

Cain and Abel: A Biblical Perspective on the Immigration Debate | BY ABIGAIL DOUKHAN

Listening to the current debate on immigration, I am rather surprised to see how many of my Christian counterparts seem completely fine with some of the more rigid stances on immigration, including the deportation of illegal immigrants and the suspicion shown towards immigrants aspiring to set foot on American soil. This stance on the part of Christians is surprising to me inasmuch as the Bible, on the contrary, seems to shed a positive light on not only the exiled, but on the very condition of exile! From the exilic calling of Abraham, the exile of the Hebrews from Egypt, to the Christian calling to be "strangers in the world," the Bible seems sympathetic to the condition of exile. Moreover, the Bible is replete with injunctions to love the stranger and to care for him. This is not only one of the central themes of the Hebrew Bible, but is also evident in Christ's behavior towards the marginalized and the despised of his time—the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the gentiles, women, etc. Contrary to the common sense of our contemporaries who see the exiled with suspicion and distrust, the Bible not only sheds a positive light on the condition of exile, but also instructs us to love the exiled.

The question is, however, as to why the Bible places such an important emphasis on the condition of exile, as well as on the need to welcome the exiled. Why is exile seen in such a positive light? And, more importantly, why does the Bible teach us to care for the exiled? How is this



an essential duty as a Christian? This essay proposes to address these questions from the perspective of a very short story narrated in the Hebrew Bible: the story of Cain and Abel. Now, the choice of this particular story will appear to some to be somewhat peculiar. Indeed, it seems difficult to see the connection between that particular story, which takes place between two brothers, and the situation we are in, of choosing whether or not we should welcome the exiled among us. What we forget though is that this story depicts far more than a mere squabble between brothers. It might be argued that the story of



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Cain and Abel has an almost archetypal value, inasmuch as it illuminates something about the human condition at large, and, more specifically, about the way that we relate to the other in our world; that is to say, the way that we relate to a potential intruder, to a potential exile. The story thus functions as a mirror to our present condition and can give us a deeper understanding as to how we are to relate to each other, as well as to the divine intent with regards to human relationships. It is my belief that the story of Cain and Abel holds a profound lesson with regards to the immigration debate, and it is now to this story that I would like to turn.

The story of Cain is an intriguing one, riddled with enigmatic allusions, twists and turns. Already, in the story of his birth we have a sense of his importance, of his centrality in the world. When Eve gives birth to Cain she exclaims: “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man” (Gen 4:1), whereas the birth of Abel is only mentioned in passing. Moreover, as his name and profession as a tiller of the soil indi-

cate, he is also profoundly grounded in the world, at home in it, and in full possession of it. The root for the name Cain, *qanah*, meaning “to acquire” alludes to this possessive and masterful stance of Cain. Thus, the central and masterful stance exercised by Cain later on is already inscribed in his very name. He is born under the sign of mastery, of acquisition. Cain’s destiny will be marked by the desire and ability to possess, to acquire, thereby ensuring the centrality and strength of his stance in the world. In other words, Cain’s central and possessive stance in the world is that of the hard-working success story that has carved out a place for itself in the world. It is the very epitome of the American dream. It is what all of us are aspiring to become.

Yet, it is Abel whom God chooses to acknowledge; it is his offering which God welcomes, whereas Cain’s offering goes largely ignored. Now this is interesting! It is as though the Biblical narrative seems to distrust Cain, and his central possessive stance on the world. Contrary to traditional Protestant ethics where

wealth and material success are seen as a sign of divine election, our Biblical narrative seems to find these lacking. Cain, in his comfortable stance in the world, is not seen favorably by God. He is missing something! The subjectivity at home in the universe, the hard-working home-owner, who has earned his bread with the sweat of his brow is not seen as a success story in our Biblical narrative. To own a patch of land is not enough and does not point to divine favor. To the contrary, the self-sufficient land-owner represented here by Cain is seen with incredible distrust. In fact, he is largely ignored by the divine gaze, which prefers to consider his brother Abel. But what does the latter have that the former doesn't? Precisely this: he has nothing. Abel, whose name means "vapor" or "breath," is a migrant on the earth. He is a shepherd, which Biblically speaking means that he has no claim on the land. He wanders on a land that does not belong to him. He is in perpetual exile, on borrowed territory, dependent on land-owners for his living. In other words, Abel is strangely close to the present-day immigrant. And it is to him that God turns his gaze. As though it were precisely his condition of exile which God finds attractive.

Why is that? Why is exile more pleasing to God than the sedentary condition? Why is God so seemingly unjust to the home-owner, at home in the universe, in privileging his exiled, immigrant brother? Our text does not give us any clear reasons as to why God chooses to ignore Cain. But what we know for sure is that this act of disrespect on the part of God profoundly alters Cain's stance in the world. Indeed, the text says that Cain's face "fell." This is significant when one realizes that the face constitutes more than a mere part of the body, but rather, symbolizes the self's dignity and personhood. God's actions have the result of destroying in Cain what constituted his dignity, his manhood and humanity. It is his own deposition, his own death that Cain sees in Abel's individuation by God. Likewise, we also, like Cain, feel a certain discomfort at the irruption of an other, a

stranger, in our homogenous, "safe" and familiar neighborhoods! The other, the stranger, the immigrant, like Abel unto Cain, is indeed a threat to our comfortable stance in the world, to our hard-earned place in the sun! To share the world with this good-for-nothing intruder does not seem to be in our job-description as humans, let alone as Christians. This is not, however, the take of the Biblical story where God seems to despise Cain over Abel. The question of course is why! Is there a deeper intention behind God's seemingly unjust actions?

One wonders if there is not perhaps meaning to be drawn from God's actions towards Cain. Perhaps there is a pedagogical intention behind this pain inflicted by God upon Cain. But we must go back to what constitutes Cain's problem. Indeed, the sacrifice of Cain does not contain the key, in my view, to Cain's sin. It is the passages prior to the event of the sacrifice which give indication to Cain's problem. Cain's problem is not so much in his intentions, or in his actions, as in his general stance in the world: a central stance which, as such, remains essentially oblivious to an other. Cain's problem lies then not so much in his performing the wrong rite, or in not being attuned to the spiritual realm, as in his lack of a concept of otherness. It is not that Cain is not a good person, or even a good "Christian." Certainly, he is to be admired as a hard-working individual, who has earned his place in the sun. He is also, to be sure, an engaged believer since he is the one who comes up with the idea of sacrificing to God. But Cain's problem is not so much a spiritual one, as it is an ethical one. And, inasmuch as he has no concept of ethics, he likewise has a poor concept of transcendence and of the spiritual realm. Indeed, to lack a concept of the other, to lack sensitivity to the other is ultimately to lack interest in God as the Great Other. The God of Cain is a God to his measure, someone he thinks he can impress or manipulate. As long as Cain does not see Abel, one might argue that he doesn't really see God. This is evident incidentally in the way that he ultimately totally misses the mark in his sacri-

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This is where God's way with Cain becomes interesting; What better way to open Cain up to the dimension of the other than through the experience of suffering or pain? Indeed, inasmuch as pain constitutes the disturbance of a self's complacent and comfortable stance in the world, it has an ethical significance. In respecting Abel and not Cain, God allows for Abel to rise up, for the first time, as a person in the realm of Cain. For the first time, Cain takes notice of his brother; for the first time, he sees him and notices his presence in the world. For the first time, Cain realizes that he is not alone in the world, that he is not the center of the world! God is then not so much trying to annihilate Cain as to release him from the prison of his

ego. God is not so much trying to destroy Cain's world, as to broaden it to include the dimension of the other, to make it into a shared world. It is not then the destruction of Cain that is aimed at by God's pedagogy of pain, but his elevation to true selfhood. What makes for the self's true dignity is not material success, hard work, or even religiosity, but a certain sensibility to otherness. The elevated self is not the religious self or the successful self but the relational self. True selfhood is thus not that of a central, hard-working self, who has carved for itself a place in the world, but rather that of a sensitive, vulnerable self which has awakened to the dimension of the other. The pain that Cain is experiencing as the end of him is in fact the opening up of the possibility of otherness. Such then is the pedagogy of



pain: to open up the self to a dimension other than itself, beyond itself, otherwise than being and as such, to allow for the genuine self-transcendence necessary to true worship.

The story of Cain and Abel is then the best illustration of the higher calling contained within the encounter with the exiles and immigrants among us. The pain of such an encounter, to which we react by promoting the expulsion of the exile out of our lives, holds then a deeper ethical meaning. It signifies towards an experience, an encounter with otherness, and as such, with transcendence. The encounter with the exile constitutes in fact the first genuine encounter with otherness; it bears witness to the dimensions of transcendence and otherness within the world. For the first time, the previously self-enclosed self is awakening to a human other, and is developing sensitivity to the plight of the human other, and of humanity at large. For the first time, the self is capable of sensing the presence and the plight of another. Affectivity and sensibility to otherness are thus awakened and heightened in the self by the trauma and suffering associated with the encounter with the exiled. And as such, spiritual perceptions are heightened! Having shown ourselves capable of welcoming a human other *as* other, we are now ready to engage with a God who is himself radically other, ever disturbing, ever challenging the ego's plans and projects for itself! The temptation of idolatry—of worshipping a God in the image of the self's delusions and fantasies—can only be overcome like this. The ability to welcome a stranger in his difference, in his disturbance, shows a deeper ability to overcome idolatry in the spiritual realm—that is to say, a readiness to be disturbed, to be overwhelmed, to be taught, by a God who is himself the ultimate immigrant, and stranger in the world.

The temptation when faced with an exile or an immigrant is always rejection and expulsion. Indeed, such an other poses an immediate threat to a central self at home in the world. The immigrant poses a threat to all that the self has built, to all that is mine! And as such, the first reaction

is to do away with the exile, with this intruding stranger! The Biblical worldview however opens up a wholly new perspective on this problem. It opens up the possibility of the difficult and painful encounter with a stranger, with one who threatens our comfort zone, but it does so with a promise: the promise of a broadening of the self to an other, of a humanizing of the self, of it acquiring a higher mode of being, a calling beyond mere material success, beyond superficial religiosity towards a higher spiritual calling—to encounter the true God, the one who disturbs our comfort zone, the one who broadens our horizons, and the one who is hiding in the face of the exiled among us, waiting for us to awaken to our higher calling—that of loving God in the face of the other. For is it not God himself that we are in fact welcoming through our care and love for the stranger—this icon of God in the world, exiled and alienated like him, unloved and forgotten like him? Have we forgotten that God is sometimes to be found in the face of the vulnerable among us and that by welcoming the latter it is God himself that we are indeed welcoming? Have we forgotten the profound teaching of Jesus about caring for the strangers among us, even those who don't deserve it, even those who are illegal, and those who disrupt the "peace"? "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:35–40). ■

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