

**WHEN THE EARTH RECEIVES THE BLOOD OF "A BROTHER":
READING THE STORY OF CAIN AND ABEL (GENESIS 4:1-10) IN
THE LIGHT OF ECO-SPIRITUALITY**

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Abstract

This article proposes that eco-spirituality is not just about the protection of the environment from denigration. It is far more than that as revealed in the story of the first brothers, Cain and Abel. This story of fratricide suggests that man is only a breath. To continue to exist, man must be accepted in the community of brothers. The subsistence of the human species lies in our recognition of the fact that we are one another's keepers. Hence, eco-spirituality is the response of the human species to the divine imperative to be one another's keeper so that together, the human species can care and protect the environment. Thus, this article argues that ecological spirituality is about how man's relationship with his fellow man can affect the environment. Creation reveals God's love and generosity; this divine generosity beckons on human beings to have a new attitude towards creation in general.

Keywords: Cain, Abel, Genesis, Eco-spirituality, Brotherhood, Environment

Introduction

From the biblical account, when God created the world, he created man and woman from the dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7) and charged them with a dual responsibility: be fruitful and care or be stewards over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28-30; 2:15). In obedience to this divine command, the first brothers were born, Cain and Abel. Their occupation highlights their response to the second part of the command. The Scripture says that Cain was a tiller of the soil while Abel his brother was a keeper of flocks. However, to be able to maintain stewardship over the earth, the two brothers have to accept each other and live in harmony or else they jeopardize the divine command. Stewardship over the earth is the primary responsibility of humanity because human beings are part of the ecosystem. This stewardship must be understood as custody of both human and earthly ecology. When human beings fail to be their

brother's keeper, as in the case of Cain against Abel, the earth reacts because there is a symbiotic relationship between humanity and the earth. This relationship is not merely biological or sociological, it is fundamentally spiritual. The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis chapter four underscores this relationship. Thus, this article promises to do a close reading of Genesis 4:1-10, paying attention to its theological contours so as to establish the eco-spirituality therein.

The birth of Cain and Abel (vv 1-2)

The fourth chapter of the book of Genesis opens with the conception and birth of Cain and "his brother" Abel. Usually in the Bible, a child's name can relate to circumstances of birth, physical qualities or disabilities and even future fate. In Gen 4:1 we read that "Adam *knew* his wife and she became pregnant." The Hebrew word "know" (*yādā*) often connotes personal or even intimate knowledge as here. When Eve gave birth to her first son, she called him "Cain," saying: *qaniti* iš et-yhwh (adonay). This etiology has been translated differently among scholars. The particle *et* is not the accusative/object sign, but the preposition "with" as many ancient versions attest. Some take the preposition in the sense of "with the help of ..." (Kissling, 2004, 217). However, I would rather translate the preposition *et* as "along with." That is, in the sense of "like, equally with, in common with" (Lev 26:39; Isa 45:9 and Jer 23:28 attest to this translation and it works well in the context). Thus, the tone is set from the beginning where Eve's words give us a hint to understanding the story. Even the sound play (paronomasia) between the name *qayin* and the verb *qaniti* is very suggestive. The sound of the verb *qaniti*, "I have gotten, obtained, created, made" (see Gen 14:19, Gen 14:22; Deut 32:6; Psa 139:13; Pro 8:22) reflects the sound of the name Cain in Hebrew *qayin* and gives meaning to it.

The word *qayin* apparently meant a kind of "spear" (2 Sam. 21:16), but that does not seem to interest the author of this *Book of the Beginnings*. He appears to have something else in mind which is revealed in his use of the preposition *et* that he attaches to "YHWH." Eve has "created a man equally/along with or like God." She has just been thrown out of the garden, and her words at her son's birth is intended to be exultant and arrogant rather than pious. "She will show God! Not for her the thought of him alone giving life (2:7). She can do it too. She is in fact setting an example of defiance which Cain himself is later to follow, when he takes away life, something that was also the sole prerogative of God (Job 1:21)" (Gibson, 2001, 143).

After Cain, a second son was born, his brother Abel who was simply identified as a shepherd (cf. 4:2). Thus, it is obvious that something is missing in the sequence. Unlike Cain's, Abel's name was not clarified; Eve did not give any etiological background to Abel's name, thus creating the impression that the name means nothing. But this is not the case. As Karolien Vermeulen rightly observes, "the omission of the name's explanation in the case of Abel can be a so-called *argumentum ex silentio* as understood by rabbinic exegesis" (Vermeulen, 2014, 31). This suggests that the silence is not only deliberate but meaningful. The gap in the narrative could be the narrator inviting God to speak in human silence. God indeed spoke. In the name of Abel, He reminds humanity, and Eve in particular who wants to equate herself with God, that "man is only a breath." The name Abel is one of the everyday Hebrew words for "breath" (*hebel*), though not so much the "breath," but "vanity," or "vapour." It is a metaphor for something insubstantial, worthless, and quickly gone. It is Ecclesiastes' favourite word. We have it too in Job 7:16, "my days are a breath," and in Ps. 39:5, "Surely every man stands as a mere breath." There is no doubt that this name is in the story to underline the shortness and vanity of human life in general, and of Abel's own life in particular (Gibson, 143); and it is an invitation for humanity to live in relationship with one another for "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). God created an ecosystem of relationship and stewardship. When these are maintained, we have a balanced and well ordered world.

Complications in the Story of the Brothers (vv 3-7)

In Gen 4:3-7, we see a complication in the narrative that eventually leads to the distortion of the ecosystem. The occupation and the cultic offerings of the brothers give us a glimpse into their attitude and lifestyle. Abel was a shepherd and Cain a husbandman, and in due course each brought an offering appropriate to his vocation to set before the Lord, "Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel ... brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof." Despite the fact that the cultic act of the brothers were both described as "offerings", God looked upon Abel and his offerings with approval while that of Cain He disapproved (cf. Gen 4:4). It is difficult to understand the reason behind the divine disapproval of Cain at first glance, but one thing is almost certain: the offerings point to the attitudes of the two brothers. As most commentators believe, Cain may have been more perfunctory than his brother. It does not say that he brought the "first-fruits" of his crop, only the "fruit of the ground." In

retrospection, Proverbs 3:9 says "honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of all your produce;" and Nehemiah (in 10:36) echoed this agreement of the people of Israel regarding offerings that are meant for the Lord when he said: "We have agreed to bring each year to the house of the Lord, the first fruits of our fields and of our fruit trees of whatever kind." Thus, Cain reserved for himself that which was meant for God. But we were told that Abel did bring some first-born lambs. Exodus 13:12 explains that all male firstlings of animals belongs to the Lord. Thus, Abel gave God that which rightfully belongs to Him. And there is a special mention of the "fat portions," that is, the choicest part of the animal, which in one type of sacrifice in the temple (see Lev. 3:16) was reserved for God and burnt on the altar. The Epistle to the Hebrews (11:4) seems to agree with this when it speaks of Abel's offering to God as "a more acceptable sacrifice" (Gibson, 144). Even the text says that much, for God looks with favour, not just on the offering, but also on the one who offers. However, on Cain and his offering, He did not "look".

Cain was crushed by this and "his face fell" (cf. 4:5). The idiom means that, inner anger was reflected in Cain's facial expression. The fallen or downcast face expresses anger, dejection, or depression. Conversely, in Numbers chapter 6, the high priestly blessing speaks of the YHWH lifting up his face and giving peace. Cain's reaction shows a wrong attitude toward God. It is the creator's prerogative to decide what is acceptable in sacrifice and what is not acceptable. Human beings are not in competition with each other for a relationship with God. God's love for one does not diminish his love for another because he has enough space to accommodate everybody. Our only competition should be with the person we used to be (Kissling, 221).

The most interesting thing in this narrative is YHWH's interruption with a speech of warning (vv. 6–7). The specifics of the speech are uncertain, as one can see by comparing the translations. It consists of three questions: *Why...? why...? will you not?* and two if-clauses, *If you do well/if you do not do well* (Brueggemann, 1982, 57). The introduction of the conditional clause with an interrogative particle prods the answer from Cain, as if he should have known this. It is not a condemnation, but an encouragement to do what is right. The Hebrew text is difficult, because only one word occurs, נָסָא (*se'et*), which appears to be the infinitive construct from the verb "to lift up" (*nasa'*). The sentence literally reads: "If you do well, uplifting." On the surface it seems to be the opposite of the fallen face. The word *nasa'* can be used in the Bible

for forgiveness, but God is not condemning Cain yet, nor calling for a confession. He is simply telling him to do well (Allen - Oswalt, 2008, 58). Everything will be changed if he does well. God will show him favour, he will not be angry, and his face will reflect that. But more may be intended since the second half of the verse forms the contrast: "If you do not do well, sin is crouching...." Not doing well leads to sinful attack; doing well leads to victory and God's blessing. The Hebrew term translated as "crouching" (רָצַץ, *rovets*) is an active participle. Sin is portrayed with animal imagery here as a beast crouching and ready to pounce (a figure of speech known as zoomorphism). An Akkadian cognate refers to a type of demon; in this case perhaps one could translate, "sin is the demon at the door," "and toward you [is] its desire, but you must rule over it." As in Gen 3:16, the Hebrew noun translated as "desire" refers to an urge to control or dominate. Here, the desire is that which sin has for Cain, a desire to control for the sake of evil, but Cain must have mastery over it. The imperfect is understood as having an obligatory sense. Another option is to understand it as expressing potential ("you can have [or "are capable of having"] mastery over it."). It will be a struggle, but sin, in this case, uncontrolled anger, can be defeated.

What Cain Said (4:8)

Meanwhile, Cain did not control his anger; he allowed his anger to determine his action. In this scene, Cain and Abel are the only actors. The awfulness of the deed is accentuated by the stark brevity of the description. Whether by accident or design, the ancient masoretic text (MT) omits what Cain actually said to his brother (Wenham, 2002, 106); while some later ancient texts like Samaritan Pentateuch, LXX, Vulgate, and Syriac, tried to supply that which was supposedly missing in the MT: "Let's go out to the field." The question that is now raised is whether the readings of the later ancient texts reflects the original or is itself an artificial intrusion into the text. While almost all commentators accept the addition, if only for the sake of meaning, some still try to make sense of the text as it stands in MT. Scholars like Ephraim Speiser claim that "the original must have contained Cain's statement, but the text was accidentally omitted in MT" (Speiser, 1964, 30). However, I completely agree with Abraham Habermann. It is unlikely that the copyists omitted words which are so clear and so apparently necessary for the proper understanding of the text (Habermann, 1957, 30). Moreover, "and Cain spoke ..." is sufficient to explain the verse as it stands. Thus, it is possible that the elliptical text is original. The texts

reads קין אל־הבל אָמַר ("And Cain spoke to Abel his brother"). The correct understanding of the word ויאמר in this context is "and spoke." There are two instances other than Gen 4:8 in which אָמַר, followed by no direct quote, denotes 'spoke' (cf. 2 Sam 21:2 and 2 Chron 1:2). Thus, the gap in the text under review could be a narrative style with a huge theological import. The manuscripts which the MT reflects, left a space after ויאמר. The empty space indicates that "Cain spoke nothing to his brother." In other words, whatever was said were empty words, deceit and lies. The author uses this technique of aposiopesis, "a sudden silence" to create tension.

The break in interpersonal relationship manifests itself, first and foremost, in the moment the other person is no longer seen or considered as an interlocutor worthy to be spoken to verbally and truthfully. In fact, to be in front of another also involves confronting the other at the level of words, opinions and sentiments expressed verbally. The incapacity of Cain to verbally express his inner rage and displeasure as a result of the divine preference of his brother shows itself on different levels. First, in Gen 4:5 Cain could not voice his state of mind. It was the narrator who told us that "Cain was very angry and his countenance fell." His state of mind was shown even in his countenance, but he could not express it verbally. Even when God admonished him in Gen 4:6-7: "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 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." Still, Cain did not take advantage of this divine admonishment to express his mind and say something to his brother (cf. Gen 4:8). This absence of word was substituted immediately by an act of violence. Cain reacted violently to his rejection, but not against the One who rejected him so much as against the innocent one who was accepted. Jealousy had raised its ugly green-eyed head and was about to prove that it is truly "cruel as the grave." It is possible for us to read this story of fratricide with some degree of indifference because we have become conditioned to violence, but we should bear in mind that sin had "entered" and was already "abounding" and would shortly "reign" (see Rom. 5:12-21) in the most gross way. The text by repeatedly using the word "brother" brings this into sharp focus. The man, first born on earth killed the second man born on earth—his own brother! (Briscoe, 1987, 63).

When the Earth receives the Blood of a Brother: Its Implication to Eco-Spirituality

Until now we have seen how brotherhood degenerates into fratricide, an action that has caused a disequilibrium in the ecosystem. Immediately Abel's blood touched the ground, there was a disorder in the ecosystem. The ground received the blood and caused the blood to speak (cf. Gen 4:10). Abel's spilled blood cries from the ground and is heard by God. "Your brother's blood is crying to me," says YHWH. The four Hebrew words used hardly require comment. Compressed into them is a whole theology whose principles inform much of the criminal and cultic law of Israel. Life is in the blood (Lev 17:11), so shed blood is the most polluting of all substances. Consequently, un-atoned-for murders pollute the land, making it unfit for the divine presence. Here, Abel's blood is pictured "crying" to God for vengeance; קָרָע "cry" is a desperate cry for help. The law, the prophets (Isa 19:20; cf. 5:7), and the psalms (34:18[17]; 107:6, 28) unite with narratives like this (cf. 2 Sam 23; 1 Kgs 21) to assert that God does hear his people's desperate cries for help; especially when the ecosystem is abused, in this case, through man's inhumanity to his fellow man (Wenham, 106).

"Where is your brother Abel?" was God's question to Cain in Gen. 4:9. The Mosaic law would require an affirmative and positive answer to this question. But Cain's response was: "Am I my brother's keeper?" This response would have been recognized as a particularly heinous violation of community solidarity, which was highly esteemed among the Hebrews. Community presupposed mutual responsibility, and this was the foundation of Israel's covenant commitment (e.g., Lev 19:18; Gal 5:14). Even death did not obviate family obligations to a deceased family member (e.g., Num 35:19, 21; Deut 25:5-10). Community responsibility took priority over individual preferences or rights. Kinship terms such as "brother" characterized those who entered into a mutual covenant agreement. "Brother" is used of fellow Israelites (e.g., Deut 1:16; 15:12) who are protected from exploitation of any kind (e.g., Lev 25:35-43; Deut 23:19); aliens who live within the community are treated as "native-born" (Lev 19:33-34). Human morality assumes an unstated covenant between persons that is grounded in the intrinsic *imago Dei*. (Mathews, 2001, 274). T. C. Vriezen expresses the implications of covenant community thus:

The Old Testament might be called the most humanly minded book of the ancient world... The relationship between man and man is dominated by the relationship between man and God ... ; as YHWH lives in a community with man, man is also linked with his fellow-man by *chesed* (faithfulness). Men linked together

by YHWH are brothers. Israel is a community of brothers.... Within this community men must help each other as much as lies in their power.... The background of the words 'faithfulness,' 'righteousness' and 'justice,' without which the Israelite community cannot exist, is the idea of the Covenant" (Vriezen, 1970, 388).

Cain abrogates this sacred obligation of kinship loyalty by the appalling crime of fratricide; a crime that caused the blood of his brother to cry from the ground. The source of the disquieting cry is the "ground" that is cursed because of Adam's sin (3:17) and is now polluted by the spilling of innocent blood. Later, Israel was forewarned that murder defiled its land, and for such crimes there was no exoneration for the nation except through retribution against the malefactor (e.g., Num 35:33; cf. Gen 9:5). Collective guilt required just and prompt action by the community against the culprit.

Abel's life turns out to be just a vapor because of Cain's cynical violence. If his sacrifice is not acceptable to the LORD, no one's sacrifice will be! Such violence stains the land and causes it not to yield to man (cf. Lev 26:20). Just as Cain is to be banished from the land for such violence, so also Israel is warned. Should they perpetuate such violence, they too will be vomited out, just like the Canaanites (Lev 18:25-28). The canonical audience, who has experienced this firsthand in the exile, knows the truth of this. Chosen people or not, a society which lives by violence will be ground into the dust of history (Kissling, 224.).

Thus, eco-spirituality is not only concerned with the denigration of the environment; it is also about how man's relationship with his fellow man can affect the environment. There is a close affinity between the humankind and the earth, an affinity that is at the same time transcendental. In the second account of creation (cf. Gen 2:5-7) after God had created the world, he fashioned man from the dust of the earth and breathed His spirit into man. Thus, man is both a natural being and a spiritual being. The line literally reads "And YHWH God formed the man, soil, from the ground." "Soil" is an adverbial accusative, identifying the material from which the man was made. Human life is described here as consisting of a body (made from soil from the ground) and breath (given by God). Man's utter "creatureliness" is even more starkly present in the Hebrew of Gen 2:7 than it is in English. For the Hebrew word for "humankind" is *adam* and the Hebrew word for "ground" or the dust of the earth is *adamah*. This underlines, not only the etymological connection of the two, but also emphasizes their

theological affinity with each other. Because man is naturally *adamah*, and supernaturally a living being, any act that dehumanizes him and squeezes life out of him by another, evokes a reaction that cries out for vengeance from the *adamah* (ground/dust) to the creator. This is because of the sacramental nature of creation. Nature, generally, both animate and inanimate have God's imprint in them. Thus, when Francis of Assisi identifies God in nature, he was not being pantheistic. He was stating the obvious, namely that nature is sacramental because it tells people about God. This explains why Pope Francis, in his Encyclical: *Laudato Si* encourages us to work together for the good of the ecosystem:

The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still can work together in building our common home (2015, No. 12).

Human beings working together towards protecting our common home, calls for human solidarity and a culture of love and acceptance in the human community. For if we refuse to accept one another, any effort towards protecting the environment becomes simply a hypocrisy; for the earth is our common home and not the home of one as against the "other." The relationship between nature and spirituality has a transcendental and ontological basis since everything belongs to God. Hence, humanity will have to give account on how the gift of creation is received and treated; and this includes the gift of one another. The questions God asked Cain are the same questions he asks us every day, even though *ex silentio*, in relation to the ecosystem: "Where is your brother/sister?" "What have you done *to the environment*?" Therefore, eco-spirituality is not only about protecting the environment; it is an attitude towards creation in general, a way of life informed and influenced by our religious values. These values are founded on ontological truths such as: Creation belongs to God (cf. Psalm 24:1); human life is sacred (cf. Ex 20:13; 27:7; Psalm 139:13-14; 1 Cor 3:16-17); love one another (cf. John 15:12; Mark 12:31). Patriarch Bartholomew I captures this complete sense of eco-spirituality in his teaching on the Sacrament of the Eucharist. In his words:

We care for the plants, and for the animals, for the trees and the rivers, for the mountains and the seas, for all human beings and the whole natural environment ... creation on the one hand, and

humanity on the other hand, the one that encompasses and the one that is encompassed, cooperate and correspond. As humanity offers creation in the act of priestly service to God, so also does creation offer itself in return as a gift to humanity (2012, 97).

Creation reveals God's love and generosity, This divine generosity beckons on human beings to have a new attitude towards creation in general. For creation is groaning in pains as it awaits its liberation. And since God listens to the cry of the oppressed as evident in the story of Cain and Abel (cf. Gen 4:10), He will definitely hear the groaning of creation, calling for liberation. Human beings can be agents of this liberation as they relate with their fellow human beings and with the environment as a whole. Therefore, this sacramental approach to human ecology and the ecosystem in general point to the fact that creation is sanctified by various forms of grace. Which means that eco-spirituality draws humanity to the sacramental nature of creation by reminding all that God the Father of creation has left His imprints on the ecosystem, hence, it must be treated or approached with every sense of respect that it deserves (Duke 2020, 37).

Conclusion

Looking at the story of Genesis 4:1-10 from the point of view of Hebrew phenomenology, one realizes that all the times Abel appears in relationship to Cain, it appears as a construct: "his brother" or "your brother". Elizabeth Obara observes here that "in the appendage of "his brother" to Abel, his existence becomes an implicit request to be accepted as a brother" (Obara, 2013, 68). Thus, the story of Cain and Abel tells us that it is not enough for one to be born into the world, his/her continued existence depends on his/her acceptance in the community of brothers and sisters. Therefore, human beings by their very nature are "Abel." They are ephemeral like the morning dew that quickly disappears. Our subsistence as human species lies in our acceptance of one another; in our recognition of the fact that we are one another's keepers. We need to care for one another in order to collectively care for our common home, the earth. The story of the first brothers on earth reveals that it is God's design that human beings be their brother's keeper so that together they can fulfil their God given mandate to care for the earth. This is the divine pattern: human beings were created and charged with the responsibility to multiply and have stewardship over the earth. Multiplication or fruitfulness also implies the preservation of the human species. If we destroy one another, who then will care for the earth? Herein lies eco-spirituality: *adam's*

(humanity's) ability to care for its kind so that together, they can care for the earth; for divine pattern if violated, has severe consequences.

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