive force ready to ambush Cain.”³⁸ In this understanding sin becomes fluid. It becomes a force with

37. van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel," 31.

38. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 57.

the potential to surprise and to attack. This leaves very little certainty of how to avoid sin and, as a result, sin found Cain when he was not expecting it.

In the CBC show *Being Erica*, Erica has the opportunity to re-visit moments in her life to learn from particular situations of regret so she can make better choices in the present. The time travel and learning is overseen by Dr. Tom. The episode “Two Wrongs,” offers several examples of how sin lurks and the various responses to the opportunities for sin. The program opens with Erica and her publishing partner Julianne trying to respond to Brent, an ex-friend and business associate who outbids them for a book manuscript with the intent of destroying their business. Erica’s first suggestion is to speak to him. His response is to inform them that he will continue to outbid them for every manuscript. Julianne’s response is to find a video of Brent imitating his boss and threaten to send it to all of his colleagues, including the boss.

At this moment Erica, along with her friend Adam, is returned to her past where she is visiting her brother Leo at university during frosh week. Erica is distressed as she watches him be humiliated and sexually assaulted by Jordan. Erica confronts Jordan and hits him with a trophy. A fight ensues while Erica, Adam and Leo escape. Erica wants to go back and continue destroying Jordan and all his supporters.

At this moment Erica and Adam return to his past where he was an enforcer and they witness Adam beating someone. Erica cannot bear to watch the violence as it unfolds in front of her and they are returned to Dr. Tom’s office where he describes his own experience of violence.

Dr. Tom: I remember the first time I beat someone up. It was in a bar and it was about a week after Sarah [his daughter] disappeared. And I remember my hands shook. I felt like I wanted

to vomit. And the second time, it was easier and after that, well it just stopped registering really. It became normal.

Erica: You think I'm going to become like you, like Adam, because I want to protect my brother from a monster and I want to save my business from being destroyed.

Adam: You take one step in that direction, it's still a step. It opens the door to more, and violence is violence whether it's physical or not.

Dr. Tom: You know, you do violence to Jordan, to Brent, it might solve one problem but it creates a far more serious one and acting counter to your own values will do more than just change your circumstances. It will change you and you may not like what you become.³⁹

Erica returns to her office and refuses to send the video. That evening Julianne suggests cashing in her RRSP's in order to outbid their competitor.⁴⁰ These examples show how the opportunity for sin lies in many everyday choices which may or may not seem violent and may appear as protecting someone or something that is loved. As Adam and Dr. Tom showed Erica, once the violence or sin becomes a choice, it becomes easier and easier to reconcile and normalize. Sin is lurking for these characters as they attempt to navigate strong emotions which are a reaction to the situations around them.

Sin cannot be taken lightly and there is both an internal and external component. It is internal in that it results from human choices. It is external in that the choices are a reaction to a stimulus outside the human. In making choices which lead either toward or away from sin there are very few scientific laws that guide the decision making. Violence may appear to solve the problem but, on a long-term basis, it feeds itself and becomes a

39. *Being Erica*, "Two Wrongs," season 3, episode 3, October 5, 2010, http://www.cbc.ca/video/#/Shows/Being_Erica/Season_3/1597307002/ID=1608086583 (accessed March 28, 2012).

40. *Being Erica*, "Two Wrongs," season 3, episode 3, October 5, 2010, http://www.cbc.ca/video/#/Shows/Being_Erica/Season_3/1597307002/ID=1608086583 (accessed March 28, 2012).

normal part of life. Humans have to decide how to respond to each situation. These decisions are not always easy or clear. This lack of clarity means that the possibilities for harm—for sin—are expansive. This is the area in which the reader finds Cain and where imagination is necessary. It seems that Cain is experiencing something painful and struggling with a strong emotion. His response will lead him either toward or away from sin.

Cycle of Violence

The cycle of violence offers a model for understanding how the sin that is lurking feeds itself to create ongoing domestic violence. There are several variations on the cycle of violence which are well documented and usually include three or four stages. This example follows a three phase model.

1. Tension building: This phase may include intimidation, fear of violence, threats, communication becomes more difficult and may end entirely.
2. Violence: This phase may include arguments, physical or emotional violence.
3. Honeymoon: The abuser may be in denial that anything has happened, blame the victim and make excuses for his or her behavior, and attempt to appear sorry. This phase often includes manipulation which leads back to tension building⁴¹

Cain seems to be caught in this cycle. Prior to the offerings, there is no indication that the brothers interact. This could be seen as a sign that the brothers have withdrawn from each other as in the tension building phase. There is no indication that the brothers

41. There are many sources and versions of the cycle of violence. One example is: Coalition Against Violence, Avalon East, "Cycle of Violence," <http://www.coalitionagainstviolence.ca/The%20Cycle%20of%20Violence.htm> (accessed March 6, 2012).

interact prior to the offerings. In verse 8, Cain invites Abel out to the field. According to the Targum, they have an argument which ends in murder.⁴² During this argument, Cain questions the acceptance of Abel's gift. Abel ties his acceptance to good deeds. As indicated earlier, Cain essentially responds that there is no judgment—no consequences. The Targum indicates that they have a quarrel and Abel is killed. In this portrayal Cain seems to have little concern for how his actions impact others.

Up to this point in the story, Cain has many choices and the reader can see him struggling to understand his own emotions and to respond appropriately. According to the Targum, a response to love shapes both character's motivations and their behavior in very different ways. Cain and Abel share an understanding of a world created in love.⁴³ This moves Abel to good deeds. Cain's understanding of love leads him to a sense of entitlement with no limits. Abel continues to understand the necessity of relationships while Cain is torn between his role as a brother and his role as a provider.

As René Girard, a French historian who developed theories regarding scapegoating and mimetic theory suggests, violence is not a problem of an individual; it is a problem of the community. He suggests that once violence enters a community, it is difficult for the violence to end.⁴⁴ This reflects the cycle of violence as described in the Cain and Abel narrative. According to Girard, the community identifies a scapegoat, as the source of the violence. As long as the scapegoat remains in the community the entire community is at risk of violence.⁴⁵ In the Cain and Abel narrative, Abel becomes the

42. "Targum Pseudo-Jonathan" 4:8 -11, 80.

43. "Targum Pseudo-Jonathan" 4:8 -11, 80.

44. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, (London: Continuum, 1988), 86.

45. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 86.

scapegoat for the rejection of Cain's offering and target for his anger.⁴⁶ Cain becomes the scapegoat for violence and is destroyed by being banished from the community which affects the political and cultural life of the community.

Family of Origin

Family of Origin theory describes family roles and interactions taking into consideration a variety of factors including birth order, historic events surrounding coming of age and family life events over several generations. According to Roland W. Richardson, author of several books on Family of Origin Theory, oldest siblings are often jealous of and feel displaced by younger siblings.⁴⁷ Applying this theory to Cain may suggest that by this point in the story Cain has simply had enough of feeling pushed out by his younger brother.

In applying psychology and imagination to the Cain and Abel narrative, the offerings may represent yet another example of how Abel outdoes his older brother. Adam and Eve are silent throughout this story but, if they were present as the offerings were presented and commented on Abel's offering, Cain could experience this as rejection. Perhaps Cain's deepest fear is his fear of being rejected. Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a peace activist and Roman Catholic Trappist monk suggests that fear is the root cause of war. This fear is based on fear of others, fear of self, and fear of everything. This fear leads to an inability to trust even ourselves. According to Merton, if humans

46. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," 376.

47. Ronald W. Richardson, *Family Ties that Bind: A Self-Help Guide to Change through Family of Origin Therapy*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Self-Council, 1987), 73.

cannot trust themselves, it means that they no longer believe in God.⁴⁸ Merton's understanding makes a direct link between fear, the ability to trust, and violence. If Cain feels himself to be rejected, his ability to trust the people around him and to trust God is compromised. This inability to trust reinforces Cain's fear of being inadequate in relationship to his brother.

This inability to trust also leads to an inability to be empathetic, to be able to relate to and understand his brother's perceptions, and to be able to care for Abel in ways that are meaningful. According to Rifkin, "trust becomes indispensable to allowing empathy to grow, and empathy, in turn, allows us to plumb the divine presence that exists in all things."⁴⁹ Trust is necessary to alleviate fear, to cultivate empathy and to prevent violence. In imagining Cain's experience, I see a young man who wants desperately to be accepted by his parents, his younger brother, and by God. When he compares his offering to Abel's it does not seem to measure up. He fears that he will be rejected by his family and by God. He is so afraid that he cannot trust he will be supported and accepted when compared to his brother. If he could trust his own self-worth, his own ability to provide an appropriate offering, he could also trust that he will be accepted. Following Merton and Rifkin's logic, even God has disappeared for Cain and so Cain cannot be vulnerable even with God.

Cain cannot respond to God's attempt to prevent murder because he cannot trust that God exists or that God is on his side. "To be vulnerable is to trust one's fellow

48. Thomas Merton, "The Root of War is Fear" in *The Power of Nonviolence: Writings by Advocates of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 98.

49. Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization*, ch 5 (Salvaging Faith and Reason in the Age of Empathy) para 10.

human beings. Trust is the belief that others will treat you as an end not as a means, that you will not be used or manipulated to serve the expedient motives of others but regarded as a valued being.”⁵⁰ For people of faith, I would extend this argument to God and suggest humans also need to trust that they will not be manipulated by God but will be valued and accepted by God. In the narrative, Cain does not respond to God’s comment that sin is lurking perhaps, because he cannot comprehend that God is speaking to him as a valued being. If, as Merton suggests, God has ceased to exist for Cain, God can no longer reach Cain as he struggles with his emotions. God cannot help Cain as he struggles with the sin that is lurking. There are many times in the human experience when people cannot hear or reach God even though faith asserts that God is very nearby. This narrative offers an example of this type of experience.

These theories suggest that the narrative might also be read as one in which the reader understands that it is Cain’s perception that he is rejected by God and that it is Cain who has lost his ability to trust that God will accept him. It is possible that Cain’s insecurity and sense of rejection have become hatred. According to Merton, it is difficult to face the self-hated in the self and easier to direct self-hate and insecurity at others.⁵¹ In this understanding, it is easier for Cain to hate Abel than it is to recognize and deal with his own self-hate.

Cain is not able to master sin and deal with his strong emotions constructively. He becomes violent towards Abel and kills him. Cain’s own insecurity and fear of rejection have created a powerful force that results in violence. If, as Merton suggests, humans live

50. Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization*, ch 5 (A Radical Reformulation of Truth Freedom, and Equality) para 13.

51. Merton, “The Root of War is Fear,” 98.

much of their life in fear which leads to a lack of trust and then to hate,⁵² how is it possible to avoid violence at all?

As Genesis 4:7 points out, humans have responsibility for choices and actions. If humans simply try to avoid violence for violence' sake, the underlying hate and fear that lead to violence still exist. It is here, at the root of fear, that the sin of violence will be avoided. Cain really needs to struggle with the fear which is inside. It is the fear that leads to hate and then to violence.

Merton has indicated that fear and trust are intricately linked. Martin Luther King Jr. has written that “conflicts are never resolved without trustful give and take on both sides.”⁵³ If fear is linked to trust, then how is it possible to build trust when one fears? Trust requires stepping into the unknown in spite of fear.

If this is the case, then both brothers have some responsibility. Cain is older and is described as an adult from the beginning of the text. Abel is described as insignificant. I wonder if Abel feels threatened by, and afraid of, his older brother. Elie Wiesel suggests that Cain and Abel are responsible for each other's destiny. Abel is responsible for Cain's violence in that he remained “silent when Cain needed him”⁵⁴ to hold challenge him and hold him accountable. As much as Cain was afraid of rejection, it is likely that Abel was also afraid of his older brother. He too may have needed to learn how to trust, to step into his fear, and approach his brother.

52. Merton, “The Root of War is Fear,” 98.

53. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam” in *The Power of Nonviolence: Writings by Advocates of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 114.

54. Elie Wiesel quoted in Dorothee Söelle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 130.

Transformation of Fear

Stepping into fear suggests the possibility of entering a shadow side of oneself and that of another person at the same time. The consequences are unknown and, like a shadow, that which is feared moves and changes shape. It is not constant. Fear does not have a life of its own and is always attached to a physical being or an object. It moves as the being moves in the same way that shadows move with the sun. Stepping into fear means that it is difficult to know where the step will land. It also implies that there is a moving towards the object that is feared and not away from it. The result may be a confrontation of some sort, or reconciliation and healing.

Examining the events of 9/11 and the resulting war put the relationship between fear and trust in a larger frame. It is possible to speculate about the motivation behind the attacks. However, the response of attacking Iraq and Afghanistan and the subsequent *War on Terror*, as its name suggests, is largely motivated by fear, by hate, and by lack of trust, by revenge and by greed. As Merton has suggested, this lack of trust means that God as a creative force who transforms violence and who heals relationships no longer exists. So if God no longer exists, what fills the vacuum? I wonder if fear is cultivated as a way of filling the God vacuum in a way that serves particular political ends. In applying Girard's theory described above, Muslims and Arabs might be perceived as the scapegoat (Cain) with North Americans and Christians as the persecuted victim (Abel). This dichotomy creates an environment in which fear and mistrust prevents the building of empathy and relationship and creates the conditions in which violence is more likely to flourish.

Each entity has responsibility for its own violence and sin. As Cain is responsible for himself, his fear, and his subsequent actions, those producing the War on Terror

rhetoric and responding with violence are responsible for their own fear and actions as are those who perpetrated the original attacks. Sin has taken hold and erupted into violence. Again, I would suggest that it is the fear that needs to be dealt with in order to end the violence. This happens by dealing with the misunderstandings and fear of Islam and the racism towards people of Arab descent. This is the responsibility not just of Arabs and Muslims, but also of non-Arabs and non-Muslims, who pray for peace.

In the following chapters it will become even clearer that this first act of violence does not end the violence or absolve either party from responsibility. The violence is only the beginning of the story and only the beginning of God's creative grace at work in Cain and in the world.

Chapter 2

Am I My Brother's Keeper? Responsibility and Remembering

It was then that Cain knew he had killed his brother, Abel. Cain wanted to run away, but his feet would not carry him and his hands trembled. The sky darkened. Then Cain heard God's voice calling to him, "Where is your brother?" God's voice was angry and sad. Cain answered, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The rock that seemed so light a moment ago was heavy in Cain's heart. . . It was as if Cain had destroyed an entire world.

—Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Cain and Abel*

The previous chapter examined the murder of Abel with regard to sin and the cycle of violence. This chapter continues that discussion and adds the component of human responsibility for one another. This chapter will also begin to explore the role of memory and re-remembering in shaping behavior. Remembering simply means to recall something. Re-remembering begins a process of recalling and then re-shaping memory. This chapter opens with Cain either unable to remember what happened to Abel, or more likely, unwilling to admit that he murdered Abel. The primary question of this chapter is whether humans have responsibility for each and for the earth. The response to this question determines behavior. If the response to the question of responsibility is that humans have no responsibility for each other, then there is no right or wrong and violence becomes an acceptable means of attaining a desired goal regardless of harm. My interpretation of the Cain and Abel story, however, will show that humans do have responsibility for one another and that responsibility takes precedence over the hoped for goal.

Focus of Responsibility

Before examining what responsibility entails, it is necessary to examine who responsibility is focused toward. This section of the passage opens with God asking Cain directly: "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain responds: "I do not know." Then Cain attempts to deflect and redirect God by asking his own question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9). Cain is asking a specific question about his brother but this question is important in defining social responsibility. Keeping in mind the patriarchal nature of scripture, I will extend the definition of the term "brother" to include sibling relationships and by symbolic extension other relationships with the earth.

According to Swenson, the verb commonly translated as keeper connects the Cain and Abel narrative with the ethic of care highlighted in the creation story and extends it to human relationships. In her argument, God put the humans in the garden "to till and keep" (Gen 2:15) the land. This was the first task given to humans and highlights the relationship between the earth, humans and God. The same Hebrew word is used both in keeping the garden and keeping the brother, but no one answers the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" With this question unanswered, readers of the narrative must decide for themselves whether keeping is a task to which humans are called. If humans are called to a life of keeping, then they must also decide whom they will keep.¹ In Swenson's translation of Genesis 2:5, she suggests that the creation was incomplete because there was no rain and no humans to care for the earth.² The result of this understanding is that caring for the earth and all the creatures that are a part of the earth

1. Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden," 374.

2. Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden," 375.

(human and non-human) is part of the human responsibility which was instilled at the time of creation. Swenson goes on to suggest that the verb *'bd* "to till" indicates the physical work of tilling which is an action of worship to God, the creator.³ As mentioned in the previous chapter, this verb may be used of work and worship. This worship, in the form of work, is central to the relationship that exists between God and creation and specifically the God-human relationship. In the narrative, Cain tries to separate his work from his relationships but the work of caring for the earth and other people is an act of worshiping God. Violence to creation or humans is a neglect of the work of caring and of worship. A certain amount of violence exists throughout the food chain as creatures eat one another for survival. The difficulty arises when the violence becomes motivated by greed or as Swartz indicated earlier, a sense of scarcity.

Several scholars, including Ed Noort, argue that the conversation between Cain and God is one in which responsibility is the central issue.⁴ Swenson connects the naming of the brothers with responsibility. She indicates that the names say something about the responsibility of the brothers. Cain is identified as an adult and provider. Abel's name identifies him as insignificant and vulnerable. Therefore, Cain is expected to care for this vulnerable brother.⁵

3. Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden," 375.

4. Ed Noort, "Genesis 4:1-16: From Paradise to Reality: The Myth of Brotherhood," in *Eve's Children: the Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 105.

5. Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden," 380.

Both Humphreys⁶ and Hauser⁷ identify the connection between God's question to Cain "Where is your brother?" and God's question to Adam "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). Both these questions begin what are identified as trial scenes in which God questions human actions⁸ and in which a question of responsibility is at stake. The question "Where is your brother Abel?" suggests that Cain should know where Abel is. Regardless of how Cain responds to the question, he will be found guilty of something. If Cain responds by saying "Abel is dead," he admits to murder. If Cain responds by saying "I do not know," he will be found negligent in his responsibility as a brother.

The reader knows that Cain knows where Abel is, because he murdered him and yet Cain responds with the words "I do not know." Cain does know where Abel is, but his response indicates that he does not have respect or honor for Abel or God. Though the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" may also indicate Cain's desire for more information and an attempt to understand his role as a brother. Cain's response may also be an attempt to deny or hide his role in Abel's death.

According to Westermann, the question "Where is your brother?" assumes that Cain knows where Abel is and that because they are brothers, Cain and Abel are connected regardless of the circumstances of their relationship.⁹ In asking where Abel is, God is forcing Cain to question his own responsibility for Abel's wellbeing. Cain chooses to plead negligence over murder. Cain's response, "I do not know; am I my brother's

6. W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 58.

7. Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links Between Genesis 4:1-16 and Genesis 2-3," 298.

8. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 304.

9. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 304.

keeper?" responds to God's question with another question and raises several more. The questions are important for the story itself and invite the reader to ask more questions.

Keeping

As described earlier, keeping would require Cain to watch over Abel and to protect him, but Cain was unable to fulfil this task. His question, "Am I my brother's keeper" (Gen 4:9), underscores the inner struggle of trying to make sense of what it means for Cain to be a keeper.

Humphreys asks if "Cain [is] belligerent, as many read him?"¹⁰ The perspective of Cain as belligerent is related to the analysis in chapter one whereby Cain is identified as evil or unworthy for no apparent reason. He is portrayed as a trouble maker who is unwilling to behave in ways that God expects. Humphreys' next question asks whether "as the first son/brother, does [Cain] not know what Yahweh expects of him in this relationship?"¹¹ The Midrash translation supports Humphrey's argument that being among the first humans in Scripture, Cain had no one from whom to learn that murder was wrong.¹² Within the text Cain's struggle reflects the necessity of defining responsibility of both humans and God.

Sidney Breitbart, a Jewish theologian, asserts that Cain's question "Am I my brother's keeper?" is a legitimate one and suggests that by asking this question Cain is really asking "am I the only one to be my brother's keeper? You, God, are just as

10. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 58.

11. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 58.

12. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, 191.

responsible. Why did you not stop me from killing your creation?"¹³ Cain is challenging God and asking why this was allowed to happen. If this interpretation of the question is accepted, it suggests that Cain is struggling to define his responsibility to Abel as well as his understanding of God.

Cain's question about whether is Abel's keeper indicates that he is uncertain about his responsibility. Swenson suggests that "Cain did not realize that his work in service to the land does not end with the soil."¹⁴ Humphreys, Breitbart and Swenson's interpretations all point to the idea that the narrator is trying to figure out how Cain should behave in his relationships with others, where his responsibility ends, and God's begins. Similarly, modern humans must grapple with questions of responsibility.

For example, the *Responsibility to Protect*, which is an "international security and human rights norm"¹⁵ that comes from the "international community's failure to prevent and stop genocides, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity,"¹⁶ and is an attempt by the international community stop and prevent these activities from occurring. One of the tensions within this obligation is the need to balance the right of national sovereignty with the need to protect vulnerable citizens within countries where genocide and war crimes are occurring. In some situations, such as the on-going occupation of the Palestinian West Bank, there is no international response under this policy. The questions raised in the Cain and Abel narrative related to responsibility

13. Sidney Breitbart, "The Cain and Abel Narrative: Its Problems and Lessons," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 32 (2004): 123.

14. Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden," 378.

15. International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, <http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/> (accessed October 1, 2012).

16. International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, <http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/>.

continue to be relevant to the conversation about *Responsibility to Protect*. As Cain asked “Am I my brother’s keeper?” it is important for modern readers to ask themselves the same question in regards to global responsibility. Whose responsibility is it to prevent and stop genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity? Is it appropriate to use military force to protect the vulnerable? When does protecting become interfering? While the modern world is complex and the answers to these questions seem complex, I wonder if the questions in the narrative help to put these questions in perspective.

While Cain asks if he is Abel’s keeper, and modern humans ask if they have responsibility for violence in another part of the world, God asks “What have you done?” (Or not done?) These two questions speak to a possible tension between a human understanding of responsibility and God’s expectations of behavior. At first glance these questions should be easy to answer: Cain murdered Abel when he should have been responsible for Abel. He did not act as a keeper but he should have. The answers to the questions surrounding *Responsibility to Protect* policy should be as simple to answer and yet, as with the Cain and Abel narrative, there are layers upon layers of complexity.

A common prayer of confession reads “We confess to you God that we have sinned in what we have thought, said and done. We confess that we have sinned also in what we have not thought, or said or done.”¹⁷ This prayer of confession speaks to the complexity of human choices in response to God. Cain needs to confess both what he has done (murder) and not done (kept his brother). Modern humans also need to confess what they have done (complicity in many situations of violence) and not done (protected the most vulnerable).

17. The Committee on Worship, *Service Book*, (The United Church of Canada, 1969), 232.

So where does the responsibility for preventing murder lie: with Cain or with God? Earlier in the story, God spoke with Cain, suggesting that he had responsibility for his anger and jealousy. In this sense, God is Cain's keeper—trying to prevent him from responding with violence. The *keeper*, as defined in chapter one, includes helping, protecting, care and watchfulness.

Humphreys asks whether keeping is “really what is involved in relationships between siblings? Yahweh has certainly made no effort to keep Abel.”¹⁸ God's only action to protect Abel is to warn Cain against sin. It seems like a half-hearted effort with little effect, but perhaps God is expecting that Cain would be the keeper and God would not need to be in that role. Abel is entrusted to Cain's care and through Cain to God but because Cain is unable to be Abel's keeper, God is unable to keep Abel. In this understanding, God needs Cain to be the keeper and has no ability to act except through humans.

Cain is struggling with his responsibility for watching, protecting and saving Abel. The use of the word *keeper* suggests that Cain understands his role, in relationship to Abel, is not one of domination. Rather than dominating, Cain has tried to abdicate all of his responsibility for his brother Abel. This is portrayed by the way in which Cain responds to God's question. He attempts to minimize the damage to himself: lack of responsibility is less of an issue than murder. He then asks why he should care about Abel's wellbeing.

I would argue that Cain, and by extension humans generally, have responsibility for one another. Humans depend on each other in many ways and on the earth for life.

18. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 58.

The question of keeping—safe guarding and tending—one another—is important for determining behavior and responsibility. Westermann wants to limit responsibility. He suggests that in most circumstances humans are not able to be each other's keepers, but that there may be situations where responsibility for another is appropriate.¹⁹ What these situations may be is not indicated, but seem to include questions of life and death.

I would argue that even small choices may be situations of life and death. For example, my choice to drive my car to the grocery store contributes to climate change which, in turn, produces drought in Palestine and glacial melting in Greenland and sea level rise in Oceania. For the people affected, my choice may be a life and death choice. Almost every choice which humans make impacts another person or the earth. Responsibility for one another needs to include an awareness of how individual choices may affect someone else. This is part of the work of *keeping*, of safe guarding and being a shepherd.

In the case of Cain and Abel, does Abel, “the ‘keeper of the sheep’ need a ‘keeper’?”²⁰ Does Abel need someone to look after him and care for him? Abel is characterized as the younger brother who is vulnerable and inconsequential. Cain is characterized as the older brother, a man, with responsibility. If keeping, as described above includes care for the earth and care for people with whom there is limited relationship, then in the case of close relationships the onus for responsibility and keeping is even greater.

The text describes Abel as a keeper of the sheep—a shepherd. One of the tasks of shepherding is to be a companion and live with the sheep while protecting and providing

19. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 304.

20. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 58.

for them. It is not the murder that prevents Cain from being Abel's keeper, but his inability to be a companion to Abel. In his work with grief counseling, Alan Wolfelt offers eleven points to describe companioning. For Wolfelt, companioning carries a spiritual component which allows people to enter each other's pain—not to fix the pain—but to be present to the pain as a witness. He identifies companioning as “walking alongside; it is not about leading or being led.”²¹ While Wolfelt's work focuses on companioning within the context of grief work, his points also provide a framework which may help to explore Cain's inability to companion Abel. Within Wolfelt's framework, Cain's task is to listen and witness to whatever it is that Abel's soul is experiencing as the younger brother. Cain's reaction to Abel's offering suggests that he is not able to do this. Abel also has a responsibility to companion Cain but neither brother is responsible for solving the other's problems and challenges. Their responsibility lies in being present with one another. While the shepherd has responsibility for the physical well-being of the sheep, Wolfelt's analysis of companioning offers insight into the spiritual element of the concept of keeping.

The spiritual aspect of companioning underpins the physical responsibility of keeping. In order for the shepherd to care enough about the sheep and provide for their well-being, the shepherd has to see the sheep as living beings and commit to their ongoing care. So in shepherding one another and providing for the physical well-being of humans, there is an element that requires humans to see each other through God's eyes, with compassion. This is companioning.

21. Alan Wolfelt, “11 Tenants for Caring for the Bereaved,” Centre for Life and Loss Transition, <http://www.centerforloss.com/companioning-philosophy/> (accessed March 17, 2012).

Cain's action in murdering Abel seems to suggest that *keeping* and *companioning* Abel are beyond his responsibility. Abel is a "keeper of the sheep" but has failed to keep Cain. Abel has neither protected nor provided for Cain. Neither brother is fulfilling their role of being a companion to the other. Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and writer supports this by suggesting that Abel "was silent when Cain needed him. Abel said nothing."²² The responsibility for companioning lies with both brothers and both brothers have failed in their responsibility to the other.

Based on the above discussion, the question is not whether humans have responsibility for one another, but what form that responsibility takes and where the bounds of the responsibility lie. The answer to Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" should indeed be yes. While Cain articulates the question, if both brothers had responded yes to his question earlier in the story, perhaps the story could have had a different ending.

This "yes" response leads to another question: What does it mean to be a keeper? As discussed earlier, a *keeper* is one who companions, who cares for, watches over, and protects. Cain is portrayed as a human in a complicated situation trying to figure out how to respond. A simple reading of the narrative may encourage Cain to be seen within the dichotomy of good and evil, as identified earlier in Matthew, Luke, and 1st John, without recognizing the complexity of human experiences and emotions which are a part of the narrative and the interpretation of the narrative. When examining the Christian scriptures it is important to note that many of the writers were Jewish Christians interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures in order to make sense of Jesus' life and work. Though they may not

22. Elie Wiesel quoted in Dorothee Söelle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 130.

have yet seen themselves as a new sect, they were trying to figure out where the boundaries of the sect and of God's agency lay. Using Cain and Abel as examples of good and evil helped to give concrete examples for appropriate behavior. Tom Thatcher, of Cincinnati Christian University, indicates that the use of Cain and Abel by the authors of the Christian scriptures may be a way of making sense of their own troubling times. He suggests that remembering history helps to form and maintain group identity.²³ This would have been an important task for early Christians.

Some modern and ancient interpreters think Cain is portrayed as inherently evil because of his behavior. Hauser writes that "Cain's response reveals the animosity and callousness that led to the murder."²⁴ Salvian the Presbyter (400-480 C.E) describes Cain as the "most wicked and foolish of men in believing that for committing the greatest crimes it would be sufficient if he avoided other human witnesses."²⁵ These commentators identify Cain as evil and wicked. The text itself does not indicate an opinion about Cain as a person. The text focuses on Cain's actions and their impact on his relationships.

Responsibility

The Cain and Abel narrative shows Cain struggling to understand his responsibility and what is God expects of him. As part of this concern for Cain's behavior, God continues to question Cain by asking "What have you done?" (Gen 4:10).

23. Tom Thatcher, "Cain and Abel in Early Christian Memory: A Case Study in 'The Use of the Old Testament in the New,'" *CBQ* 72 (2010): 737.

24. Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links between Genesis 4:1-16 and Genesis 2-3," 298.

25. Salvian the Presbyter, "Governance of God 1.6" in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 1, Genesis 1-11*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Andrew Louth, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 107.

Cain is not able to respond effectively to God's question which indicates that for him, and I believe for many people, the ability to take responsibility for actions is challenging.

This question serves to reveal God's dismay and concern for Cain's brother Abel. In other places in scripture this question is used as a human lament and to express concern about a particular situation and the possible outcomes.²⁶ Only in this context and Genesis 3:13 does God ask a human what they have done. The inability to take responsibility for actions creates the space for sin to continue unabated. An action that causes harm to oneself, the earth or another was identified earlier as sin. When the harm or mistake is recognized and an individual attempts to make amends, there is an opportunity for reconciliation and healing. The inability to take this responsibility continues the cycle of violence and sin.

Merton expresses this phenomenon by writing that humans see sin in ourselves, "but we have great difficulty shouldering responsibility for it. We find it hard to identify sin with our own will and our own malice. . . Yet at the same time we are fully aware that others do not make this convenient distinction for us."²⁷ The son, returning home, knows that he has made mistakes and is willing to make amends but he is not certain that his brother or father will understand his mistakes and respond with compassion. In the Cain and Abel narrative, Cain responds to a direct question about his responsibility by indicating his lack of responsibility for Abel. As identified earlier, Cain's question "Am I my brother's keeper?" may be Cain's way of trying to place the blame for murder on

26. Gen 20:9; Gen 31:26; Exod 14:11; Num 23:11; Judg 8:1; 1 Sam 13:11; 2 Sam 3:24; John 18:35.

27. Merton, "The Root of War is Fear," 98.

God. God, however, is not allowing Cain to be absolved of his behavior or the consequences for that behavior.

As the authors and editors of the narrative develop the scene, they are struggling to make sense of how God fits into the story. If Cain is allowed carry on with his life without reflection on his behavior, or the accountability that God provides, he would continue the cycle of violence and sin. God's role in both stories seems to be one which holds the characters accountable and challenges them to make different choices. God's role does not seem to be to prevent sin but to provide a framework in which the humans can understand the consequences of their actions. The humans have the ability to shape their lives and choices with or without heed of God's advice.

The Community Response to Blood

In the Cain and Abel narrative, Abel's blood cries out to God and God hears the voice of the blood: "Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" (Gen 4:10). These words continue to acknowledge that God is aware of the violence that has occurred and that blood which should be life giving has been poured onto the ground. God's cry is on behalf, not just of Abel's life, but for the violence that has now entered a community and which has the potential to destroy that community.

Abel's blood is not only his own but the blood of the entire community. According to James Kugel, Genesis 4:10 reads: "your brother's *bloods* are crying out to me."²⁸ He notes that the Tractate Sanhedrin indicates that the word *bloods* suggests multiple victims and that "a whole worldfull' [sic] of wonderful people hangs on each

28. James Kugel, "Cain and Abel in Fact and Fable: Genesis 4:1-16," in *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 180.

and every life.”²⁹ The violence directed at one individual actually affects many more people. Noort, supports this view by indicating that shed blood belonged to the family and to the clan and that when violence occurred the *bloods* were returned to the family through blood vengeance.³⁰ The community had responsibility for preventing bloodshed and responding once violence had occurred. According to Noort, the concept of *ius talionis* (penalty equalling crime) as described in Deuteronomy 19:21 was developed to limit blood vengeance. The blood vengeance was seen in a positive way and was used to ensure that justice was done for the murder victim. The biblical narrators also knew that blood vengeance could lead to a cycle of violence.³¹

It is this cycle of violence that concerns me. I understand the need for justice, but justice means different things to different people. For example, Leon Kass writes that justice may mean “fairness or equality.” It may also include “just distribution of communal goods . . . and community burdens.” Justice may also mean “just dealings” or “just punishment for misdeeds.”³² As Kass describes, justice covers a wide breadth of meanings and life events. In North American culture, justice is often confused with punishment.

Christopher Marshall, of Victoria University of Wellington, head of School of Art History, Classics and Religious studies with a focus on peace and justice studies, defines

29. Kugel, “Cain and Abel in Fact and Fable,” 180.

30. Noort, “Genesis 4:1-16. From Paradise to Reality,” 98.

31. Noort, “Genesis 4:1-16. From Paradise to Reality,” 98-99.

32. Leon Kass “A Genealogy of Justice,” Commentary 102, (1996):44. When the article was written Kass was the Addie Clark Harding Professor in the College and the Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago.

the difference between restorative justice and retributive punishment. The concept of retributive justice

requires punishment. The scales must be balanced. . . . Justice demands an equity of suffering. Restorative justice, by contrast, is more interested in promoting healing and reconciliation than in measuring appropriate doses of punitive pain for particular crimes. What justice really demands is not the balancing of pain between victim and offender, but concerted action to overcome pain. It requires offenders to act in ways that will restore the dignity, autonomy and well-being of their victims, as well their own.³³

As Kass has described there are many understandings of justice, but Marshall's explanation helps to illumine the difference between justice and punishment. Marshall also suggests that restorative punishment plays a role in creating justice and identifies this as the "pain of taking responsibility."³⁴

A current example where a distinction between justice and punishment might be made is in the trial of Thomas Lubanga who was convicted at the International Criminal Court for war crimes in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He participated in creating an army of children through conscription and violence with many of the girls being raped. He has not been sentenced but, when he is, he may expect life imprisonment.³⁵ What would justice look like in this situation? For some, the death penalty for Lubanga would be justice. For some, Lubanga's continued life, even in jail, does not seem like justice. If justice requires the offender to "act in ways that will restore the dignity, autonomy and

33. Christopher Marshall, "Restorative Justice and Punishment," *Occasional Papers*, St. John's in the City, <http://www.stjohnsinthecity.org.nz/about/publications.htm> (accessed March 21, 2012), 1.

34. Marshall, "Restorative Justice and Punishment" <http://www.stjohnsinthecity.org.nz/about/publications.htm> 1.

35. David Smith, "Congo Child Army Leader Thomas Lubanga Found Guilty of War Crimes," *The (Manchester) Guardian*, March 14, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2012/mar/14/congo-warlord-thomas-lubanga-icc> (accessed March 22, 2012).

well-being of their victims, as well their own” neither capital punishment or life in prison meets the requirements for justice.

In order for justice to occur in Marshall’s model, Lubanga needs an opportunity to restore the dignity and well-being of his victims. He cannot undo the violence he has perpetrated against these children: he cannot undo their suffering, restore them unharmed to their families and communities, or undo the violence his army has caused in Democratic Republic of Congo. It is physically impossible for him to return to every individual he has harmed and make amends—even if his victims were open to this. Marshall goes on to suggest that restorative punishment includes “the pain experienced by offenders in owning up to their wrongs and acting to put them right.”

This is something that Lubanga may be able to do. He may be able to publically speak of what he has done and apologize to the children, their families, their communities and the country. He may be able to listen to the children speak about their experiences, the pain and suffering he caused and to feel that pain in his own being. Lubanga may be able to encourage the ending of violence, and to become force for the healing of relationships. This would take great courage on his part and could be incredibly painful for him.

Some might see Lubanga as a monster. Some see anyone who commits murder as a monster. Don Mason, who murdered his wife, describes a murderer as someone who has “been alienated from their true self, others, and God, usually for some time.”³⁶ Alienation does not describe a monster, but it does describe someone who has lost their way. In the same way that a murderer is cut off from their true self, Cain may have been alienated from himself.

36. Mason, “What Murder did to Me,” 296.

These images of a murderer shape how violence will be addressed by a community. Kass advocates capital punishment for murder and sees this as justice. He indicates that a life for a life is the appropriate response to murder and adds that “a community that has no stomach for executing justice—surely and swiftly—undermines its very existence. By letting people get away with murder, it only encourages more killing.”³⁷ His argument seems to be that without capital punishment, there is no justice for the victim, no punishment, and that society will destroy itself.

Even though punitive justice is intended to lessen violence, it seems to me, to increase the potential for violence. Related to Girard's work with scapegoating is the Mimetic Theory which suggests that relationships shape human identity. When values and desires are shared, friendship and stronger communities develop. When a goal either cannot be shared or is outside the boundaries of a community the result is conflict.³⁸ This means that the community must also share its understanding of justice and punishment to function in an orderly fashion.

If a society believes that capital punishment will deter violence, and the entire society supports this action, then capital punishment becomes normalized and accepted within the society and it is not seen as violence but as justice. Similarly, blood vengeance accepted as the norm creates a situation in which the reprisals are not viewed as violence but as justice. This type of justice creates a situation where every act of *justice* requires another act of *justice* to set it right. Girard describes this process:

37. Kass, “A Genealogy of Justice,” 51.

38. The Raven Foundation, “What is Mimetic Theory?” <http://www.ravenfoundation.org/about-us/what-is-mimetic-theory> (assessed March 22, 21012).

vengeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every act of reprisal calls for another reprisal. The crime to which an act of vengeance addresses itself is almost never an unprecedented offence; in almost every case it has been committed in revenge for some prior crime.³⁹

The result of this form of 'justice' is a cycle of violence that continues indefinitely.

In order to end this cycle of violence, the principles of restorative justice must be used. Punitive punishment described by Marshall, and supported by Kass, does not address the culture which led to violence. Sentencing Lubango to life in prison will prevent him from doing further violence in Democratic Republic of Congo but it will not change the legacy of violence he left behind or rebuild broken communities. As it is now, the violence will continue and there are others committing similar atrocities in the Democratic Republic of Congo and other areas of Africa. The cycle of violence is not broken by removing one person from the cycle.

Miroslav Volf speaks from personal experience when he reflects on the need to end the cycle of violence. Born in what is now Croatia, he studied theology in Germany and the United States. He was conscripted into the Yugoslavian army in 1984 where he was interrogated over a period of several months. He experienced first-hand and reflects on faithful responses to violence. Much of his work has focused on reconciliation, peace-making and forgiveness. Volf writes that "to triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one. The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated; the second victory, when evil is returned. After the first victory evil would die if the second victory did not infuse it with new life."⁴⁰ For many humans, the response to violence and bloodshed is more

39. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 15.

40. Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 9.

violence and as Volf has indicated, in order to end the cycle, violence cannot be used as punishment.

Re-membering

By claiming not to know Cain may have been pretending, or trying, not to remember but memory and re-membering creates an opportunity to change the response to violence. One act of violence is often the response to a previous act of violence which is often the response to a previous act and so on. Part of re-membering, as indicated by Girard's work, is to recognize that the violence is a response to something else, something that is perceived as an injustice. To re-member is to look to the past, the present and the future. To remember is to recall something that has happened. To remember also means to acknowledge something current and make a connection. To re-member suggests the possibility of drawing the past and present together to create something new in the future.

Memory and re-membering is incredibly important in resolving conflict, because both shape perceptions. For example, the conflict in Palestine/Israel is incredibly complex. There are modern political dimensions stemming from the aftermath of the Second World War, religious texts and theology which support a secular, political Zionist stance, and as well, the conflict is often portrayed in North American media as either a Jewish/Muslim conflict or an Arab threat to the only democracy in the Middle East. All of this serves to muddle the understanding of an already complicated conflict.

Towards the end of my time in Israel and the Occupied West Bank of Palestine, I toured Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. As I walked through the museum, read the stories, and looked at the pictures, they resonated with stories and

images from my time in the Occupied West Bank of Palestine. The same types of injustices that led to the Holocaust are happening towards the Palestinians. Palestinian land is being confiscated. Palestinians are being arbitrarily detained and arrested. There are restrictions on Palestinian travel. Depending on your point of view, the *security wall* protects Israeli society from terrorists and the same *separation barrier* cuts Palestinians off from their family, livelihoods, medical access, education, and creates Palestinian ghettos throughout the West Bank.

Uri Davis, who describes himself as a “Palestinian Hebrew of Jewish origins”⁴¹ and is an anti-apartheid activist in Palestine/Israel, writes that

even if the [UN] member state in question is a ‘Jewish state’, it cannot hold the stick at both ends, claiming in the name of the victims of the Jewish holocaust . . . that UN General Assembly Resolution 181(II)⁴² represents Israel’s international legal birthright, and in the same breath prostituting the said claim and the memory of the Jewish and other victims of the Nazi occupation of Europe by blatantly violating the terms of the said UN General assembly and Security Council Resolutions and perpetrating the crime against humanity of ethnic cleansing.⁴³

Davis’ words may sound harsh but they represent the tension between the need to make amends for the atrocities of Hitler’s regime and create a safe place for the Jewish people, the history of political Zionism which calls for a Jewish state, and the current oppression of the Palestinian people.

This situation needs to be re-membered. Many different ethnic and religious groups have histories in the region of Israel and the Occupied West Bank. Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, many communities were ethnically and

41. Palestine: Information with Provenance, “Uri Davis”
<http://cosmos.ucc.ie/cs1064/jabowen/IPSC/php/authors.php?auid=1> (accessed March 31, 2012).

42. The resolution that formed the state of Israel.

43. Uri Davis, *Apartheid Israel: Possibilities for the Struggle Within*, (London: Zed Books, 2003), 64-65.

religiously diverse including Palestinian Jews, Christians, and Muslims. These people lived and worked together. They were friends and neighbours. The Holocaust was an evil event in human history. The creation of the state of Israel was, I believe, intended as a good response to the evil of the Holocaust. The actual result is that other ethnic groups, specifically the Palestinians and the Bedouin, have been displaced. This type of experience, in which land is confiscated from original peoples, is not limited to Israel and Palestine. In North America, the First Nations were displaced from their land to create Canada and the United States. It has already created hardship for our First Nations and has resulted in several instances of violence. As a result of this displacement, among some members of Israeli and Palestinian society, a culture of retributive justice exists. Some Israelis and Palestinians have a sense of needing to respond to acts of violence with other acts of violence in retribution and the serving of justice. As long as this culture exists, peace cannot be achieved.

One Israeli settler I spoke with remembers that the land in that region belonged to the Jewish people because God has promised it in the Bible. For him, justice will only be served when that land belongs to the Jewish people alone and he works to bring about this memory in the future.

Rabbi Arik Ascherma of Rabbis for Human Rights, also remembers God's promise in scripture. He remembers a promise of justice for all people and so works to fulfill God's promise in the future. Both of these people remember their scripture and tradition but they remember it differently. Both of these people live with the collective memory of the Holocaust. As I listened to the settler speak, he was prepared to do anything to bring his memory to life in the future—including kill anyone who opposed

this memory. Rabbi Arik was not prepared to perpetrate violence in order to bring about justice. He felt that violence would lead to more violence.

As this example shows, memory is powerful, and according to Volf, “we are not just shaped *by* our memories; we ourselves *shape* the memories that shape us.”⁴⁴ And so in the instance of Israel and the Occupied West Bank of Palestine, the memory of the past shapes the present and the future. Memories and the interpretation of memories shape perspectives and behavior. This is re-membering at work.

Memory shapes how humans respond to situations of violence. Naim Stifan Ateek, a Palestinian Christian and founder of Sabeel (an ecumenical liberation theology centre in Israel-Palestine), suggests that compassion is at work in God's response to Cain. As a result, the model for human relationships should be one of justice and compassion:

To live righteously is to live compassionately in the midst of the complexities of social and political life, seeking God's loving presence for our neighbours as well as ourselves. Such living implies a true understanding of the common humanity of all people and God's justice and mercy as extended to all.⁴⁵

Being able to see the common humanity requires the re-membering of those who would be described as enemy. In order for Cain to have compassion for Abel, he would need to see and understand Abel as part of his own humanity. The family systems theory described earlier and many of the modern situations described above demonstrate that there are many layers and complexities to relationships which affect the ways in which people interact with one another, but what Ateek describes is the need to live with compassion even in the midst of these complexities. God understands the connectedness between Cain and Abel and the common bond which allows compassion to flourish. In

44. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 25.

45. Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 144.

order for the common bond to be visible, the enemy, or those who oppose, must be remembered.

The Earth as God's Body

Re-membering earth's identity is important in understanding the role of the earth in this narrative. Re-membering the earth may lead to an understanding of the earth as a living being with the ability to respond to violence.

Sallie McFague, an eco-feminist theologian, professor, and author of several books, suggests that “‘the Word is made flesh’ [may not be] limited to Jesus of Nazareth but [may also include] the whole body of the universe.”⁴⁶ This suggests that the earth is an embodiment of God. Psalm 104:30 describes the creation as being formed by God's spirit (breath):

When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.⁴⁷

In this sense God's breath becomes the force that causes the earth to live. Both Judaism and Islam carry similar themes in which God is the creator and somehow part of the universe.

In First Nations spirituality, it is customary to offer a prayer of thanksgiving whenever a plant or animal is taken from the land for human use. There is also a sense within these traditions that the animals and plants, the earth, the sun, the moon, and rocks

46. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 131.

47. Psalm 104:30.

are relations. This understanding is one of connectedness and relationship with the entire universe. The other beings that sustain human life cannot be taken for granted or misused.

In his analysis of the Cain and Abel narrative, Wittenberg suggests that the earth is a being in and of itself: "The entire living pelt of our planet, its thin green rind of life is actually one single life-form with senses, intelligence and the power to act."⁴⁸ Science is also beginning to accept that the earth is a living organism. James Lovelock, a scientist, concurs with the idea that the earth, what he calls Gaia, also has at least a limited intelligence. This limited intelligence includes the ability to know if the temperature is right or the air the right mix of gases.⁴⁹ The earth would also have knowledge of the correct soil composition for plant growth.

In many parts of the world, blood is still used as a soil additive to increase nitrogen.⁵⁰ From a strictly agricultural perspective the addition of Abel's blood should be good for the earth, and yet Abel's blood cries out from the ground. If, as asserted above, the earth is an intelligent living being, it is possible that the earth is making a distinction in the type of blood. Menstrual blood or birthing blood gives life as part of its essence. Animals that are killed for food give sustenance to other creatures. Blood that comes from violence destroys life even as it renews the soil nutrients. As an intelligent being,

48. Wittenberg, "Alienation and 'Emancipation' from the Earth," 109.

49. James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 138.

50. Margaret Elphinstone, "Organic Gardening: Everything the Beginner Needs to Know," (London: Green Print, 1990), 30; Mohammad Amiri Ardakani and Mohammad Hossein Emadi, "Managing Livestock by-Products in Iran," *LIESA Magazine*, September 2004, Agri Cultures Network, <http://www.agriculturesnetwork.org/magazines/global/from-field-to-market/managing-livestock-by-products-in-iran> (accessed May 26, 2011); John M. Gerber, "Soil Fertility," College of the Virgin Islands, Gardeners Factsheet, no. 18 September, 1979, <http://www.uvi.edu/sites/uvi/publications/gf18.pdf> (accessed May 26, 2011).

the earth seems to be protesting blood that is shed without care and without the intent to sustain life.

Rifkin suggests that because the earth is a living entity, there is a human responsibility to the earth as part of the whole and that if

every human life, the species as a whole, and all other life-forms are entwined with one another and with the geochemistry of the planet in a rich and complex choreography that sustains life itself, then we are all dependent on and responsible for the health of the whole organism.⁵¹

This connection to the earth requires responsibility. Cain's spilling of Abel's blood harms a part of creation and creates an unsustainable situation. Rifkin points out the requirements for sustainability and health are complex and I would argue that violence upsets this delicate balance.

The earth is able to acknowledge Abel's blood has been shed irresponsibly and is able to respond. Westermann describes the earth's response this way: the earth "gulps the blood of the victim down its throat. It reacts to the blood by denying arable soil its 'power,' i.e., the power of fertility and so its produce."⁵² If the earth is a living entity and God's being, it has the ability to act, to make choices, and to respond to human actions which are a part of it. Cain's action of murder may be a sign of illness in the earth similar to a stuffy nose or upset stomach in a human. A human response to illness is to sleep and take medication. In the Cain and Abel narrative the earth's response to this particular illness is to withhold fertility.

If Earth is understood as God's body then, when Cain murders Abel, he attacks the earth and God along with Abel. The earth feels the pain and horror of Abel's death

51. Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization*, ch 15 (A Biosphere World) para 15.

52. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 306.

and therefore God feels the pain and horror of Abel's death. The blood being shed is not only Abel's blood but God's. Violence against a human becomes violence against the earth and God.

The Curse

As a response to the violence that has occurred, the ground curses Cain. It is important to note that the ground curses Cain, not God. The earth's soul curses Cain for the violence that has become part of its being. The murder of Abel changes Cain, the earth, and God forever. The earth knows that violence is a part of its being and that the violence will contribute to the illness and death of the earth. The illness of the earth is a natural consequence of violence which is manifested over thousands of years and brings us to our current ecological crisis in which it is becoming more and more difficult for the earth to sustain life.

Because Cain is part of the earth, this curse affects not only Cain but the entire earth. Both Cain and the earth are cursed together and are inseparable in their fate. Yet, this curse has brought about alienation and separation. The murder of Abel destroyed the connection between Cain and the earth.

Broken Relationships

At this point in the story, the outcome looks very bleak. Abel is dead and the relationship between Cain and the earth has been ruptured. The relationships that nurtured Cain no longer exist for him. A. A. Boesak, whose career has included ministry,

anti-apartheid activism and politics in South Africa⁵³ writes that “the earth can no longer bear fruit for [Cain]. The earth mourns. The earth chokes in blood, and cannot respond to Cain. The earth can no longer converse with him. The earth can no longer return anything to him. Cain’s relationship to the land is ruptured.”⁵⁴ The curse lies in the broken relationship between Cain and the earth. The earth is a living entity made up of soil, water, air, animals, plants and humans. When Cain’s relationship with earth is broken, his relationship to all these beings is also broken.

Where does Cain’s responsibility for keeping all these beings lie? Cain seems to have an image of himself as single entity apart from his brother, the earth, and God. He engages in relationship with these other beings but does not see them as an extension of himself. An understanding of the earth as Gaia, a living being, would suggest that Cain is not an individual entity, as he assumes, but part of a larger being of which Abel, animals, plants, rocks, air and water are also a part. His responsibility lies in recognizing and keeping his connectedness to the larger being. Cain needs to re-member his relationship to the earth.

With re-membering in mind, I want to examine again Cain’s question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain remembers his sense of rejection when his offering was not accepted. Cain remembers his jealousy and anger at his brother. It is this remembering that leads to Cain’s act of violence and the murder of Abel. Volf indicates that how the

53. South African History Online: Towards a People’s History, “Reverend Allen Aubrey Boesak,” <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/reverend-allan-aubrey-boesak> (accessed March 23, 2012).

54. A. A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1984), 149 quoted in Gerald O. West, “Two Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context of Liberation,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 73 (1990): 35.

wrongdoer—in this case Cain—is remembered is vital in forming an appropriate response.

What does it mean to remember rightly in regard to the wrongdoer? If we are tempted to interject, “Who cares about him?” the response is surely that it is the wrongdoer whom God calls me to love. Whether I remember publicly or privately, *what* I remembered concerned him profoundly; after all, I was remembering *his* wrongdoing.⁵⁵

In asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” it seems to me that Cain is really asking, “Who cares about him?” Cain sees himself as the injured party and wants God to justify his need for justice, but God refuses to allow Cain’s memory to be the only memory in this situation. God’s memory recognizes Abel as the one who has been wronged and that Cain has responsibility. From the perspective of blood vengeance, the cycle begins with Cain feeling he was wronged by God and by Abel. Cain attempts to rectify this injustice by killing Abel. Cain cannot kill God but he can attack Abel. In attacking Abel, Cain also attacks the earth. The earth, which is God’s body, responds to Cain’s attack by withholding fertility from Cain.

The current environmental crisis may be the result of human violence against one another and the earth. The earth responds with less and less ability to produce sustenance for all her creatures. This is partially a natural consequence of humans interfering with ecological cycles but it may also be the earth intentionally withdrawing life from humans in response to violence.

The cycle of violence seen in the Cain and Abel narrative continues to be at work in the modern world when justice and punishment are confused. Ending the cycle of violence will include re-membering the human-earth-God relationship in ways which

55. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 13.

make it possible to recognize that harm done to one component of the creation harms the larger entity and God.

Chapter 3

Not So! Divine Alternatives to Violence

The world was not new anymore. People built cities and made homes there. Yet people often spoke angry words. And with angry words they drew their swords. Swords turned to guns and guns to bombs. One killing became two, two became four, and four became sixteen. Sixteen killings became war. Entire worlds were destroyed. . . Perhaps one day, when each person learns to reach out an open hand without the rock, without the sword, without the gun, the entire world can be saved. . . And in God's garden called Earth, all will be good.

—Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Cain and Abel*

This chapter focuses on the closing verses of the narrative and examines the repercussions of broken relationships: broken relationships between humans, the earth, and God. Part of the challenge in responding to this brokenness is the desire, of many people, for punishment. This chapter examines the function of punishment on individuals and on the community. It continues to explore the cycle of violence, and, using the tool of re-membering begin to identify alternatives to violence in relationships.

Consequences of Broken Relationships

As the conversation between God and Cain continues, Cain discovers that there are consequences for his actions. Verse 12 of the narrative indicates that the ground “will no longer yield to you its strength” (Gen 4:12). The first humans were given the earth to use for food with the understanding that they were also to care for it (Gen 1:28-30). Cain has neglected his responsibility to his brother and so the ability to control the earth is being withdrawn. Cain also loses the ability to adequately produce from the land for his community. As a tiller of land, Cain has used the land to generate food for himself and

his family. He discovers that this will no longer be possible. All of Cain's losses are reinforced by the use of the word strength which indicates the damage done to the earth by Cain's actions. The produce of the land, the ability to produce from the land and Cain's authority over the land have been removed from him.

The foundational narratives of Creation and Cain and Abel shape perspectives and behavior. For some, the right to use the earth without regard for the creation or other people comes from the creation stories. In the same way that the Creation narrative shapes attitudes towards earth, the Cain and Abel narrative shapes attitudes towards violence. This narrative should draw humans back to the importance of relationship with each other and with the earth. The narrative is incredibly important in shaping a theology and a way of life based on non-violent relationships with other people and the earth.

By Cain's act of violence and his inability to shepherd Abel, he has given up the right to receive from the earth as a gift. If the earth can no longer give easily to Cain then, in order for Cain to survive, he must wrestle food from the earth instead. Humans have a choice about whether to follow Cain's act of violence and damage the relationship with earth, or attempt to make alternative choices which contribute to the well-being of all creation.

The Cain and Abel narrative, not only describes an early story of violence, it offers a model for breaking the cycle of violence and creates the possibilities for peace within creation. Within this model, peace needs to focus on human relationships and the relationship with the earth. Like justice, peace has several common interpretations or descriptions. In a somewhat cynical way, Merton describes several of these perceptions:

For some [people] peace merely means the liberty to exploit other people without fear of retaliation or interference. To others peace means the freedom to rob

brothers without interruption. To still others it means the leisure to devour the goods of the earth without being compelled to interrupt their pleasures to feed those whom their greed is starving. And to practically everybody peace simply means the absence of any physical violence that might cast a shadow over lives devoted to the satisfaction of their animal appetites for comfort and pleasure.¹

Merton ties the exploitation of the earth to the inability of humans to achieve peace. The exploitation of the earth and of other people is one way of sapping the earth's strength and removing the yield that may be possible. The earth cannot continue to sustain life as we know it because of the *strength*, the resources that humans use. Cain's first act of violence and eventual founding of the first city sets the stage for the violence and exploitation that currently exist. I am not suggesting that the current crisis is a direct result of Cain's actions only that it was and is a story that can be used to reflect on the nature of violence and how to end it.

The environmental crisis that currently exists reflects the consequences of an unhealthy relationship with other people and the earth. Merton's words accurately describe what happens when the human perception of the earth becomes one of domination. Humans are inseparable from the earth and, yet when the earth is no longer able to yield her strength, the relationship becomes one of survival not of abundance. This sense of survival is evident for Cain as he becomes a "fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (Gen 4:12). He cannot run away from the earth. Whether he lives or dies he cannot escape the earth. Swenson writes that "the land's rejection of Cain *is* his instability."² This instability suggests that without the connection to the earth, Cain will be off balance, perhaps close to a breaking point. If the earth is understood as God's

1. Merton, "The Root of War is Fear," 103—104.

2. Swenson, "Care and keeping East of Eden," 382.

body,³ then God, through the earth, is providing Cain's stability. Several places in scripture describe God as the rock of refuge and the stronghold⁴ which convey images of stability and strength. With Cain's rejection by the earth, he loses the strength of the earth and his ability to be grounded in God.

Cain is the human most directly affected by these broken relationships and is therefore destined to be not only a *fugitive* but a *wanderer*. The choice of words in Hebrew is again unique. The word translated *wanderer* in this chapter can be translated elsewhere as to mourn (Jer 48:17) or to flee (Jer 50:8). The word wanderer may have been chosen to reflect something of Cain's mental state; not only will he wander, but he will mourn and flee from God and the earth. Similar to the prodigal son, these words all carry connotations of someone who is broken and filled with pain. It also seems that with the loss of his ability to till the land, Cain is also losing part of his identity. Westermann also suggests that Cain's banishment is just as severe as if he had been killed.⁵ Cain has to live both with the knowledge of what he has done and spend his life outside of community.

Noort suggests that as Cain becomes a fugitive and a wanderer he also loses his ties to his family.⁶ Cain is now cut off from the relationships he has always known. Humans are interdependent and Cain has always been part of a family. Particularly in an environment where community is tied to survival, to be outside the community would mean death, physically and metaphorically. It seems that the future looks very bleak for

3. McFague, *The Body of God*, 131.

4. E.g. Ps 18:2.

5. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 310.

6. Noort, "Genesis 4:1-16," 95.

Cain but the outcome of the narrative begins to change. In God's speech (Gen 4:12), Cain is held accountable for his actions and the consequences are made clear to him. The violence that has occurred is not acceptable and as a result, Cain's relationship with the earth is damaged and, therefore, his relationship with God. The consequences mean that Cain will no longer be able to till the land to gain access to the produce of the earth; the earth will no longer be in his care.

Punishment

Central to the narrative are issues related to punishment and whether that punishment is understood as retributive or restorative. Cain assumes that his punishment "is greater than [he] can bear," (Gen 4:13). Cain hears God's speech as a punishment and responds accordingly. Cain's response is a very human response in which punishment becomes heavy and burdensome. And this is where the narrative shifts.

As described earlier by Marshall, a common understanding of punishment includes retribution with the intention of suffering and by extension the understanding that an offender should suffer in equal amounts to the victim. The biblical understanding of punishment carries with it the connotation of instruction and learning.⁷ Cain's punishment is not intended as retribution but as an opportunity for learning new behavior and new ways of dealing with his anger. Cain's *punishment* creates the opportunity for learning and the possibility of redemption and healing for Cain and his community.

The Hebrew that is translated as *punishment* also carries the possibilities of *misdeed*, *sin*, or *guilt*. According to Humphreys, most translations use the word

7. Wood and Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Punishment."

punishment⁸ but the range of possibilities that he suggests opens many possibilities for reading the text. “My *sin* is greater than I can bear!” suggests that weight of the violence he committed is weighing on Cain. “My *guilt* is greater than I can bear!” suggests that Cain knows what he has done and that there are consequences for that behavior.

However, Eric Peels maintains that Cain’s cry in verse 14 is one of protest and fear, not of remorse since he laments only his punishment.⁹ In this context, sin and guilt come from within Cain, while punishment implies something that is imposed on him from outside. All three words imply both the gravity of the violence and consequences that result from violence. One of the challenges with understanding scripture is that context changes. In North American society sin and guilt are seen as individual issues while in communal societies such as the Ancient Near East, sin and guilt would be understood as communal issues. If the original writers and editors of the narrative brought a perspective of guilt and sin as communal the reading of the text in that context suggests that Cain’s guilt is not his personal issue but an issue for the entire community.

While the consequences that result may be great (large), the Hebrew translated as great also carries connotations of *strange*—something that causes surprise or is unusual.¹⁰ Whatever this sin or guilt or punishment is, it is something that Cain and the reader are not expecting. While the use of the word *bear*, suggests that Cain will carry the consequences, there is another meaning which contributes to the element of surprise. The

8. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, 59.

9. Peels, “The World’s First Murder,” 28–29.

10. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*, s.v “1524.”

Hebrew, translated as bear, may also include *to forgive* (Gen 18:26). There is the possibility that Cain will be forgiven; there is a possibility for redemption.

This is further supported by Swenson's translation which indicates that earlier in the narrative the Hebrew is translated as "lift/born up."¹¹ There is a close connection between the negative connotations of the translation indicated by heaviness and the positive connotations indicated by lightness. Swenson writes that "instead of being lifted/born up by the consequences of doing the right thing, Cain cries that he cannot bear/lift the onerous consequences of his wrong action."¹² Both the capacity for good and evil continue to exist within Cain but he cannot lift the weight of his sin.

Redemption and Vengeance

The possibilities for goodness continue to exist in Cain because he (and all other humans) are created good as indicated in the creation story (Gen 1:26-31). This theme of goodness and the possibility of redemption is affirmed through modern Judaism and Christianity and many other faith traditions. The understanding of punishment as an opportunity for learning affirms this view. Cain's curse from the earth is a punishment but it is also an opportunity for Cain to learn and understand that his actions have consequences for himself and for the earth. Even in this original story of violence, the possibility of redemption exists.

The possibility of redemption exists even in the midst of broken relationships. Cain accuses God of driving him "away from the soil," (Gen 4:14). *Driving*, in other contexts, may relate to divorce (Lev 21:7) which speaks to the brokenness of

11. Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden," 382.

12. Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden," 382.

relationships in this narrative. With the words “I shall be hidden from your face” (Gen 4:14), Cain acknowledges that his relationship with God has been changed and he can no longer relate to God in the same way. Cain identifies that he will be *hidden* from God which suggests a choice on Cain’s part to stay out of God’s sight. It may also suggest that Cain believes God will no longer see him. In this brokenness, Cain seems to have a sense of the weight of his actions and recognizes the instinctive community response. It is Cain who introduces the idea of his own murder. He recognizes that he will be a target for violence and tells God that he knows this. By sending Cain away from the community, God is saving both Cain’s life and the community’s life. Cain’s removal from the community breaks the human cycle of violence.

Westermann suggests that Cain is “‘infectious’ and so a danger to the community.”¹³ Just as the spilt blood belongs to the community, the perpetrator of violence also belongs to the community. As long as Cain stays in the community, the potential for violence perpetrated either by Cain, or by someone seeking revenge for Abel’s death, exists. Because of the infectious nature of violence, Cain’s presence means that the community is no longer immune to violence. Cain suspects that his life is in danger and that he is beyond protection. Even though Cain is preparing for death, God is creating the opportunity for Cain to live. While Cain’s response might be a normal human response and, for many people may reflect their image of God’s justice, God’s response to Cain offers a surprising and unexpected twist to the narrative. “Not so!” This phrase leads the reader deeper into the narrative and opens possibilities for an alternative response to violence and an unexpected image of God.

13. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 310.

The narrative sets Abel up as the victim, the insignificant brother and the earth is portrayed as a victim affected by the violence Cain has perpetrated. The logical conclusion is that Cain should be punished for his actions and with the same degree of suffering as was experienced by Abel and the earth. But at this point in the narrative, God's compassion for Cain is evident. As Cain becomes the one without protection, whose life is at stake, God places a mark on Cain to protect him.¹⁴ God's allegiance seems to be with anyone who is outside the community or at risk in some way. This allegiance has shifted from Abel, to the earth and now includes Cain. Throughout this narrative God is intimately and actively involved in the affairs of Cain and Abel with a particular focus on protecting the vulnerable.

The violence through which Cain asserted his dominance has now become the reason for his vulnerability. God could assert dominance through violence or allowing others to kill Cain. The possibility of God's violence exists, but the mark signifies God's intention for something different. According to Brodie "there is an implication that YHWH actually touches [Cain]."¹⁵ God's actions in this narrative indicate willingness for God to be in the midst of violence with a focus on care and concern regardless of the complexities and conundrums that violence and the human response to it creates.

This mark that is placed on Cain, reminds the reader of other signs in Genesis. *Sign* is used to describe the signs in the sky at creation (Gen 1:14) and the rainbow following the flood (Gen 9:13). Both of these signs are signs of a promise, a sign of

14. van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel," 39.

15. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 154.

God's presence and the possibility of reconciliation.¹⁶ In the Christian Scriptures, the Gospel of John is known as the *Book of Signs*. The stories in the gospel use signs to identify God among humans in the person of Jesus. Throughout scripture, a sign, or a mark is a symbol of God's commitment to human life and a reminder of God's very tangible presence.

This commitment recognizes the capacity for both good and evil behavior. The mark that is placed on Cain signifies this dichotomy. Brueggemann suggests that the mark is a sign of both "guilt and grace."¹⁷ As well as reflecting Cain's inner state, this mark is an outward sign that Cain is a murderer and that he is under God's protection. This mark reflects something very profound about the human-divine relationship.

The mark reflects the potential for good and evil that exists within all humans. It reflects the potential for forgiveness and unforgiveness, the potential for change and resistance to change. While God may see the potential in Cain, it may be difficult for Cain to recognize. It seems that Cain is harder on himself than God is and that he is expecting more dire consequences. Cain recognizes that there should be consequences for his actions and the use of the word *mark* may reflect Cain's sense that others may want his life in exchange for Abel's.

God's "not so" continues to enforce Cain's protection with a threat of God's *sevenfold vengeance* (Gen 4:15). Modern definitions of vengeance focus on retaliation and retribution but biblical "vengeance was understood as God's way of redressing

16. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 156.

17. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 60.

wrongs, and the word seldom has a connotation of vindictiveness.”¹⁸ As described earlier this includes learning and healing. The healing aspect of vengeance seems to have disappeared from the common meaning and been replaced with a focus on justice which, in turn, is often understood as revenge. These attitudes continue to keep the cycle of violence alive. Within the context of the Cain and Abel narrative, God is responsible for *vengeance*. The narrative continues the theme of God’s compassion for whoever is most vulnerable indicating that the vengeance will be directed at whoever kills Cain. If the killing of Cain occurred, it would come from a place of anger and a sense of entitlement to Cain’s life. This further act of violence based on anger requires a response from God. The response is one of reconciliation and healing. This is not what is expected. God’s character is changing what is expected.

Understanding vengeance as an opportunity for learning and healing creates a reading of the narrative that offers hope and reconciliation instead of on-going violence. Cain’s life keeps alive the possibility of healing and redemption for him and his community. A. A. Boesak indicates that Cain’s future life of wandering is not what God intends for humans but that it is a life that is created through oppression and violence. It is the oppressors who will be wanderers.¹⁹ This raises the question of whether Cain is an oppressor or a refugee. Cain is both. Cain is an oppressor because he asserted his authority and refused to shepherd his brother Abel. He is portrayed as the stronger of the brothers but by the middle of the narrative Cain is a refugee fleeing for his life. As described earlier, historical interpretation has attempted to classify Cain and Abel as good

18. *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, s.v. “Vengeance.”

19. Boesak, *Black and Reformed* quoted in Gerald O. West, “Two Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context of Liberation,” 36.

and evil. The ambiguity about Cain's status as refugee or oppressor suggests that an individual may find themselves living with many realities at the same time.

These realities shape how individuals are perceived by others which in turn shapes the response to violence. Cain's community would view him as the oppressor and would therefore want to remove him from the community. He was the one who perpetrated violence against someone the community perceived as weaker and for whom he was responsible. Cain may have perceived himself as the oppressed throughout the narrative as indicated by his response to Abel's offering being received. As the oppressed, Cain would perceive that others have done particular things to him or would threaten him. For example, Cain perceives that Abel was accepted over him. He also expects that the community will try to kill him. The perception of oppression is individualistic and is difficult to identify clearly.

This difficulty in perception makes it challenging for humans to respond to violence in ways that seem fair and just. It also creates a challenge for understanding God's actions in this narrative. Many humans assume that God will be fair and just but Brodie suggests that Cain being allowed to live creates the perception that God is unfair.²⁰ It instead suggests that God understands the complexities of perception and the capacity for both good and evil that exist within humans. It also places compassion and care for the vulnerable at the centre of God's being.

The idea that Cain being allowed to live is unfair results from an understanding of vengeance as punishment instead of an opportunity for healing and reconciliation. Ending the cycle of violence requires a change in perspective that may seem unfair and God's refusal to participate in that cycle may seem unfair. Part of the perception of unfairness

20. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 153.

may lie in the challenge of seeing beyond an immediate response to understand the long-term consequences of particular actions.

For example, when Cain assumes he will be killed by his community, the community might have a sense that this is fair and right because Cain already killed someone. God's response of allowing Cain to live seems unfair by this standard. However, killing Cain would not solve the problem of violence, it only continues the cycle because now Cain's supporters (if he has any), would feel they have a right to kill in response to Cain's murder. This cycle of violence operates on an individual level as well as a global level. Merton describes the cycle of violence in this way: "If [the enemy] can only be destroyed, conflict will cease, evil will be done with, there will be no more war."²¹ What this does not take into account is that every act of violence requires another act of violence to obliterate the previous act and create fairness. Fairness is never achieved and the cycle will continue indefinitely. As described earlier, this dynamic is seen at work in Palestine and Israel and in the *War on Terror*.

God's response of refusing to engage in violence turns the perception of fairness upside down. Cain is protected so that there will not be more violence against him and the cycle of violence is broken. This break in the cycle creates an opportunity for healing for both Cain and his community. For Cain, the healing will challenge his ability to remember. He will always remember that he is a murderer. He will also remember that he had a brother that he was responsible for and the he failed in his ability to keep that brother. The knowledge of what he has done will not leave Cain. If it simply stays as memory it has the potential to fester and continue causing harm for him and the community. If he can re-member his actions it creates an opportunity for healing.

21. Merton, "The Root of War is Fear," 103-104.

Memory and re-membering help to heal the God-human relationship. “Whoever does not remember, whoever pretends not to have known, and whoever did not want to know . . . has understood nothing at all. God is memory, and that is why to remember is to approach God. To forget, to repress, is a way of getting rid of God.”²² Cain’s conversations with God in this narrative suggest that his relationships and responsibilities have been impressed upon him. His understanding comes too late to prevent murder but may still allow him to re-member events in such a way that he may approach God.

I recognize this phenomenon in regards to Attawapiskat, a 1st Nations reserve in northern Ontario which is experiencing extreme poverty and a shortage of adequate housing. There is a tendency to blame the people of Attawapiskat for their poverty instead of re-membering the history of 1st Nations in Canada and the complicity of those of us of European descent who benefit from their poverty. Within a context of blame and forgetfulness it becomes difficult for humans to perceive God’s touch of compassion and healing. From many in the non-aboriginal community who cannot re-member, I hear anger and blame. From those who are trying to re-member, I hear a sense that God is creating an opportunity for reconciliation and the possibility of a different future. That fact that Cain continues to live, forces the community to re-member. The fact that Attawapiskat exists, forces many in the non-native community to re-member. If Cain had been killed for retribution, the community could forget about him. It would be easy to point a finger and say: “See, God punishes murderers with death.” The community would not have to struggle with how to respond to Cain. The community would not have to struggle with what it perceives as the unfairness of God and God’s protection of Cain.

22. Dorothee Söelle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 132.

Alternatives

Humans tend to respond to violence with an attempt to create fairness, however, the Cain and Abel narrative may not point in that direction. The narrative suggests that a response to violence should not create more violence and in a culture where retributive justice is viewed as normative, God's intervention of protection for Cain does not seem fair. Jesus indicates that the human response to enemies (and therefore people who do violence) should be one of compassion. In Matthew, Jesus responds to the common understanding of revenge, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"²³ by saying:

Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.²⁴

This passage has sometimes been used to suggest that the response to violence is to do nothing. Recent biblical studies indicate this passage suggests a model of response to violence which creates an opportunity to change the situation. Walter Wink, a modern biblical scholar with a focus on peace, suggests that this type of response offers the oppressed, and the victim of violence, an opportunity to "recover the initiative and assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed. The rules are Caesar's, but how one responds to the rules is God's."²⁵ This response does not make the situation fair, but it does respond to, and expose, the violence without using violence. It also allows the oppressed a choice in their response. Ghandi successfully used non-

23. Matt 5:38.

24. Matt 5:38-42.

25. Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 182.

violent methods to mobilize Indian society for independence from British rule in the 1930's and 1940's. Martin Luther King, Jr. also used these methods in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. While both of these men were assassinated, the movements that they led changed the world and created cultures that are more just.

In the passage from Matthew, as well as the Cain and Abel narrative, alternatives to violence are being offered and violence is clearly shown to be a choice and not inevitable. Choosing non-violence is challenging and requires a commitment to deal with other consequences. In the case of Cain and Abel, God may be accused of unfairness, of not caring about violence. And yet, as has been demonstrated, God's compassion is for any who are vulnerable including those who may seem to be the oppressor. God's concern here is not with fairness but with the lessening of violence. In a world filled with violence, it would seem logical that lessening violence be a priority.

Reuven Hammer suggests that there is never a satisfactory explanation for violence regardless of whether one life is at stake or an entire people. So, while violence can never be justified or explained, he argues that it is a reality. He offers several suggestions for responding to the "inflation of evil" with "the inflation of good."²⁶ In order to respond to and prevent evil and violence, he suggests understanding the history of both good and evil, exploring and identifying what prevents violence and then training and educating people in this knowledge and skills.²⁷

26. Reuven Hammer, "The Biblical Perception of the Origin of Evil," *Judaism* 39 (1990): 324. Hammer was an Associate Professor of Rabbinics, Jewish Theological Seminary of America – Jerusalem when this article was printed.

27. Hammer, "The Biblical Perception of the Origin of Evil," 324.

As the Cain and Abel narrative suggests, violence has existed since early in human history. For Cain, the violence results in his wandering and eventually settling in “the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Gen 4:16). Nod is a name meaning wandering and east indicates not only direction but also carries with it connotations of ancient and eternal.²⁸ These names suggest that the narrative describes ancient truths about violence and its consequences which continue to have meaning and relevance for the future. It also suggests that as Cain was led to a new and different way of life. Humans through the centuries have a similar opportunity to create a new way of life.

Following the Cain and Abel narrative, Cain goes on to marry, have children and eventually establish the first city. The life that he creates is different from his life as a tiller of the land and it is not what he expected. It may seem that there were no consequences for murder. It is important to remember that Cain is cut off from his community and spends his life forming new relationships and new community. He must struggle with his memory of violence as he attempts to re-member himself so he can heal himself and thus be able to trust others enough to form new relationships. Since his relationship to the earth is damaged, Cain is no longer able to till the land for produce and instead must rely on his own strength instead of the earth’s to provide for him. This is the life of someone who will live with the consequences of violence, even as he attempts to create a different life for himself.

Conclusions

The Cain and Abel narrative has been used to suggest that violence is inevitable since it appears early in the canon of scripture. Augustine’s interpretation which connects

28. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*, s.v. “7710.”

the Cain and Abel narrative to the fall and, therefore, violence to the creation story has supported this perspective. I have argued that the Cain and Abel narrative can be interpreted in support of restorative justice and an end to the cycle of violence.

This thesis has shown that while violence has occurred since early in human history it is a choice that results from many different factors which include family of origin, emotional, psychological and social factors. Helping people to address these root causes may increase the ability of individuals to relate to one another in healthier ways and decrease the incidences of violence. In the instance of Cain and Abel, the possibility exists that if the brothers had each been able to contribute to their relationship in healthier ways, if Cain had not felt unworthy and jealous of Abel or had been able to use his anger for creative energy Abel may not have been killed.

It is important to note that, within the Cain and Abel narrative, the earth is an active character that is able to feel and respond to violence. This thesis has shown that a broad understanding of violence includes exploitation of the earth's resources and that violence done to humans is in fact violence done to the earth. Humans and the earth are bound together so that even while the relationship with the earth is damaged, humans remain dependent upon the earth for survival. The current environmental crisis needs to be identified as a result of violence done to the earth as well as humans.

Throughout the narrative God challenges Cain and then Cain's community to see the world differently and to respond to the wrongs they feel they have experienced in ways that lessen instead of increase violence. This is seen in God reminding Cain that he has a choice in how he deals with his anger. It is seen in God asking Cain what he has done and then reminding Cain that his actions have consequences, not only for himself

but for the entire earth. Finally, God's challenge to lessen violence is seen in the protection that is placed on Cain. God's responses in these situations changes the way in which Cain and the people around him view the world and respond to it. God may be seen to continue to act in these types of ways in the modern world if humans are perceptive to God's action.

This thesis has offered examples of current events and situations which are currently responding to violence by breaking the cycle or are opportunities to explore these alternatives. Those who attempt to change the perspective of violence and the way in which violence is engaged in North American culture need to have commitment and strength to withstand accusations of passiveness and unfairness.

The important facts from this reading of the Cain and Abel narrative are that violence is not inevitable. It is a choice. The situations that lead to violence are complex and so are the responses. Violence does not make a person evil, but that the capacity for good and evil continue to exist in each person regardless of behavior. The focus of responding to violence needs to be one that encourages learning, reconciliation and healing.

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