"Listen! Your Brother's Blood Cries Out to Me from the Ground." Understanding Genesis 4:10b

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This paper argues that the key to understanding better the story of Cain's Murder of Abel is by exegetically analyzing Gen. 4:10b "Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." Employing literary and historical-critical criticisms, this study will conclude that there are underlying powerful concepts that are present in the episode, namely: a "shouting-silence" motif, the sacredness of the kin's blood, and a theme of the land.

Introduction

Immediately after the first parents' expulsion from Eden on account of their sin, the next chapter (Gen 4) begins again with another episode of God's confrontation on man's sin—this time, on Cain for killing his brother Abel. Just like Adam and Eve who washed their culpability by putting blame on another, Cain made some excuses when asked where was his brother (v.9). However, the difference here is that there was a prima facie evidence to the crime. There was a firsthand witness, i.e., the blood of Abel crying to God from the ground for justice (v.10b). With this, Cain was caught red-handed and had to acknowledge the fratricide he did.

The progression of events in Genesis becomes vaguer here. From a "talking serpent" in Gen 3, we now have a "crying blood." Peculiar too are the circumstances around it: a) sacrificial offerings are already practiced (vv.4-5), b) herding was simultaneously co-existent with agriculture (v.2), and c) groups of people from faraway land were in existence apart from Adam's household (v.14).

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The narrative background hence gives us a picture that this account is unlike the mythical Eden Story, but is more of an allegorized story based on an advanced civilization. There are several given concepts behind the text that are seemingly comprehensible already to its readers.

The aim of this study is to try to re-trace this pre-setting surrounding the story of Cain's Murder of Abel in order to understand it better. It will be realized by carefully analyzing the phrase uttered by Yahweh in Gen. 4:10b *"Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground"* vis-a-vis the Ancient Near East civilization and other related biblical texts, before attempting to view exegetically its overall narrative meaning within the first part of Gen 4. In so doing, the following outline will be observed:

1. Gen. 4:10b in the First Murder Account
2. The "Shouting" Motif of the Text
3. Bloodguilt in the Semitic and Hebraic World
4. The Theme of the Land

Gen. 4:10b in the First Murder Account

Its Central Importance in the Narrative

Looking at Chapter 4, one can notice the repetition of several words/verbs, as well as recurrent motifs. A. LaCocque analyzes the verbal structure of this chapter and arrives at the following outline:

A Genealogy: Adam knew his wife (1-2).
  B Cain and Abel: their entreaty of Yahweh (3-5).
    C Dialogue: Yahweh and Cain (6-7).
      [D Dialogue (aborted): Cain and Abel (8)].
    C' Dialogue: Yahweh and Cain (9-15).
  B' Cain: exits from the presence of Yahweh (16).
A' Genealogy: Adam knew his wife (17-26).[1]

[1] A. LaCocque, *Onslaught Against Innocence: Cain, Abel, and the Yahwist* (Oregon: 2008), 4. He actually summarizes the analysis made by U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis,* trans. I. Abraham (Jerusalem: 1961), vol. 1, 185-191.

It is conclusive from this concentric structure that the murder in v.8 (D) is the central focus of the chapter. However, since its dialogue part is missing, the two dialogues of God and Cain (C and C'), occurring before (vv.6-7) and after the crime (vv.9-15), are held then of prime importance. G.J. Wenham agrees that v.8 is the central theme. Nonetheless, he sees that the chapter's dialogical literary style is very important since it is sandwiched by the narrative sections. He discusses that there are noticeable change of actors and speakers within this account:

> v.2b-5 – Narrative: Cain and Abel are main actors, while God is passive.
> vv.6-7 – Dialogue: Yahweh questions Cain.
> v.8 – (Dialogue) Narrative: Cain and Abel alone.
> vv.9-14 – Dialogue: Yahweh and Cain.
> vv.15-16 – Narrative: Yahweh is active, while Cain is passive.[2]

Wenham sees that these changes (especially the activity and passivity of the contact of God with man) may mean more. Apart from the fact that Gen 4:2b-16 is structurally, thematically, and verbally parallel with Gen 2–3, it is more than a rerun of the fall for "there is development: sin is more firmly entrenched and humanity is further alienated with God."

When God confronted Cain, His confrontation of Adam in Gen 3 is immediately recalled when he transgressed by eating the forbidden food for want to be "god-like" (Gen 3:5). God's questioning of Cain likewise stems from the fact that Cain had transgressed too, not by disobeying, but by acting "god-like," whose usurpation of Abel's life can be seen as an act of "un-creation." The great rabbi Nachmanides reads Cain's thought as: "It is possible that his intention in killing Abel was that the world be built up from himself for he thought that his father would not have any more children.

[2] G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15,* WBC I (TX: 1987), 99.

He also feared that the main building up of the world might be from his brother, [which seemed likely since it was he] whose offering had been favorably accepted."[3]

With all of these arguments, the dialogue after the crime (which includes verse 10) becomes then an important segment of the narrative. It seems that all the previous verses of Gen 4 are geared toward this confrontation, after which, as can be seen in the succeeding events, the human beings continued to grow bolder in their plight to claim their independence from their Creator. Consequently, the Deluge in Gen 10 would be God's ultimate resort.

A Paradox with Silence

Verse 8 brings in a big grammatical problem as it introduces the encounter with *wayyoʾmęr*[4] ("and he said") without specifying the dialogue supposedly present thereafter. Various attempts were raised to understand this phenomenon:

a) wa*yyoʾmęr* is to be taken as "and he spoke/conversed" (cf. 2 Chr 32:24) or "mentioned" (cf. Gen 32:27)[5] or "he had words with him."[6]
b) scribal error by homoioteleuton: the scribal eye jumped from the first to the second *śādę̄*.[7]
c) wa*yyoʾmęr* (Hebrew root *ʾmr*) as a loanword: the Arabic word *ʾamarun* ("sign, token") may refer to the heap of

[3] C. B. Chavel, trans., *Ramban (Nachmanides) Commentary on the Torah: Genesis* (New York: 1971), 89.

[4] In this study, the transliteration of the Hebrew characters into the Roman alphabet is based on Pim Ritbroek's "Scholarly transliteration of biblical Hebrew" (July 9, 2015) as circulated by Brill's Publication; see: http://www.brill.com/downloads/author-guide/special_scripts_hebrew_transliteration_scholarly.pdf.

[5] J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis,* ICC (Edinburg: [2]1980), 108.

[6] N. Sarna, *Genesis,* The JPS Torah Commentary (New York and Jerusalem: 1989), 33.

[7] R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation* (New York: 2001), 26.

stones Cain allegedly placed in the desert; likewise in Akkadian, it means "to see" or "an appointed place, rendevouz."[8]

Several ancient versions, in their attempt to solve this problem, added words after *wayyo'mẹr*:[9]

a) Targum-Pseudo Jonathan: "Come, let us both go out into the field."
b) Septuagint: διέλθωμεν εἰς τὸ πεδίον : "Let us go out to the plain.
c) Peshitta: "Let us go into the open country."
d) Vulgate: *egrediamur foras* "Let us go out of the doors."
e) Samaritan Pentateuch (and Sam. Targum): "Let us go into the field."

What can only be said is that there is no consensus on this occurrence, especially on whether to understand this omission as the Masoretic Text's (MT) real intent or to put value on the testimony of other biblical versions. There are some commentators that support and give weight on the current MT text, interpreting the silence of the dialogue as the author's literary style of emphasizing a point. Among them are:

- G. Wittenberg (paraphrasing C. Westermann's thoughts) – "the author, by cutting down the descriptive elements of the story to the bare minimum of the murder, has succeeded in shifting the central focus unto the following scene. Yahweh confronts the murderer with a question which is very similar to the question he asked Adam in Genesis 3."[10]
- Wenham – "Though the external events climax in the murder, the narrator has portrayed the deed so tersely that he has succeeded in shifting the real weight of the action to [this] sentence: 'What have you done? Listen, your brother's blood is crying to me.'"[11]

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[8] Cassuto, *Genesis,* 215.

[9] Ibid.

[10] G. Wittenberg, "Alienation and 'Emancipation' from the Earth. The Earth Story in Genesis 4, In *The Earth Story in Genesis,* ed. N. Habel and S. Wurst, The Earth Bible II (2000), 108.

[11] Wenham, *Genesis,* 107

- B. Vawter – "It is as though the author is saying that what he tells is too frightful for words, that brother should slay brother, and that so soon after both had made their offerings to the same God."[12]

Following their line of argument, one can say that the biblical author might have downplayed, and did not elaborate much verse 8 in order to lessen the gruesome impact of the story to the readers and to focus more on the message at hand, i.e., the call for justice. The silence in this verse can also be interpreted as removing the centrality of the murder act in the episode in lieu of a more important revelation by God to unfold two verses after.

The unspoken words of Cain actually speak a lot for it captures the magnanimity of the moment, and serves as a significant prelude to the first killing that immediately follows. Supplying it with "Let's go out to the field" (or other wordings with a similar effect) would not create a similar narrative climactic build-up. Thus, with this ellipsis in the dialogue, the readers are left to picture with their own words the imagery of the bloody scene. Moving further in the re-creation of the event, R. Graves and R. Patai put words on the victim at the very moment of the crime: "Abel's last words were: 'My King, I demand justice!'"[13]

The "Shouting" Motif of the Text

A Replay of the Crying Event

Another syntactical problem is encountered behind the noun *qôl* ("voice") in Gen 4:10b. Most English translations (e.g., King James Version, Revised Standard Version, etc.) render it as in a grammatical construct form with the word next to it, *dᵉmê* ("the blood of"), and also as the subject of the verb *ṣoʿᵃqîm* ("crying"); thus, the phrase: "The voice of the blood of your brother is crying out…" This is understandable since it is more logical to have a

[12] B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (New York: 1977), 95.

[13] R. Graves and R. Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (London: 1964), 93.

"voice crying" than a "blood crying." However, *qôl* is in the singular form and its supposed verb, *ṣoʿᵃqîm,* is in the plural. Isn't it better to annex this verb with *dᵉmê* which is also in the plural? Or shall we rather support the claim of popular translations presupposing that textual errors might have occurred on this verse?
The more reasonable explanation is by taking *qôl* as a separate form of interjection: "Hark!" or "Listen!" Gesenius' Grammar (§146b) cites a similar case in other texts like Isa 13:4; 66:6; 52:8; Jer 10:22; and Song 2:8.[14] This gives us a better syntactical order, making *dᵉmê* as the rightful subject of the sentence and is the agent of the act of "crying."

Taking *qôl* as a separate independent exclamatory sentence highlights the interplay of the "shout and silence" motif in the text. Having two shouting verbs (*qôl* and *ṣoʿᵃqîm*), verse 10 creates an image of real noise to its readers.[15] This is paradoxical yet stylistically powerful, for just two verses prior (v.8), there was the silence in Cain's speech. The question is: does the motif mentioned hold ground here? To answer this, it is good to examine first the etymology of the names of the main characters: Cain and Abel. There are several opinions on the meaning of the name Cain in reference to its first appearance in Gen 4:1:

a) From the Hebrew root *qnh* meaning "to buy, to acquire" (cf. Gen 25:10; 33:19).
b) From the Hebrew root *qyn* meaning "lance" or "something worked in metal."
c) From the Arabic *qaynun* or Aramaic *qynʾh* meaning "smith" or "metalworker."[16]
d) A reference to the Kenite tribe, known to be smiths and pastoral nomads, since Cain is often regarded as "the

[14] E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (New York: 2006), 467.

[15] Note: In different ways, modern English translations of the Bible generally put an exclamation mark (!) on this verse, e.g., NRSV: "Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me!"; REV: "Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"; NAB: "Listen: Your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil!"; NJB: "Listen! Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground."

[16] Wenham, *Genesis,* 101.

representative of the nomad tribes of the desert, as viewedfrom the standpoint of settled and orderly civilization."[17]

e) From the Hebrew root *qnh* meaning "to produce, to create" which appears in Hebrew, Ugaritic, and Phoenician. Sarna expounds this position by claiming that Gen 4:1 pictures Eve as having a jubilant cry at the birth of Cain, in the same way as Adam had when he first saw the woman in Gen 2:23. In effect, she was saying: "I woman (*ʾiššâ*), was produced from man (*ʾîš*); now I, woman, have in turn produced man."[18]

U. Cassuto is also in the latter's line of thinking by interpreting "Eve's remark as a shout of triumph at putting herself on a par with Yahweh as creator: 'I have created a man equally with the Lord;'" R. D. Nelson also says that at the birth of Cain "Eve expresses the joy that was proverbial at the arrival of one's firstborn (Jer 20:15)."[19]

Abel's name, on the other hand, is not much discussed. It comes from the Hebrew *hębęl* meaning "breathe."[20] Its wide usage is often found in late and sapiential writings (i.e., Eccl 1:2; Psa 144:4; Jb 7:16, etc.) with the special nuance of "vanity,"[21] or to put it succinctly, "a passing air/vapor." In the pericope, unlike its elaborate treatment of Cain's name and his qualities, the name of Abel was never explained. Most commentators believe that this non-elaboration reflects best Abel's passing and abrupt transient role in the Bible—neither was he given a major scene nor a chance to speak. It is because his name "usually expresses in Hebrew the

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[17] Skinner, *Genesis,* 115.

[18] Sarna, *Genesis,* 32. Sarna has archaeological and historical sources to back this up; the word is contained in a "divine ephitet used in Gen. 14:19... [also] In Ugaritic, the goddess Asherat bears the description *qnyt ilm*, 'progenitress of the gods'" (Ibid.).

[19] R. D. Nelson, *From Eden to Babel: An Adventure in Bible Study* (MA: 2006), 76.

[20] L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament [HALOT]* (Leiden, Boston and Köln: 2001), 236-237. The word may also mean "warm breath, vapour… (transitory) breath, vanity… idols, things that do not really exist" (Ibid.).

[21] Wenham, *Genesis,* 101.

brevity of human life… whoever called the child's name *hębęl*, alluded unwittingly to the fate in store for him."[22]

Understanding Cain's birth in verse 1 as a shouting scene and Abel's advent in verse 2 as a brief passing event the text was quiet about (seemingly unimportant), it can be viewed here that there is the *shout-silence motif,* which would likewise be repeated in verses 8 and 10, respectively. Moving fast forward, this motif ends in Cain's vehement loud remark in verses 13-14 after learning the curse he would receive from God. G. von Rad sees this final dialogue with God as a strong "cry of horror:" "The *ʿāwōn* of which Cain speaks and which he thinks himself unable to bear is the *punishment* for sin. It is a cry of horror at the prospect of such a life of unrest and harassment without peace."[23]

Special Nuance of the Word צעק ṣʿq

The Hebrew root *ṣʿq* basically means "to shout, to cry," but in the Hebrew Bible, its usage is seen in various occasions and themes with particularized meanings. *HALOT* lists the nuances of the *qal* form of this verb:

a) "to shout, call out" (e.g., Gen 27:34: Exo 5:8).
b) "to shout [for help, for deliverance]" (e.g., Exo 8:8; Deut 26:7).
c) "a cry for assistance in a court of law, a term for 'hue-and-cry'" (e.g., Deut 22:24,27; Jb 19:7).[24]

J. Skinner adds another concept not emphasized by *HALOT*: "*ṣʿq* denotes strictly the cry for help, and specially for redress or vengeance (Exo 22:22,26; Judg 4:3; Psa 107:6,28 etc.)."[25] Among other details of its use are:

- a desperate cry of hungry people (Gen 41:55).
- an expectation of death (Exo 14:10).

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[22] Cassuto, *Genesis,* 202.

[23] G. Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary,* trans. J. Marks, OTL (London: [3]1972), 107.

[24] *HALOT,* 1042.

[25] Skinner, *Genesis,* 108.

- a cry amidst oppression by enemies (Judg 4:3).
- a scream for help by a woman being raped (Deut 22:24, 27).
- a plea to God by victims of injustice (Exo 22:22, 26).
- an assertion that God hears His people's desperate cries for help (Isa 19:20; 5:7; Psa 34:18; 107:6, 28).

It is unclear where to classify Gen 4:10b's *ṣʿq* among these meanings. Though *HALOT* mentions the given verse under its third meaning, i.e., "cry for assistance in a court of law," it could not be immediately taken as such for there were no judicial courts yet in the first chapters of the Genesis text. Nonetheless, what is clear from the various definitions is the fact that the one who does the crying is in real *dire need* of help with an utmost desire to be freed from the suffering he/she is experiencing (be it injustice, famine, attack of enemies, etc.).

Sarna, in understanding this word, analyzes it vis-à-vis its noun-form in Gen 18:20 which he translates as: "Then the Lord said, the outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave!"[26] Instead of using the generic word "cry" or "shout" to translate *ṣʿq,* he prefers the term "outrage" to capture the gravity and the height of emotion which the lands of Sodom and Gomorrah were experiencing because of their inhabitants' great sins. Even *HALOT*, in defining its noun-form, uses the term "scream" and other yelling terms filled with emotions:

a) "yelling, screaming from despair, need of unhappiness" (e.g., Exo 11:6; 1 Sam 4:14)
b) "yell, call for help, of the oppressed, addressed directly or indirectly to God or Yahweh" (E.g., Exo 3:7,9; Isa 5:7).[27]

What can then be supplied with the present definition of *ṣʿq* as appearing in Gen 4b is the deep human sentiment of "desperation, unhappiness, a begging plea" that is probably present when the blood of Abel cries out to the heavenly court for justice.

[26] Sarna, *Genesis,* 132; *ṣʿq* and *zʿq* are interchangeable and have the same meaning.

[27] *HALOT,* 1043.

Sarna better describes this very moment of crying as having a "pathos/stirring passion":

> … the anguished cry of the oppressed, the agonized plea of the victim for help in the face of some great injustice. In the Bible these terms are suffused with poignancy and pathos, with moral outrage and soul-stirring passion. God heeded the "outcry" of His people against the harsh slavery of Egypt in Exo. 3:7; His "anger blazes forth" when He hears the "outcry" of the ill-treated widow and orphan in Exo. 22:21-23; and to the prophet Isaiah, in 5:7, an "outcry" is the absolute negation of justice and righteousness... *ṣᵊʿakah* is especially used in connection with the suffering of the poor and the impoverished victims of avaricious exploitation.[28]

Though dwelling on the supernatural world and ancient rites, J. Morgenstern's observation on certain Semite superstitious practices captures best the concept of "pathos" in Abel's blood's cry:

> The natives of Palestine likewise believe that on the spot where the blood of a murdered man has been shed a ghost of spirit appears every night, which constantly calls out the last words or cry of the deceased... Even if its blood cannot be avenged, the soul of a murdered man cries constantly for decent burial, so that its restlessness and suffering may be allayed, at least in part.[29]

If this claim will be given value, it may be concluded that the "cry" in Gen 4:10b is not a mere "cry;" it is even more than a "desperate scream." It would probably be a horrific haunting and terrifying "groan/moan" among the ancient Semites, who with their animistic orientation, were still believing then the supernatural nature of a blood-ghost.

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[28] Sarna, *Genesis,* 132.

[29] J. Morgenstern, *Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions Among the Semites* (Cincinnati and Chicago), 142-143.

Bloodguilt in the Semitic and Hebraic World

Blood's Bond among Tribes

The phrase *dᵉmê ʾāḥîḵā* is translated as "the blood of your brother" since *dᵉmê* ("the blood of") here is in construct form with *ʾāḥîḵā* ("your brother"); suspiciously though, *dᵉmê* is in the plural instead of being in the singular.[30] Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar (§124n) associates its singular form to "blood as organic unity," while its plural form to the concept of "bloodshed in murder" or "bloodguiltiness."[31] This, however, does not give us a new information for we knew already of the murder act in Gen 4:8. Yet, it validates the reality of the guiltiness of Cain. Waltke–O'Connor's Hebrew Syntax (#7.4.1b) distinguishes the two noun forms clearer: "Generally human blood in its natural state in the body is called *dām* ["blood"]; after it has been spilled, the plural form is used."[32] Here, an important point is raised: *dᵉmê* refers in general to blood that was spilled (which may include accidents!) away from the living body—wherein prior it was called *dām*—regardless of the guiltiness of the man-slayer.

The usual commentary on Cain's flight from his father's household and away from other peoples is that he was guilty of murder. Though this point will not be contested, it is meritorious also to entertain a skeptical inquiry: what if Cain just acted out of self-defense? Shall he still merit a punishment? Biblical texts

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[30] Cassuto notes that in the Samaritan Pentateuch, it is in the singular form.

[31] Kautzsch, *Gesenius',* 400. It says: "The singular is always used when the blood is regarded as an organic unity, hence also of menstrual blood, and the blood of sacrifices (collected in the basin and then sprinkled), and in Num. 23:34 of the blood gushing from wounds. On the other hand, *dāmim* as a sort of plural of the result and at the same time of local extension, denotes *blood which is shed* when it appears as blood-stains (Is. 1:15) or as blood-marks (so evidently in Is. 9:4). But since blood-stains or blood-marks, as a rule, suggest *bloodshed* in murder… simply the sense of a bloody deed, and especially of *bloodguiltiness*, Exo. 22:1f., etc."

[32] B. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (IN: 1990), 120.

would support a "yes" answer. Among members of the same family/clan, both cases resulting to an individual's death (guilty or not) have a corresponding judgment to be effected to the accused:

a) *Pre-meditated, i.e., murder* – capital punishment by the nearest relative of the victim (Exo 21:12,14-16; Num 35:16-21; Deut 19:11-12; 2 Sam 14:6-7).
b) *Unintentional, i.e., homicide* – banishment from the land, or to a place of asylum (Exo 21:13, Num 35:6,11-15,22-28; Deut 19:3-6).

From their above-mentioned concepts of life, blood and tribe, it appears that all three are interconnected. Blood-revenge is a system they created to ensure that the sanctity of life and their brotherhood within the tribe is preserved, protected and promoted. S. Cook comments that:

> [T]he inviolable nature of the blood tie which makes kinsmen brothers, and the responsibility attached to the shedding of blood, lie at the very root of the almost ineradicable system of blood-revenge. If a man has killed one of his own group, he has committed an offence for which he cannot expect to obtain protection from the members of his tribe.[33]

The ancient tribal concept is that all its members are bound together by blood; each will be responsible for the life of another. With the death of Abel, Adam, being the logically assigned "avenger," had no choice but to kill his son Cain; if Cain were not guilty, he had also no choice but to leave the land anyway. In any case, Cain is doomed to be removed from the blood-pact and company of the household (or tribe). This has to be done for the benefit of the future members of the tribe.

Several Jewish commentators would understand the plural of *dām* to connote the idea of the other bloods of the tribe members (especially in the future), co-related with the blood of Abel. A. Dershowitz posits his readings of the rabbinic writings regarding this: "According to a midrash, God says to Cain, 'The voice of thy brother's blood... cries out..., and likewise the blood of all the

[33] S. Cook, *The Laws of Moses and the Code of Hammurabi* (London: 1903), 50.

pious who might have sprung from the loins of Abel.' The talmudic principle 'He who kills a single human being, it is as if he has destroyed the entire world' grows directly out of the Cain and Abel narrative."[34]

W. R. Smith, in his studies of Semite religions, corroborates with this valuing of a kin's blood and life:

> But that circle [where man's life is sacred] again corresponds to the circle of kinship, for the practical test of kinship is that the whole kin is answerable for the life of each of its members. By the rules of early society, if I slay my kinsman, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, the act is murder, and is punished by expulsion from the kin; if my kinsman is slain by an outsider I and every other member of my kin are bound to avenge his death by killing the manslayer or some member of his kin. It is obvious that under such a system there can be inviolable fellowship except between men of the same blood.[35]

Mechanics of Blood-Revenge

Y. Feder, in his article "Mechanics of Retribution in Hittite, Mesopotamian, and Ancient Israelite Sources," describes that the Israelites' view of bloodshed can be traced from the Hittite treaties and Mesopotamian ritual texts. Here are some of his observations:

- Oaths possess an autonomous self-enforcement being sworn by both parties before the deities with self-curses attached on violators. Its basic ergative formula appears as: "May the oath deities… destroy (or devour, or seize)…"
- The punishment would come from the gods. Sickness and malignant entity in body (demonic attack) are the commonest results.
- Blood is taken as a personalized evil (thus, the "crying blood" in Gen 4:10b) endangering ritual patrons and as an

[34] A. Dershowitz, *The Genesis of Justice: Ten Stories of Biblical Injustice that Led to the Ten Commandments and Modern Law* (New York: 2000), 55.

[35] W. R. Smith, *Religion of the Semites* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: 2002), 272.

autonomous threat to be removed ritually. Bloodguilt is a debt to be paid and is even passed on to people (as in the famine caused by the unredeemed blood of the Gibeonites in 2 Sam 21:1-9).

- A ceremonial covering of the blood with dirt is needed to appease the victim (as in Deut 21:1-9).
- The Israelites' uniqueness from their Semitic neighbors is its non-acceptance of monetary recompense for a blood spilled.
- Yahweh personally ensures that punishment shall be given to the guilty; here arises the automatic retribution concept among the Israelites (e.g., David on Joab's murder of Abner in 2 Sam 3:28-29: "his blood is on him").[36]

He concludes that the Israelites' concept of bloodguilt (and vengeance) is their response to mechanistic super-mundane threats. Curse is a negative blessing (*b^{e}rākâ*) and it works in an automatic process of cosmic justice.

With the offerings sacrificed by Cain and Abel (Gen 4:3-4), it could be supposed that they were already practicing religion/cult at that time, and were seeking God's blessing on them. Cain interprets that God was not pleased with his sacrifice which had caused him a severe distress (v.5). We do not know what happened, but it could be that a "negative blessing" had occurred on him. By this time, the first inhabitants of the world were already recognizing the possibilities of receiving either favorable or unfavorable response from a divine power.

According to A. Feyerick, the first recorded verifiable existence of set of laws (and thus, the presence of a judicial system) is during the reign of Ur-Nammu (2112-2095 BCE), the founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur, with his code "By the Might of Nanna, the moon god, lord of Ur." The Code of Hammurabi followed in the 18th century,[37] while the Mosaic Law would arrive several centuries later. The first city in Ur, Eridu (5th millennium BCE), is often regarded as founded by Cain himself (cf. Gen 4:17). Ar-

[36] Y. Feder, "The Mechanics of Retribution in Hittite, Mesopotamian, and Ancient Israelite Sources," *JANER 10* (2010): 110-157.

[37] A. Feyerick, *Genesis: World of Myths and Patriarchs* (New York and London: 1996), 42.

chaeological digs reveal the presence of series of temples there dedicated to Enki which were said to have been used between the 5th to the 3rd millennium.[38]

If merit will be given to the mentioned dates and discoveries, the story of Cain and Abel would refer to a narrative circa 5th millennium, when no fixed judicial system existed, but cults to gods were being practiced. Having these facts, we are made to believe that the bloodguilt concept in Gen 4 was being implemented due to the absence of a judicial court to hear Abel's case! In hindsight, we might as well consider *HALOT*'s definition of *ṣ'q* as a "cry for assistance in a court of law,"[39] provided that it refers to a judicial court in heaven with God as the main arbiter.

Even the Law of Hammurabi with its famous *lex talionis* and an advanced judicial system values the importance and purgative power of an oath. LH 206-207 reads as (pertinent words were underlined): "If an *awîlum* [probably "servant" or "commoner"] strikes another *awîlum* in a fight and injures him, that *awîlum* shall swear, 'I did not strike him with intent,' and he shall pay the physician. If he dies from his being struck, he shall also swear. If an *awîlum,* he shall weigh out one-half mina (=30 shekels) of silver."[40] Swearing (or making an "oath") at that time seems to possess still a mechanical effect of its own that would appease a victim's soul, even lessening a supposed death penalty or expulsion to a mere payment to the bereaved family.

D. P. Wright says that this section in the Law of Hammurabi paved the way for the Covenant Code to include a special ritual of cleansing in its altar law as stipulated in Deut 19:13-14. The concept of the altar of asylum may be understood as divine protection on the accused from being prematurely executed.[41] Succinctly speaking, we can say that a divine force was still in effect that time side-by-side existing human judicial laws.

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[38] Ibid., 34.

[39] *HALOT,* 1042.

[40] D. P. Wright, Inventing *God's Law: How the Covenant Code of the Bible Used and Revised the Laws of Hammurabi* (Oxford: 2009), 155.

[41] Ibid., 165.

Theme of the Land

The Murder in the "Field" and Cry from the "Ground"

The murder occurs *baśśāḏę̄* ("in the field"). *HALOT* reads this word in Gen 4:8 to mean "pasture, open fields, land". However, it carries other meanings in its appearance in the Bible, such as: "pasture, territory of a tribe, or of a people," "pasturage, territory of a city," and "field, arable land."[42] The noun *śāḏę̄* ("field") is indeed very rich in the text, for it may not only refer to the site of the crime itself, but may even include both their places of work—Cain's arable land and Abel's pasturage—and their family's dwelling territory in general.

Von Rad sees the significant interplay between the "crime site" and "Cain's workplace" in the word *baśśāḏę̄*:

> As in the story of Paradise, so here there is throughout the story the ʾᵃdāmā-motif, the thought of the earth as the most basic foundation of all human existence. Cain had plowed the soil, offered the fruit of the soil, caused the soil to drink a brother's blood; but the blood complained against him from the soil, and therefore the soil denies him its fruit, and he is banned from the soil (Gunkel). But this theme is completely sacred, for the story of Cain understands cultivated land as the realm of cult and blessing close to God.

The Bible attests that the spilling of blood on the ground pollutes it; coming even more from the shedding of an innocent blood, it definitely affects the fertility of the land.[43] J. Skinner moves away from the understanding of *baśśāḏę̄* as the "earth's surface"; he is more on the idea of a "cultivated ground" connecting it with the curse on Cain in Gen 4:11 ("And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand."). He says that "the idea

[42] *HALOT,* 1307-1308.

[43] J. Rogerson, *Genesis 1-11,* Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: 1991), 67.

cannot be that the earth is a monster greedy of blood; it seems rather akin to the primitive superstition of a physical infection or poisoning of the soil, and through it of the murderer, by the shed blood. The ordinary OT conception is that the blood remains uncovered."[44]

LaCocque explains this further by relating it with Num 35:33: "Blood, the sacred substance of life, renders taboo the land on which it falls until expiation is made for it."[45] The word *taboo* is presently secularized to mean many things. The Encyclopedia of Religion presents the original rationale of its usage after it was adopted from the Polynesian word "tapu":

> Taboo is a social prohibition or restriction sanctioned by suprasocietal (innate) means or a socially sanctioned injunction alleged to have the force of such a prohibition. Taboo stands at the intersection of human affairs and the forces of the larger universe. Generally, it is determined by divine, or animistic mandates; but it may involve "punishment" by inherent circumstances… the realm of "tapu" amounts to a comprehensive system of religious mandate controlling individual and social life.[46]

LaCocque, when he says "rendering taboo," means that Cain's society itself was in unison (without any need of confirmation or judicial court hearings) that by the mere fact that Abel's blood touches the ground, the taboo governing it breaks. Influenced by the Canaanite religion, the Israelites might have a similar belief on death: "In their poems the Canaanites were accustomed to identify Môt, the god of death and the king of Sheol, with his realm, Sheol; and of one who went down to Sheol they used to say that he entered the mouth of Môt and descended into his gullet."[47] In the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat, 15th-14th centuries BCE, there was the goddess Anat who had the young Prince Aqhat slain in order to have his strong bow. The tale presents its effect: "...through his

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[44] Skinner, *Genesis,* 108.

[45] LaCocque, *Onslaught,* 96.

[46] R. Wagner, "Taboo," *ER XIII,* 8947.

[47] Cassuto, *Genesis,* 220.

death..., the fruits of summer are withered, the ear in its husk... Blasted are the buds."[48]

Graves and Patai, in their studies of Hebrew Myths, describe vividly what this swallowing of the blood brings: "Earth quakes when she drank Abel's blood refusing to accept his flesh. Earth spewed it and cried: 'I will receive no other body until the clay that was fashioned into Adam has been restored to me!'"[49] For this reason, fearing the continuous anger of the supernatural world (which could be earthquake, famine, or other worse phenomena), the ancient Semites practiced a special ritual of purging of the ground when instances like murder occur.

The ritual described in Deut 21:1-9 might have been based on existing purification rites of the Ancient Near East. A peculiarity in it is that the blood of the host being offered as expiation should not touch the ground. Depicted in some Chaldean cylinders are some scenes where animals are being sacrificed with a special club or mallet to make sure that no blood would fall on the ground. In Arabia, "captive kings were slain by bleeding them into a cup, and if one drop touched the ground it was thought that their death would be revenged [which would fall on the executor himself!]."[50]

One with ancient religions then is the basic Mosaic concept that life is in the blood (Lev 17:11) and that in remote cases, it may "pollute the holy land, making it unfit for the divine presence."[51] Having in mind the sacrificial tasks of Cain and Abel in seeking for God's presence/blessing, we can say that a similar effort is being sought for by Cain's family. In reclaiming God's presence back after Abel's blood was spilled on the ground, Adam needs to purge the soil lest punitive wrath from the heavens is unleashed.

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[48] Feyerick, *Genesis,* 67.

[49] Graves and Patai, *Hebrew Myths,* 93.

[50] Smith, *Religion,* 418.

[51] Wenham, *Genesis,* 107.

The Importance of the "Land" in the First Chapters of Genesis

Cain after his infamous deed was cursed in Gen 4:11. The Hebrew phrase *min-hāʾaḏāmâ* divides commentators on its possible meaning:

- Rashi on Targum Onqelos.: "more cursed than the land."
- Modern commentators: "away from the land."
- Cassuto: curse arises from the ground to convict Cain.
- Gunkel: Cain is banned from the land; since the land (i.e., underworld/Sheol) has swallowed the dead.

To understand this phrase, it is good to recall the curse in Gen 3:17 that was given to Adam after the "Fall":*ʾārûrâ min-hāʾaḏāmâ bāʿaḇûrẹḵā* ("cursed is the ground because of you"). Here the one being cursed is the ground. Man is just inflicted with the pains of toiling and of facing the advent of death one day; but he was not cursed. In Gen 4:11, a big shift comes when man was the one being cursed, and the one cursing him is the ground that was initially the recipient of the cursing. Cassuto's reading that the "curse is arising from the ground"—which became the personified agent of the act of cursing—captures this text's interrelation with Adam's curse. He justifies his explanation: "your [Cain's] curse shall come upon you from the ground, just as the cry of your brother's blood came to me from the ground [*min-hāʾaḏāmâ*]."[52]

In support of this thematic personification of the ground is Wittenberg. In fact, he calls it the "third actor" in the Murder Narrative. Below is his view and explanation:

> It would seem that in this central passage [Gen. 4:9-15] there are only two actors in the drama, Yahweh and Cain, but the pointed reference to which is the *adamah*, used three times in this context and then again in the response of Cain in Gen. 4:14 shows that another player has entered the stage, the Earth. A key concept of the whole of the "Yahwistic" primeval history is *adamah*, the fertile soil, on which crops can grow and which alone can sustain life. This *adamah* is the realm where human life and work take place (Gen. 2:5). At the same time it is the stuff from which

[52] Cassuto, *Genesis,* 219.

> all animals and humans are made and to which they will ultimately return. It is the stage of all the great cycles, of life, death, decomposition, decay and new life. The *adamah* appears here as a living organism which has "opened her mouth" and has gulped the blood of Abel down her throat (cf. Num. 16:30,32; Deut. 11:6).[53]

The ground then becomes the center of man's life. Having it as the one that is cursing alienates man from living life fully, confronting him with the bitter reality of suffering and even experiencing death. Sarna further reflects the build-up of this alienation: "It was the 'fruit of the tree' that led to the downfall of Adam and Eve; it is the 'fruit of the soil' that leads to Cain's undoing. The first human was worried about death; now the experience of death becomes a reality."[54] This only leads to an analysis that humankind (represented by Cain) continued to get worse and more evil than before (Adam's time), farther and farther from the sight of God, and in effect, away from the fertile soil that sustains his life.

J. Rogerson perceives in this interplay of the "man-land-God theme" a deeper understanding of human actions in general:

> There is a link between human morality and obedience to God, and the fertility of the land. Even crimes not noticed or detected by human beings are an affront to God, bringing punishment to the offenders and loss of strength to the earth. The passage expresses the conviction of the Old Testament faith that to believe in creation is to believe in an order in which human relationships play their part. The action of Cain is, in effect, an undoing of creation.[55]

Hence, the writer of the pericope is invoking also a right standard of human behavior and moral perception among his readers. The text may be meant to teach that man's immorality will cause him losing a full life that is provided by the earth and God; on the other hand, a just life will bring fecundity and happiness. The quarrel of Cain and Abel, as observed by Feyerick, may have been based on a Sumerian Myth that talks also of a quarrel between

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[53] Wittenberg, "Alienation," 109.

[54] Sarna, *Genesis,* 31.

[55] Rogerson, *Genesis,* 67.

two siblings: the farmer Enten (Winter) and the shepherd Emesh (Summer). Like the Gen 4 story, they brought their offerings to the deity (in particular, the air god, Enlil) after completing their duties to increase the earth's bounty. Their quarrel ended peacefully, as they settled their argument "in brotherhood and companionship" as Enten was chosen "farmer of the gods."[56]

Having been influenced or at least knowledgeable of this story, the non-Priestly author of the biblical account may have intentionally changed its *happy ending* to a *tragic fratricide* when he adopted it into the Bible. The historical context behind this alteration may be: the Israelites' exile from their land, or a great famine, or a continuous dry-spell on the earth. Their collective misery and poverty is further highlighted against the affluent life of the great nations surrounding them. This fact probably compelled the writer to compose a negative story that would reflect the general negative situation of the Israelites. In any case, the call of Gen 4 for a just moral life gave them hope that there is always a possibility of changing their predicament towards national fecundity and prosperity.

Conclusion

From the mentioned arguments and discussions, this study proposes five conclusions:

1) Gen 4:10b is central in the Murder Account. Around which the literary drama and main message of the author is being built-up.
2) The account has the "shouting-silence" motif that is used to highlight the climax of the emotional loudness of the murder-act in Gen 4:10b.
3) Life is sacred among early Israelite tribes, and so they are closely bound to their kin. Blood revenge is seen as a way of protecting their sense of brotherhood with each other.
4) Bloodguilt is perceived by the Israelites as possessing a mechanistic supernatural effect, coloured by their exposure to Ancient Near East nations' beliefs. A pertinent

[56] Feyerick, *Genesis,* 64.

rite is drawn to counter the prolongation of a malediction, and to restore back the divine presence.

5) The theme of "man-land-God" is at work in the first chapters of Genesis. The author (from the Yahwistic School) deliberately uses this to present a moral teaching to his readers exhorting them to reclaim the primeval order that would bring them prosperity, particularly, the fertility of the land.

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