

Cain, Accused of Premeditated Murder, Walks Away

God, Cain, and the Psychology of Shame

Geoffrey W. Sutton, April, 2024

Brian Dorsey's execution, a denouement of a tragic sequence of events, was carried out on April 9, 2024, concluding a legal process that spanned nearly two decades. Dorsey, then 52, was convicted for the 2006 homicides of his cousin, Sarah Bonnie, and her husband, Ben Bonnie. The case's notoriety stemmed from the brutal nature of the crimes: Dorsey, in a desperate attempt to settle a drug debt, murdered the couple in their residence post-midnight, subsequently engaging in a postmortem sexual assault on Sarah Bonnie.

The execution, administered via a single-dose injection of pentobarbital at the Missouri state prison in Bonne Terre, was not without its controversies. Concerns were raised regarding the potential difficulties in vein location due to Dorsey's physical health conditions, yet the procedure was reported to have been expedited without complications. Dorsey's final moments were marked by a pronounced expression of remorse, encapsulated in a prewritten statement acknowledging the gravity of his actions and the irreversible pain inflicted upon the families involved.

My purpose in this post is to examine the story of God and Cain from a psychological perspective. I'm numbering the paragraphs for ease of reference in a planned group discussion.

1. Moral Focus

Although, the Bible's first murder story is usually taught to children as the story of Cain and Abel, Abel is not the main character. Perhaps the wordplay on his Hebrew name, *breath or vapor*, illustrates his limited appearance in the tale. Also, the storyteller doesn't plumb the depths of despair and incredible outrage that parents usually feel at such a violent loss. Who cares about Adam and Eve? Does anyone have empathy? Having evaluated and treated crime victims, I have a sense of the unspeakable pain that loved ones carry to their graves. And having evaluated murderers and violent men I am tuned in to searching for moral emotions and psychopathology. But this story is different. I think God and Cain is part of a sequence of prelaw moral stories in Genesis and the spiritual struggles experienced by ancient Israelites when it comes to understanding God's mysterious ways in dealing with human nature.

2. The Farmer and the Shepherd

At first it seems the two brothers are godly men. The firstborn Cain follows his father's cursed vocation as a farmer. However, Abel becomes a shepherd. Oddly, neither son, unlike the third brother, is born in the image of Adam. Presumably, Cain and Abel are young because we do not learn of Abel's wife and children. And it is later in the story that we learn of Cain's descendants.

3. The Sacrifice

Now these two brothers appear to do what is right by offering God a sacrifice from their labor, although the storyteller adds a bit of emphasis on Abel's animal. Perhaps this is when the ancient Israelites learn that God, like the gods of their neighbors, prefers the smell of a savory BBQ rather than veggies. In fact, we may wonder if there is a prejudice favoring animal husbandry over farming the land.

4. Rejection!

God's rejection of Cain is devastating! Isn't Cain, the firstborn, the one entitled to inherit his father's estate, the one expected to rule over the household, and the one who offers the fruit of his labor, worthy of respect? Instead, God disrespects Cain's gift. Cain gets no respect.

5. Shame

Cain is shame-faced. And not surprisingly, given what we know from psychological research, shamed people respond with anger and aggression. I'm intrigued by the possibility that the writer seems to know what we know about the difference between the moral emotions of shame and guilt and the role of rejection in provoking shamed people to violence—especially shamed people who have a sense of entitlement.

Rejection is a blow to self-esteem especially in front of his younger sibling.

Psychologists warn judges and prison administrators against shaming men in contrast to evoking an empathy-guilt response.

6. Unprotected

I'm not saying the storyteller intended to present Abel as a sacrifice, but Cain, perhaps named to represent a spear or the one who acquires, hatches a plan. He rises up and takes control—Abel is removed—his life disappears like a vapor. Cain seems to act like a modern man with narcissistic personality disorder who is provoked and primed for vengeance. In the ancient culture, and consistent with evolutionary psychology, Abel is the one humiliated because he is unable to have a meaningful life characterized in the blessed phrase, *be fruitful and multiply*. We also learn that God does not necessarily protect righteous people—something Christians still find shocking.

7. Judgment

God returns to the story as a judge. In a few verses, we learn a lot about human nature and ancient cultures. Again, like a modern narcissist, Cain denies responsibility for Abel's absence. But God confronts Cain with forensic evidence as the anthropomorphic sacred life blood accuses Cain of murder. Now we get that infamous unempathetic, egocentric line: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Such a pithy yet poignant moral phrase.

8. Punishment?

Cain accepts God's judgment. Although judged guilty, there is no evidence of guilty feelings—no empathy, no remorse. Cain does have the self-centered tenacity to ask the Judge about his punishment, which changes his vocation from living off the land to life as a wanderer. Cain is a marked man. Unlike protecting Abel, God actually protects Cain. Ancient hearers must wonder, "What kind of God let's a man get away with murder?" We may wonder why wasn't Cain punished in the ancient equivalent of capital punishment like the execution of Brian Dorsey? And, moreover, why does Cain get such a legacy? Check it out. The ancient storyteller seems to delight in telling us about Cain's descendants and their reputations.

9. The Imago Adamus

Meanwhile, back to Adam and Eve, who have another child. This one, Seth, is created in the image of Adam—Seth is the imago Adamus!

Discussion Questions

1. What lessons, if any, could ancient Israelites learn from this story? Would Christians benefit from the same lessons?
2. How do ideas about shame and guilt figure in Christian theology?
3. How do people deal with perceived rejection from God, God's earthly representatives like clergy, and other significant persons?
4. Limiting yourself to the text, what adjectives come to mind regarding Cain?
5. Why might it be significant about the storyteller's assignment of Seth to be in the image of Adam?
6. What's your view of punishing murderers?
7. What might be the significance of telling readers about Cain's descendants?

Post Notes

God. God is YHWH in the Cain story. Read more about YHWH and Elohim in the early narratives in an article by Wolde (1991).

God and Cain. When I reread the story, I decided to rename this post because Abel has such a minor role. Later, I saw this idea mentioned by Vermeulen (2014).

Image of God. The notion of sons being born in the image of their father is of great importance when it comes to inheriting wealth and managing the family estate. This image theme continues in the New Testament (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:15). I've written about the image of God and psychology elsewhere (e.g., Sutton, 2024).

Firstborn Sons. In many cultures, firstborn sons are precious people entitled to a place of honor in their father's household. Of course, we know in later Bible stories that God upends this cultural entitlement. Biblical conflicts also include sisters.

Farmers vs. Shepherds. Farming isn't a feature of the wandering Israelites. They identify as shepherds and their God is the Good Shepherd. Perhaps they were looking back in time, and observed, "Cain was not one of us." Then there's the bloody personification. Abel's blood cries out. As we know, for Israelites, life is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11). Blood, the sacred life force, is ever so precious. Later, blood will protect them when God kills Egypt's firstborns, but I don't want to get ahead of the story. Read more about farmers and shepherds in Vermeulen (2014).

Blood. The sacredness of blood is a common feature of ancient tribal religions whose members sought the blessings of their gods by offering blood sacrifices of animals and humans. You can read more in *Britannica*. Sacred blood is also a recurring theme throughout the Bible and of course in the bloody hymns of the church. It appears that Israelites linked blood to life. Scientifically, blood formation appears in the developing fetus about week five, which has been mentioned in battles over abortion (See [embryology](#) for more about blood formation).

Shame and Guilt. The story nicely illustrates the important difference between shame and guilt. Shame is a powerful destructive emotional state. Provoking shame is dangerous. In contrast to shame, guilt can be a pathway to redemption when empathy is present.

Read more about the [psychology of shame](#) and the [psychology of guilt](#).

Learn more about shame, guilt, and crime in Tangney et al. (2011).

See Elison et al. (2014) for a review of research on the link between shame and aggression. And see Kjaervik and Bushman (2021) regarding narcissism and aggression. Read more about [narcissistic personality disorder](#).

Olson (2012) presents a summary of related psychological research and links concepts of shame and revenge to biblical stories, including Cain and Abel.

Jealousy. Many writers and preachers speak of Cain's jealousy. I get it. Jealousy is human and it's easy to see this powerful emotion in the story, but I think the storyteller is concerned with other issues such as morality and how God deals with people.

Empathy. There isn't much empathy in the story, which is important to guilt and relationship repair. [Read more about empathy.](#)

Death Penalty. The threat of revenge killing served an evolutionary purpose. We know from the later commandments that the death penalty was a common consequence for a variety of wrongful acts. Also, given God's acts of destruction, we can reasonably be shocked that God spared Cain's life. What options were available? Clearly there were no prisons or maximum-security tents for these nomads. For more about revenge, forgiveness, and sibling rivalry, see Olsen (2012) and McCullough (2008).

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