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Below is an excerpt from the chapter “The First Murder”. In addition to the essay and activities found below, the full guide contains a discussion of the role or translation in understanding ancient texts as well as the origins of human violence.

THE FIRST MURDER

THE STORY OF CAIN AND ABEL: GENESIS 4

YHWH had regard for Hevel [Abel] and his gift,
for Kayin [Cain] and his gift he had no regard.
Kayin became exceedingly upset and his face fell.
YHWH said to Kayin:
Why are you so upset? Why has your face fallen?
[vs1,27s]Is it not thus:
If you intend good, bear-it-aloft,
but if you do not intend good,
at the entrance is sin, a crouching-demon,
toward you his lust--

but you can rule over him . . .
But then it was, when they were out in the field
that Kayin rose up against Hevel his brother
and he killed him.

(Genesis 4:4-8, The Five Books of
Moses, translated by Everett Fox)

Read the story of Cain and Abel in your Bible. As you do, consider the following questions:

- Is Cain alone responsible for Abel's death or must God, Adam and Eve, and even Abel take some of the blame?
- Does Cain's punishment fit his crime?
- What is the legacy of Cain? In what ways do we see that legacy in our world?
- What does this story tell us about violence--in the family, in America, in the world--as we near the twenty-first century?

THE LEGACY OF CAIN

by Reverend Christopher M. Leighton

As Reverend Christopher M. Leighton points out in his essay, leaving so many questions unanswered has allowed for a remarkable number of interpretations of this story over the centuries. Not surprisingly, some interpretations have been illuminative and some extremely perturbing; some have led to greater understanding among people and some to unimaginable horror. But despite so many centuries of reflection by so many people, questions still remain.

Two stories have haunted us and followed us from our beginning. We carry them along with us like invisible tails--the stories of original sin and the story of Cain and Abel . . . I don't understand them at all but I feel them. Liza gets angry with me. She says I should not try to understand them. She says why should we try to explain a verity.

--John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (1952)

In the story of the first murder, we are gripped by what is said--and perhaps more important by what is left unsaid. This is a narrative full of gaps, and readers over the centuries have proven unable to tolerate its empty spaces. In the process of plugging up the holes, a wild assortment of interpretations has been fashioned to serve a variety of purposes, some of them deeply disturbing.

The first story to unfold outside of the Garden presents us with the best and worst of human nature. Cain delivers an offering of some fruits of the soil to God, and Abel follows his brother's lead by sacrificing the firstborn of his flock. This expression of worship was not commanded, but reflected among other things a primal desire to reach beyond oneself in gratitude and wonder.

God responds enthusiastically to Abel's gift but ignores Cain's, thereby creating a puzzle that has occupied generations of commentators: Why does God play favorites? No single answer has ever filled nor will ever fill in the blank enduringly. Claus Westermann of the University of Heidelberg notes that blessing or its absence rests on the inscrutable will of the divine. The story suggests that God is One who both chooses and rejects, and discerning a satisfactory rationale for these decisions lies beyond our comprehension. But his favoritism engenders resentment, because both brothers are animated by the same desire to win God's favor. God's warning to Cain in Genesis 4:6-7 is to face his own motivations and resist the urge to seize what he believes he is still owed. The age-old question that continues to haunt us: Does the murder originate in the favoritism of a divine parent who sets the bloody rivalry in motion? Or, as Professor Jon D. Levenson writes, "does the violence stem from Cain's refusal to accept a world in which distributive justice is not the highest principle and not every inequity is an iniquity?"

The German novelist Thomas Mann offers a different reading. He imagines Cain lashing back at God with these words, "Yes, I have slain my brother, and it is all very sad. But who created me as I am, jealous to that extent that under provocation my whole bearing is changed and I no longer know what I am doing? Art not Thou a jealous God, and hast Thou not created me after Thy image? Who put in me the evil impulse to the deed which I undeniably committed? Thou sayest that Thou alone bearest the whole world and wilt not bear our sins?"

The words of a disingenuous scoundrel? Or the legitimate defense of a man unjustly treated? While the question of culpability looms over the story, the consequences of the murder echo resoundingly through the corridors of human history. Nowhere are the reverberations--and the enduring gravity of the offense--more powerfully expressed than in *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (Chapter 31): "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me (Genesis 4:10): though he shed the blood of one, it is said damim ('bloods') in the plural. Which teaches that the blood of Abel's children and children's children and all his descendants to the end of all generations destined to come forth from him--all of them stood crying out before the Holy One, blessed be He." The story therefore reminds us that "he who sustains one soul is accounted by Scripture as though he had sustained a whole world, and he who destroys one soul is accounted by Scripture as though he had destroyed a whole world."

The terrifying irony of the story resides in the fact that it is in the religious pursuit that the brothers become locked in a violent rivalry that produces winners and losers, perpetrators and victims, but not the harmony and equity that the reader yearns for. The elevation of the younger son leads to the humiliation of the elder, and once established this pattern is played out in the stories of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and

Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and subsequently with those who follow faithfully in their footsteps--generations of Jews and Christians, Christians and Muslims, Muslims and Jews.

The story of Cain and Abel, like many biblical stories, has invited multiple readings, some problematic. At the conclusion of the fourth century, for example, in Book XII of Reply to Faustus, Augustine develops an allegorical reading in which Cain is identified with the Jews and Abel serves as a prefiguration of Christ: "Abel, the younger brother, is killed by the elder brother; Christ, the head of the younger people, is killed by the elder people the Jews." Augustine reasons that just as Cain feigned ignorance when questioned by God, so the Jews practice deceit in their refusal of Christ. Just as Abel's blood cries out for justice, so the Jews stand accused both for the death of Christ and their failure to heed the voice of God in their own sacred scriptures. "The Church admits and avows the Jewish people to be cursed," Augustine wrote. At the same time, he concludes that Cain is not punished with death, and the Jews should also live protected under the mark of Cain, albeit in a degraded condition, as witnesses to the Truth. According to this view, which remained axiomatic for the Church until our own time, the blot of Cain could be removed only by their conversion to Christianity.

Although the mark of Cain was originally bestowed as a sign of God's protective mercy, over the course of time its meaning was inverted and interpreted as a curse. In 1215, under the leadership of Innocent III, the Fourth Lateran Council promulgated legislation requiring Jews (and Saracens) to wear distinctive clothes or badges that would separate them from the Christian populace. The practice signaled restrictions that pushed Jews to the precarious edges of economic, political, and social life. The legal barriers imposed on medieval Jews in Christian Europe are a grim reminder that the Nuremberg Laws in Nazi Germany were not nearly as unprecedented as we usually imagine. The badge of Cain stitched simultaneously onto clothing and into canonical law in 1215, enshrined prejudices that remain with us to this day. But the seeds were sown long before in the teachings of the Church Fathers, most notably Augustine.

Although Jews and Christians subsequently demonized Cain, the biblical account itself treats him much more kindly. God does after all set him apart to protect him. And if he is ejected from one world--the agricultural--he is also credited with the creation of another--the urban. Perhaps to compensate for the loss of one home, he fashions a new foundation of culture. He and his offspring are said to lay the foundations of our civilization--cities, music, and the technological developments of animal husbandry and metallurgy.

The legacy of Cain is very much with us in both the impulse to destroy and the impulse to create. The story of Cain and Abel prompts us to ponder the tangled relation not only of the brothers, but of the inner ambivalences and ambiguities that define us. We may never be able to explain a verity so elemental, but we do well to ask ourselves what we can make of this double-edged story, and perhaps more important, what can this story make of us?

Reverend Christopher M. Leighton is the executive director of the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore and he served as coeditor of this volume.

RAISING CAIN: A CASE HISTORY OF THE FIRST FAMILY by Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman

If you thought that dysfunctional families were a product of life in the twentieth century, read Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman's case history of the first family and think again.

Recent archaeological discoveries have revealed a "family workup" done by one of the ministering angels about twenty years after Creation. It is translated here from the original.

This is a family of four: mother, father, and two sons, fairly close in age. They came in because the sons have been quarreling a great deal, and both mother and father appear quite helpless to do anything about

this. Most of the focus is on the older brother, who broods a lot, is extremely sullen, and is very jealous of his far more successful younger brother.

The younger brother is not aware of his advantage and thus never tries to hide his success, his easygoing manner, or the rewards of his prosperity. The older seems totally unable to understand why fortune does not smile alike on him.

It cannot be said that the parents, both of whom are only children by the way, show any significant favoritism. Yet I am quite sure it is something in their own style of life that is contributing to the very problem they want to solve.

At the beginning of their marriage, both husband and wife seemed to have lived in a very blissful state, naive, it appears, about what was happening all around them. Something, we're not sure what, changed that, and things have never been the same since. The husband growls continuously about his lot and why life has to be so difficult, whereas the wife never fails to remind him of how much pain she went through to bear him sons.

But it is more than their discontent that seems to be seeping down, particularly to their elder son. More pernicious still may be their attitude toward their discontent.

Neither husband nor wife seems capable of accepting responsibility for their own destiny. Both are always claiming that their lives would be far different were it not for how the other behaved. The man tends to blame his wife, and the wife tends to blame the environment . . . Neither seems capable of taking responsibility for personal desires, loves, or hates. Each sees the other as causing his or her own pain. Since neither talks much about their origins (they both seem to be cut off from their past), it is difficult to know how their own childhoods contributed to such irresponsibility, though there is a strong suspicion here that while they were growing up they had everything handed to them on a silver platter. Indeed, each seems to have led a youth totally absent of significant challenge . . .

There seems to be no strength in this family at all, by which I mean the capacity of some member to say, I am me, this is where I stand. I end here and you begin there, etc.

It may be this constant expectation that the other should be his keeper that prevents each from taking responsibility for himself. And as long as this attitude persists in the parents, we can hardly expect the boys to act more pleasantly toward each other, still less at times to be watchful over the other. This situation will certainly leave a "mark" on one of them.

In a family like this, with no one able to tolerate his own solitariness, or, for that matter, anyone else's, I fear the weakness in the children will never be corrected. Actually, my fantasies are worse. For, if the current inability each parent manifests to deal with his or her own pain continues, I fear that Cain's view of life will never truly focus on himself and, perceiving the source of all his problems in his brother, he may one day up and kill him.

Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman has been teaching and practicing family therapy for over three decades. He is the author of *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* and *Friedman's Fables*, from which "Raising Cain" has been excerpted.

ACTIVITIES FOR GROUPS AND FAMILIES

IMAGINING: CAIN ON TRIAL

Organize your group to conduct a trial of Cain. Assign the roles of prosecution and defense attorneys, judge, and jurors. Also assign the roles of Cain, Adam, and Eve. Finally, assign the role of God's representative or attorney. The remaining members of the group can be on call as character and expert witnesses. Have each side spend a few minutes constructing its case. First, decide what you think Cain is guilty of: As prosecutor, what will you charge him with? As counsel to the defense, will you plead him guilty, not guilty, or guilty with mitigating circumstances? Second, reconstruct the crime. What actually happened at the crime scene? What words did the brothers speak to each other right before the act? What was the murder weapon? Third, consider possible defenses that might be raised. Was the killing

premeditated? Was it possible for Cain to appreciate the consequences of his actions? (Remember: There had been no death before this one.) Did Cain know that what he did would be considered a crime? (Remember: There were no laws.) Is Cain the only one responsible for what happened? Who else shares responsibility for the act? (Consider: Adam and Eve, God, Abel himself.) What was Cain's psychological state at the time of the act? Finally, discuss sentencing. What punishment, if any, would fit this crime?

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