



The Crime of Cain

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Biblical tradition has preserved the story of the terrible act of Cain as the first crime ever recorded in human history. That suggests how important this event is. It comes out of nowhere, with no reference whatsoever to any other crime. It surprises and shocks; it is unexpected and difficult to understand. The text reports the incident in brief terms. For the first time a man kills, and it is his brother who is killed. Nothing is said about Cain's motive. Why did he kill? The question arises and the drama seems absurd.

One thing is sure, however. The context suggests clearly that the first crime of humankind was one of a religious nature. The crime of Cain belongs with all those crimes which marked history with their shameful stamp. Such crimes of religious intolerance were perpetrated precisely in the name of God. This crime is the first of its kind, and it anticipates all

of the others and may even explain their method.

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The interpretation of Cain's act as it is recounted in the biblical text (Genesis 4), explicitly through its words and implicitly through its intentional silences, is then important to help us understand the nature of the crime of religious intolerance it represents.



Cain and Abel bring their offerings to God

I. Through the Words

The text speaks right away. It tells us that Cain "was very angry, and his countenance fell" (Genesis 4:6). Indeed, he had just experienced the greatest disappointment and he could not hide his bitterness. God had welcomed Abel's offering, but He had turned Cain's down. This rejection was unbearable for Cain and this disappointment burned in his heart like a blatant injustice.



He was a farmer and as such he had strived to collect the most beautiful fruits of his orchard. Pleased with himself, he came to God with pride and presented Him with his best offering. But God did not even acknowledge his effort.

For the first time, perhaps, Cain is not appreciated. As the firstborn, he was accustomed to attention even from an early age and he grew up before his parents, first-time parents, who marveled at all his deeds. Even his name reflected the pride of his mother. As the first mother in history, Eve called him “I have acquired” or even “I have created.” All this ultimately affected his personality. He possessed everything and built his existence at the expense of Abel who had just as much right to be the brother. Therefore, Abel, whose name meant “vapor,” could withdraw and leave the limelight to the brother who was so sure of himself.

But now everything is turned upside down. Cain is rejected and Abel is honored. Cain is disturbed. He experiences his first failure before the very one he had always ignored. Abel did not exist for Cain. In the biblical text, only Cain speaks. Abel says nothing. Cain has never learned to listen. He knows only monologue. He has never risked dialogue; this is why he will ultimately kill. He cannot bear the idea of being wrong, especially before the one he has always despised—the other who does not exist. Cain thought that he was alone as the only priest of God. But suddenly reality strikes him: it is not him who has the truth. Furthermore, the truth is found in the hands of the other, the “vapor,” the “zero.” This explains the anger of Cain and his murder.

On the horizon of this event looms all the crimes of religious liberty. The Bible warns us: the prophets are always pursued and tracked down. Jeremiah, Uriah, Elijah: there is no exception. They hold the truth, and therefore they must be executed. It is because one sensed truth in Yeshua of Nazareth that the Ro-

mans with the complicity of some religious leaders killed him. As the ancient rabbis put it: “God is always on the side of the persecutor, even if the persecutor is right.” For if he is the persecutor, it is certainly because he has the truth. History has always testified to this.

The crime of Cain belongs with all those crimes which marked history with their shameful stamp. Such crimes of religious intolerance were perpetrated precisely in the name of God.

Religious intolerance does not derive from the profound conviction of one’s own truth, as some may argue in order to justify it; instead, it appears at the very moment when someone understands that he or she is no longer the only one who possesses it. Others may hold it, perhaps even the “other” we despise. It is because we *want* to be the only representative of truth in the marketplace, and not because we actually are one, that we persecute. Religious persecution is in fact the subtle evidence that the word of truth has been recognized in the other.

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II. Through the Silences
 Alongside the words which explain and in a way trivialize the drama, a close reading of our passage will also reveal silences which are too heavy and too abnormal to be unintentional and insignificant. There is one silence in particular which appears at the very moment when it was least expected, precisely when words were supposed to be heard: “Now Cain talked with Abel his brother” (Genesis 4:8). Yet nothing is said. We don’t have the content of Cain’s words to Abel. Then, right after this silence, the text goes on: “and it came to pass when they were in the field, that Cain rose against Abel his brother and killed him” (Genesis 4:8). It seems that this silence contained the source of the murder.

Indeed, silence appears in the middle of the dialogue between God and Cain. God has just called Cain to warn him or to instruct him. His words are challenging. They are made up of questions: “Why?” (v. 6). “Will you not?” (v. 7). They invite, requiring an answer. The indication of the forthcoming answer is given: “*wayyomer* Cain” (v. 8). In

the normal articulation of the dialogue, this “wayyomer” of Cain responds to the other “wayyomer” of God (v. 6) and prepares the reader to receive Cain’s response to God. Yet nothing happens. Cain does not answer God. Instead, he turns to Abel and kills him.

The mechanism of the act pertains to a psychoanalytic process. Cain has transferred his vertical relation into a horizontal relation. Instead of fulfilling his duty to answer God, Cain preferred to flee from his “religious” calling and transpose the vertical requirement on the horizontal level. Cain was supposed to respond to God, yet Cain spoke to Abel. Because he did not want, or was unable, to assume his responsibilities as someone called by God, Cain called Abel. And this move resulted in a crime.

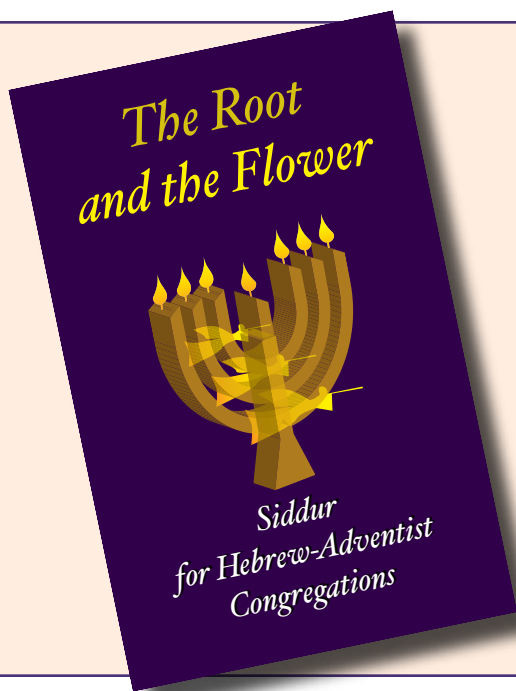
The biblical story reveals here the psychological mechanism which leads to the crusades, the wars of religion. We call others because we fail to respond to the call of God. Our own religious failure is transferred upon the other as compensation.

Religious intolerance, the contempt of the brother, germinates within the personal failure of the one who flees from his or her own religious responsibilities.

Intolerance consists in expecting from the other, or even imposing on him/her, the requirement that is supposed to be designed for us and that we failed to meet. Religious intolerance, the contempt of the brother, germinates within the personal failure of the one who flees from his or her own religious responsibilities. It is often so with the fanatic person. He is generally someone who turns outward, even with aggressiveness, in order to avoid becoming aware of his own personal problem, of his emptiness and his failure. He looks at the speck in his brother’s eye, because he does not want to consider the plank in his own eye. Those zealous for God who like to call down the fire of heaven are suspect and even dangerous.

For, like Cain, they are deaf to God’s call and therefore like Cain they will kill.

The biblical story of the first human crime denounces what actually lies behind religious intolerance. Explicitly through the words, and implicitly through its suggestive silences, the text conveys the same solemn warning. Religious intolerance is nothing but the demonstrations of one’s own failure in matters of truth and faith.



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