

Trinity College Cambridge  
23 October 2011

**Telling Tales: Stories from the book of Genesis**  
**Cain and Abel**  
Genesis 4: 1-16

Ernest Nicholson

There is more to the story of Cain and Abel than meets the eye, and it makes discomfiting reading. When I read or hear it, it rather pulls me up. For such an ancient story, it asks and poses very modern questions. Even the names mentioned – Cain and Abel, and, yes, the strange name Land of Nod, which occurs nowhere else in the Bible – are potent symbols intended to challenge or even convict the reader. The story's depiction of human nature, of the difficulties that can beset us as we endeavour to live together as a society and, in our modern hyper-connected world, as a society of nations, remains acutely pertinent.

This is a bold claim about this short narrative, which was composed perhaps as long ago as the eighth century B.C., just about contemporary with the Homeric writings, and in world far removed from this twenty-first century of ours. The story has frequently been interpreted as one about the supposed ancient clash between farmer and herdsman, or between settled populations and nomadic communities, or about different kinds of offerings to God, and the like. Whilst some hints of earlier folklore are observable, such readings of the story have never persuaded me in the face of the evidence that the story we have was from its inception one about the primeval period of humankind, as it is in its present setting, whether or not it was originally composed for this precise sequence of narrative in Genesis 1-11 or has been secondarily woven into it.

The story is not about Cain and Abel, but one about Cain. Abel plays only a passive role. You will have noticed that he says nothing, and whilst Cain's name is explained, his is not, and in any case is not a name proper but means 'a puff of breath, nothingness', or, as we may paraphrase it, he is named 'child count-for-nothing'. It occurs nowhere outside this chapter, and who, in any case would give such a name to their child! It is the story that generates the name, the name of one who is born and is murdered.

The naming of Cain provides an indication that the intended setting of the story is the primeval time. His mother's triumphant and joyous exclamation upon the birth of her

son declares 'I have brought forth a man just as the Lord did'. (The verb means literally 'create, shape, form'.) It is not difficult to discern in this exclamation of joy a parallel to Adam's cry of delight at the creation of Eve 'This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!' What is most striking is that the child is described as 'a man' (Heb. 'ish), a word never used elsewhere for a newly born child. That is, the woman's exclamation is saying something more about this birth: it places the birth of a son side-by-side with the creation of the race, for Cain is the first man after Adam and thus the continuation of the race – a further indication that it was a story relating to the primeval period, and to the beginnings of humanity.

There's a further close resemblance between the story of Adam and Eve and that of Cain and Abel. Both narratives are concerned with human beings in relationship: the first with the community between man and woman, the second with the individual in association with others, that is, of brothers living together, of humankind in society. Later in these opening eleven chapters of Genesis we read of the division of the now extensive population of the world into nations and thus the beginning of history.

Let us look more closely at our story. First, the conflict between the brothers is not about their differing occupations or the different offerings they present to God. Rather, it arises from the favour that the one (Cain) believed to have been bestowed upon the other (Abel) by God. We are left wondering how Cain came to believe that Abel was commended by God and that he, Cain, was rejected. There is nothing in the text to explain this. We must keep in mind, in considering this, that in the mindset of those who told this story, one's lot in life flowed ultimately from the divine will. Thus, when the experiences of these two brothers are traced to a divine action, this means that it is something immutable, ordained by God. That is: it happens so: it is the nature of our life as individuals in this world that thus it happens.

Herein is to be found the basic motif of the story. It speaks of the existence of human beings as brothers, of the life in common of those who intrinsically have equal rights as brothers, but where one is successful and the other not, where one feels that the other has more than he has. Here too there is a similarity even if by way of contrast between this story and that of Adam and Eve, for whilst in that story the man and the woman stand in a relationship of mutual help, here in our story another possibility finds expression, namely, that there can be enmity and opposition between brothers, that they are, indeed, rivals. And thus there surfaces those difficulties, longings, grievances which inequality, blessing or its absence, generates wherever human beings live in society or as nations alongside one another. The point of departure for the story is inequality. And so it is that

the inequality and disadvantage that the one experiences in relation to the other and which is incomprehensible leads to worse – to murder. What is most shocking, however, about the whole event, and what the story directs to the thought of the reader is that a man like Cain, who does his work and presents his offering to God, is capable of this. What the author is saying is that it is not just Cain, but anyone who potentially can become the murderer of his brother [see Claus Westermann's commentary on Genesis].

The phrase in the story that has resounded down the ages and that constantly awakens our conscience, is Cain's response to God when asked where his brother is: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Bearing in mind Abel's occupation, there is a sarcastic witticism in this reply, which is captured by paraphrasing it in some such way as 'Am I to shepherd the shepherd?' or 'Does the keeper need a keeper', for surely a brother is not expected to oversee his brother constantly. That's certainly so. But the question that God asks is a social question, for no human being exists on his or her own, and conditions arise when a brother must be his brother's keeper, situations where he is, indeed, responsible for his brother's life and wellbeing. Responsibility before God is responsibility for one's brother, one's neighbour, for one's fellow human being.

It is the experience of each one of us that there are differences and inequalities that as individuals and as a society we have to accept as unalterable, as ordained by nature. There are talents and skills that some have and others have not: there are wide differences in intelligence – in brainpower, if you like – between some human beings and others; there is Johann Sebastian Bach and there is Mozart, for example, and there are the musically tone deaf; there are those who are brilliant inventors alongside the quite unimaginative; there are those remarkable minds that now and then come along and say to the rest of us 'Can you see things this way rather than the way you have seen them hitherto?' Here at Trinity College think of one such as Isaac Newton!

But there are many inequalities in our world giving rise to wholly undesirable consequences that we can and must redress. And our story has something significant to say about this. It is a story that, as I've suggested, has the power to pull us up. For as long as this story is read, we won't be allowed to evade the question 'Am I my brother's keeper?'; that is, it is a story which when we hear it will continue to turn up the volume of that inner voice within each of us which we call conscience. The very name Cain itself will remind us of a duty to our neighbour; at times, indeed, it will loudly accuse us of neglect of our fellow human beings or, indeed, worse. It will do so when, for example, we are reminded of the many millions of our fellow human beings who live in dire poverty whilst we thrive on rather more than plenty; it will harrow us when we hear about the

millions of children in our world who die for lack of vaccines and other medicines that we take for granted. And the name Abel will similarly pierce our conscience, for it is the name of those many millions of 'count-for-nothing' men, women, and children, whose fate, for want of a more equal sharing of the world's yield, are mere 'puffs of breath', born to perish as though they had never been.

But pity ourselves also: our lifestyle, our insatiable consumerism and materialism has yielded a dread harvest of alienation: alienation from our true humanity, and alienation from our neighbours, with consequent erosion of communal bonds; mere material possessions have become the soul's desire, and, it seems, national economies cannot survive without yet more and more of this. And here that other strange name in our story, the land of Nod, will likewise prod us. It never was the name of a geographical territory, but means, strikingly, 'land of restlessness', even 'land of misery'. For us, it acts as a synonym for alienation, a chilling depiction of much of our modern human condition.

My memory is that I first heard this story a handful of years after the war as a boy at secondary school where each morning we sang a hymn and heard a carefully chosen passage of scripture read. Our Head Teacher, who was one of the wisest and best men I have ever known, included this story among a number whose theme was love and respect for our neighbour, generosity, kindness, thoughtfulness. These particular stories were often read, I well recall, on Thursday mornings, which was the day on which, upon leaving the assembly hall, we had to make a small gift towards the poor and needy in our community or some other deserving charity. His choice from time to time of the story of Cain and Abel was to inculcate in our minds the only answer we should as human beings give to that ancient question 'Am I my brother's keeper?'

The story points forward to, for example, the generosity of Joseph to his brothers later in the book of Genesis that ended a cycle of mistrust and violence, to the moving story of Ruth's love for and loyalty to Naomi, and it is of course distilled in the command in Leviticus 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself', which Jesus later placed alongside and equal to love of God; this in turn is echoed in, for example, our other reading this evening from the letter of John that if we do not love the neighbour whom we see, how can we love God whom we cannot see. Cain's questioning retort to God in the story 'Am I my brother's keeper?' reminds us strikingly of the young man's question to Jesus 'Who is my neighbour?', which called forth in response the parable of the good Samaritan. There is indeed in the story of Cain and Abel much more than meets the eye.