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Who Is Watching the Children?[1]
Ethics of Responsibility in Genesis 4:1-16

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The Bible's first question dealing with fraternal relationships "Am I my brother's keeper?" raises key questions about relational responsibility: Who is "the keeper" of whom and why does it matter? As the notion of being a "keeper" and a "watcher" is elsewhere associated with YHWH in the Hebrew scriptures, the issue arises as to whether or not Cain's question suggests that in some way YHWH shares responsibility for Abel's demise. This paper employs Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theories of dialogism and heteroglossia to illuminate ways in which Cain's question may be heard and interpreted and the attending ethical implications of each reading.

Keywords: Abel, Cain, Genesis, Bakhtin, dialogism, heteroglossia, theodicy

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Introduction

East of Eden, "Am I my brother's keeper?" emerges within a story of biblical firsts. With eyes opened to the difference between good and evil, Gen. 4:1-16 narrates the first human birth, the first gift-giving to a deity, the first sibling rivalry, the first murder of a human being, and most notably, the first question addressed to YHWH by a human being. As with fruit in the garden, the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" is ripe with meaning, and it invites us to partake in hope of gaining wisdom. Do we *hear* the question as a flat rhetorical device to underscore Cain's failure to take up responsibility for killing his brother, Abel? Or is the sound more tempting, confronting us with the dissonance of our burning desires and self-interests clashing with the immediate needs of those around us? More provocative still, does the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" sound polyphonically, an array of questions in counterpoint with each other asking us to consider various angles of responsibility: a question about our

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responsibility for keeping our neighbor, an inquiry into divine responsibility for watching over us, and/or shared human-divine responsibility in protecting the vulnerable from violence?

Referentially, we index Gen. 4:1-16 as the *Story of Cain and Abel*. However, examining the text more closely, I suggest this well-known story reveals itself as an ethical dialog between Cain and YHWH (Gen. 4:6-15a). Fashioning the text in the form of a dialog provides a starting point for exploring ethical questions of response/ability and the readiness to respond. Thus the dialog reads:

NARRATOR
Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man et-YHWH." [2] Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was tending sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. [3] In the course of time Cain brought to YHWH a gift of the fruit of the ground, [4] and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And YHWH had regard for Abel and his offering, [5] but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

[6] YHWH (to Cain)
Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? [7] 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."

[8] Cain (to his brother Abel)
"Let us go out to the field." (Not in the Hebrew text)[2]

NARRATOR
And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

[9] YHWH (to Cain)
Where is your *brother* Abel?

Cain (to YHWH)
I do not know; am I my *brother's* keeper?

[10] YHWH (to Cain)
What have you done? Listen; your *brother's* blood calls out to me from the ground! [11] And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your *brother's* blood from your hand. [12] When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.

[2] "Let us go out into the field" is supplied by the LXX.

[13] Cain (to YHWH)
My punishment is greater than I can bear! [14] Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.

[15] YHWH (to Cain)
Not so. Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.

NARRATOR
And YHWH put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.
[16] Then Cain went away from the presence of YHWH, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

As the conversation between Cain and YHWH intensifies, so does the accent on the brotherly relationship between Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:8-10). Abel, whose name evokes the ephemeral nature of a vapor, never speaks (Gen. 4:2-8). Only near the end of the dialog between Cain and YHWH do we hear Abel's voice join in as his blood cries out from the ground to YHWH (Gen. 4:10). And thus, at the center of this human-divine trio, the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" strikes the deep ethical tone that echoes throughout the chambers of narratives, laws, prophecies, proverbs, and poems of the Hebrew Bible. The salient question is how we *hear* this "first" question and how we wrestle with the potency of its meaning.

As the text before us is a dialog, approaching the text from a dialogic perspective enables us to explore how one hears and makes meaning of the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" As a theoretical foundation for exploring the dialogic nature of Gen. 4:1-16, I employ aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory of dialog: utterance, personality, and polyphony.[3] These concepts create a

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[3] A number of biblical scholars have found Bakhtin's literary ideas fruitful in developing the on-going conversations that occur between texts and readers of the Hebrew Bible: Nehama Aschkenasy, "Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnivalesque in a Biblical Tale," *JBL* 126, no. 3 (September 2007): 437-453; Roland Boer, ed., *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, Semeia Studies 63 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007); Julianna M. Claassens, "Biblical Theology as Dialog: Continuing the Conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Theology," *JBL* 122, no. 1 (September 2003): 127-144; Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); Danna Nolan Fewell, *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003); Francisco O. Garcia-Treto, "The Fall of the House: A Carnivalesque Reading of 2 Kings 9 and 10," in *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible,* ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 153-171; Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction,*

space for us to hear the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" not as simply a hollow rhetorical question but as a potential "first" interrogation into the nature of human-divine dynamics on the limen of ethical decision-making. Who is responsible for whom? How do motives factor into acting responsibility toward another? To what extent are human beings responsible for each other? To what extent is YHWH responsible to human beings? Why should we care?

Bakhtin Literary Theory

I will begin by briefly laying out the relevant points of Bakhtin's literary theory of dialog and then demonstrate how these elements may be useful in an ethical reading of Genesis 4:1-16.

Utterance, Addressivity, and Dialog

For Bakhtin, an utterance is a unit of speech communication *addressed to someone* that is comprised of two dimensions: content and intonation.[4] Content refers to words and other linguistic elements that make up the utterance. Intonation conveys the unique meaning of the content that words, grammar, and syntax cannot capture. As the utterance is something voiced, the "tone of voice" or intonation conveys meaning through the infinitely complex and varied means of inflection and manner of the speaker.[5] The timbre of one's voice is as important to one's meaning, if not more so, than the abstractions of the content. Thus, given that no speaker ever says the same thing in exactly the same way twice, no two utterances will ever carry the same meaning.[6]

Semeia Studies 38 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); Carol Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible and Dialogic Truth," *Journal of Religion* 76, no. 2 (April 1996): 290-306; Carol Newsom, "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text," in *JSOT* 97 (March 2002): 87-108; Ellen von Wolde, "Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialog with Tamar," in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 426-451.

[4] Bakhtin employs the term *utterance* to denote the basic unit of speech. Dialogs are utterances put into a conversation. Just as personalities are unfinalizable, so are their utterances. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson, University of Texas Press Slavic Series 1 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263; 270-274; 478.

[5] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 125-127.

[6] Morson and Emerson, 126.

Intonation reveals the ethical nature of the utterance. One's "tone of voice" requires an evaluation on the part of the one addressed. The speaker relies on the active participation of the listener and/or reader to evaluate and then respond to what has been said.[7] Bakhtin maintains that just as the author or speaker retains "inalienable rights" to the words used, the listener also has the same rights to hear and interpret according to the listener's context. Bakhtin contends that spoken words are "performed outside the author" in that the actual ethical import of the utterance is evaluated by one who is actively listening.[8] The listener will evaluate what has been said based on his/her own complex of interests: one's presuppositions of the meaning of the words, one's own knowledge and experience, one's own evaluation of how third parties might engage what is said, and also the myriad possibilities of responses. Hence, the ethical evaluation of the utterance will carry the unique imprint of each context in which it is heard.[9] Thus, an utterance does not merely serve rhetorical or theoretical purposes but lives and breathes in the conversational provocations and promptings taking place between speakers and listeners.

Living Personalities

Concepts of utterance, addressivity, and dialogism combine to create living "personalities" rather than mere characters. For Bakhtin, characters are literary creations pressed into service of the author's point of view. Personalities, on the other hand, are created and guided by the author to draw us in to the unfinalized nature of human beings and the multidirectional outcomes of situations in which personalities find themselves.

Bakhtin points to several aspects of our shared "lived experience" to underscore the difference between finalized literary characters and unfinalized personalities. Every human being contains a surplus that cannot be explained by any other. As such, a living human being cannot be objectified, finalized, or systematized. Bakhtin writes that "there is something unfinalizable within each

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[7] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee, University of Texas Press Slavic Series 8 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 99.

[8] Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee, University of Texas Press Slavic Series 8 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 121-122.

[9] Morson and Emerson, 134.

human being," and therefore "as long as a person is alive, the person has not yet uttered a final word."[10]

The complexity of the unfinished drama played out within each person is brought to light through conversation with others revolving around a situation, an ultimate question, or a crisis. Discourse illuminates this complexity through provocation, interrogation, and even taunts. Bakhtin explains, "The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself."[11] Thus, as in life, personalities in stories cannot be closed off from each other but rather are always becoming aware of each other's fields of vision and are calling one another into a mode of response.

Polyphony

Literature bearing dialogical markings lives in the realm of polyphony. Utterances of personalities sound together in various pitches and registers as in a piece of music with varying sequences of rhythm, harmony, and dissonance.[12] Thus, in a dialogically driven literary space, attention is not focused on an event-drive plot but on a dialog that may yield any number of insights into the personalities involved. Dramatic events give rise to dialogic interactions that reveal something unique about the thoughts and feelings of those involved. At a crisis point, we hear a struggle in decision-making leading to one of several plausible outcomes.[13] Bakhtin conceives of a "polyphonic author" as one who assumes a position on an equal footing with the personalities, one who allows the

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[10] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, vol. 8 of *Theory and History of Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 59.

[11] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 59.

[12] Bakhtin draws on the musical notion of polyphony and counterpoint only as graphic analogy of what is meant when literary voices are put into conversation with each other. He intends nothing more. However, I would argue that the nature of vitality in music and the vitality in literary characterizations have more in common than Bakhtin suggests. The harmony that is created when musical voices intersect is not unlike the emergence of a dialogic truth that begins to emerge when a multiplicity of fully valid consciousnesses are put into dialog. The contrary motion between musical voices that is essential to musical vitality is similar to the disagreement that must take place between voices in a literary setting in order for meaning to emerge. The processes by which a polyphonic piece of music and the dialogic novel make meaning are worthy of comparison and additional exploration. Bakhtin's understanding of musical forms was perhaps not sufficient for him to fully understand and appreciate all of the ways in which a contrapuntal composition bears similarity to the interaction of voices in a literary work. Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 22.

[13] Morson and Emerson, 258.

dialogs between personalities to go where they will. Dialogic interchanges invite us as readers to join these personalities on a journey into a yet unfinished future, leaving behind any preconceived ideas about a final destination.

Reading the Dialog between Cain and YHWH

The first utterance: Gen. 4:1

Now, applying these Bakhtinian concepts to a reading of Genesis 4:1-16, what do we hear? First, we hear Eve's first utterance (Genesis 4:1) as an introduction to a dialogical, polytonal world containing utterances that resist finalization. Eve utters: "I have produced a man (et) YHWH." What does she mean? Eve speaks with language that is not readily understood, opening up a vast interior world in which she, as the Bible's first mother, makes a connection between her first man/child and YHWH. Many possible meanings are contained in the phrase using the untranslatable particle את, whereby Eve makes a connection between herself, Cain, and YHWH. Eve's speech mentions YHWH, not Adam, as having something to do with the production of her man/child Cain. Where is Adam? Is Adam the Bible's first "absent father" figure? Does Eve's utterance suggest that just as YHWH is responsible, in some measure, for producing the man/child Cain, that YHWH is also responsible for watching over and protecting him?

The situation: Gen. 4:2-5

As we move forward in the story, the issue of responsibility for the man/child Cain and his vapor/brother Abel intensifies. The narrator lays the groundwork for the main dialog between Cain and YHWH that follows. In the course of time, the brothers bring gifts to YHWH from their respective occupations: Abel brings the fat portions of the firstlings of his flock and Cain brings fruits from the ground. The text does not indicate the occasion or the criteria for bringing gifts. Neither does the text indicate the basis for YHWH gazing upon Abel's gift:

וַיִּ֣שַׁע יְהוָ֔ה אֶל־ הֶ֖בֶל וְאֶל־ מִנְחָתֽוֹ

but not upon Cain:

וְאֶל־קַ֥יִן וְאֶל־מִנְחָת֖וֹ לֹ֣א שָׁעָ֑ה

Ambiguity abounds. We are left to actively construct the meaning of "gazing" through our own experiences, contexts, and understandings. It is often assumed that YHWH gazed with interest upon Abel and Abel's sacrifice because Abel brought the "fat portions," the part desired by YHWH. Such an assumption presupposes that Gen 4:5 is actively in conversation with texts outlining the Levitical requirements for sacrifice (e.g., Leviticus 3). Certainly, that is a possibility. However, the act of "gazing with interest upon" as indicated by the verb שָׁעָה is inherently polyvalent. The act of gazing upon something does not necessarily mean that the object of the gazing is necessarily desirable. One may gaze or be transfixed with horror upon a train wreck or a news program showing a video of a natural disaster. In the absence of clear criteria for gift-giving to YHWH, is it possible that YHWH's attentive gazing upon Abel's sacrifice—fat portions of a freshly killed lamb—was a mixture of fascination and horror? Or, was there no discernible reason for YHWH's intense gaze? Is it possible that just as humans are free to make choices, so is YHWH? Either way, the result is the same. Cain is angry at his sacrifice failing to gain YHWH's transfixing gaze and such displeasure was obvious to YHWH by his facial expression.

The dialog between YHWH and Cain: Gen. 4:6-16

The ensuing dialog between YHWH and Cain prompts insight into Cain: How will Cain respond to his anger and his disappointment? As the dialog consists of questions that are addressed to another but not always answered, we do not know in advance what decisions Cain will make. We do not have an overarching narrative interspersed with the dialog that guides us as to the author's point of view. As such, we enter on an equal footing with the author and the personalities and journey with them into an ethical evaluation of what transpires.

The dialog begins with YHWH addressing Cain as to the reason for his anger and his disappointment. Reading the question "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?" as a legitimate inquiry into the nature of Cain's suffering, we wonder whether or not Cain is jealous of Abel because of YHWH's gazing, or whether there is another reason lurking beneath the surface. Is Cain fully aware of the reason for his own anger? In any event, the question prompts Cain to think about what lies underneath his anger.

Yet before Cain can answer the first question addressed to him, another question follows: "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" Again, the question anticipates a response. And again, the question is multivalent. What does it mean for Cain "to do well"? Does it mean for Cain to continue to bring the same or

different gifts to YHWH so as to gain YHWH's gaze? Does it mean for Cain to manage his emotions of anger thereby culling YHWH's favor? Or does it mean for Cain to find self-satisfaction (uplift) from making the right decision at this critical time? Whatever the meaning, the remainder of YHWH's direct speech indicates that Cain is at a crossroads and that Cain must make a decision. Sin (perhaps also functioning here as a personality?) competes for Cain's attention. What will Cain do?

Cain's ethical crisis leads to a field (Gen. 4:8). The text reads:

וַיֹּ֥אמֶר קַ֖יִן אֶל־הֶ֣בֶל אָחִ֑יו

"And Cain said to his brother Abel . . ." The English text supplies words for Cain "Let us go out into the field," but the Hebrew text does not indicate what Cain said to Abel. The next thing we know for certain is that Cain rises up and kills his brother Abel. But what happened in the field? Where was YHWH, where was Eve, where was Adam? Who was watching/keeping/guarding/watching/protecting over the events that transpired between the Bible's first children?

More importantly, what did Cain say to Abel? Did a conversation take place in the field? Did Abel provoke Cain in the field in a way that would have caused Cain to rise up and kill him? Was Cain simply unable to control his brooding jealousy? Or, in an effort to "continue to do well," is Cain reasoning that if a slaughtered lamb received YHWH's gaze, perhaps a slaughtered human would be an even superior sacrifice? All we can be sure of is that something took place in the field that provoked Cain to murder his brother Abel. What did Cain do with the slain Abel? YHWH inquires, expecting a response: "Where is your brother Abel?" Relying on Bakhtin's notion of utterance, do we hear this question as a desire on the part of YHWH to know the whereabouts of Abel? In any event, Cain responds, "I don't know." However, Cain immediately and expectantly fires another question back to YHWH, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain's question sounds with the same polytonality as the many preceding utterances. What does it mean to be someone's keeper, הֲשֹׁמֵ֥ר?

Across the Hebrew Bible, the range of the verb שָׁמַר has to do with guarding, securing, taking care, being cautious and watching over. However, as Bakhtin guides us, meaning is derived as much by intonation and the experiences of the listener and reader as it does any assessment of abstract content. How does Cain inflect his voice as he addresses YHWH? Is he asking "Am ***I*** my brother's keeper?" as in, "Am I [Cain] supposed to watch over my *brother* Abel?" Here, is Cain implying, "I thought my mother Eve or my father Adam were supposed to be

watching over us?" Or, "Am I ***my brother's*** keeper?" as in, "What do I have to do with my brother? Isn't my brother responsible for himself?" Or, "Am I my brother's ***keeper***?" as in, "What does *keeping* mean?" Or does Cain's inflection perhaps suggest: "I thought you, YHWH, were supposed to be keeping and watching over us." Given the many uses of the verb שָׁמַר in Psalm 121:5-8, asserting that YHWH watches over and keeps one's life, Cain may have a point:

> YHWH is your keeper;
> YHWH is your shade at your right
> hand. The sun shall not strike you
> by day, nor the moon by night.
> YHWH will keep you from all evil;
> He will keep your life.
> YHWH will keep your going out
> and your coming in from this time on and forever more.

In the hearing of Psalm 121, is Cain addressing YHWH about the extent of YHWH's responsibility to and for those who are weaker and more "vaporous"? Is Cain suggesting that YHWH should have intervened and stopped him from murdering Abel?

Curiously, YHWH does not answer Cain's question regarding "who keeps whom"; rather, YHWH asks another question: "What have you done?" Is YHWH inquiring as to the method or the motive for the murder? Again, without waiting for an answer to the question, YHWH directs Cain to hear the voice of the blood of his brother Abel: "Listen, your brother's blood is crying out *to me* from the ground." As YHWH pulls the voice of Abel into Cain's field of vision, a polyphonic space is created whereby all voices are in play with each other. The voice of Abel's blood is directed *to YHWH* while Cain listens. What is Abel's blood saying? As the voice of the blood is directed to YHWH, is Abel is also asking YHWH, "Why didn't *you* protect me from Cain?" Or, "How will *you* bring about justice for what has happened to me?" YHWH responds to the voice of Abel's blood by addressing Cain, not Abel. YHWH indicates that as the ground has opened up to receive Abel's blood, the ground will no longer easily yield to Cain's tilling, and Cain must now live as a wanderer upon the earth. But Cain's response back to YHWH, *in the hearing of Abel's blood*, voices Cain's concern over being killed. Cain now finds his own existence like a "vapor," as an "Abel" in the hands of those he will meet in the future. How will YHWH address Cain, now as a "second" Abel?

YHWH answers Cain's concerns by putting a protective mark on Cain. If we hear Cain's question "Am I my brother's keeper?" as interrogation of YHWH's

responsibility to protect Abel, YHWH now demonstrates responsibility to Cain by providing retributive justice and protection for Cain. Is YHWH's placement of a protective mark of Cain in some way compensatory for not protecting Abel? If so, the dialog reveals that both Cain and YHWH have some ethical thinking to do about responsibility for the vulnerable and the weak. For Cain, the consequences of his actions mean a difficult life of working and wandering. For YHWH, the dialog with Cain is a reminder that humanity is weak and needs protecting. Humanity is not always response-*able* to act justly, even when counseled in advance to do so—even by YHWH.

As the dialog comes to an end, we find Cain departing from the presence or "face" of YHWH and settling in the "Land of Nod," or literally, the "Land of Wandering." Cain's settlement is therefore "not a settlement" but a continual motion of moving elsewhere—a wandering where life is never completely explained, finalized, or finished. Will Cain act in a responsible way toward his fellow human beings when next given the opportunity to do so? Cain has not yet uttered his final word . . .

Responsible Questions

So what do we gain by reading Genesis 4:1-16 dialogically? First, the Bible's first story about violence is not merely a story about crime and punishment but a dialog about responsibility. As such, the dialog is more concerned with insight into the interior worlds of personalities as they manage an ethical crisis than it is simply with the facts of the murder. Through questions, the dialog probes for an understanding of what lies underneath the emotions—in this instance, anger—that finds its release in an expression of violence towards another human being. As such, the dialog between Cain and YHWH provides guidance into important first-responses to an ethical crisis: *asking questions and searching for insight concerning what underlies one's emotions*. At the first sign of a problem, YHWH does not assign blame or make an assertion about the meaning of Cain's downcast face but rather addresses Cain with a question: "Why are you angry?" The question is designed to cause Cain to evaluate himself and come to a greater sense of self-understanding before taking action. Similarly, the questions that continue throughout the dialog involve both YHWH and Cain in evaluating the range of responsibilities for events that led up to the murder of Abel.

In addition, that many of the questions addressed to others in Genesis 4:1-16 are left unanswered speaks to the unfinished nature of ethical reflection and inquiry. In terms of what happened, Cain killed Abel, and Cain received the

consequences at the hand of YHWH. But the dialog is more concerned about what was going on between Cain, Abel, and YHWH that resulted in the murder of Abel. We are left to reflect on what the responsibilities of those involved might be as we confront our own moments of ethical crisis.

Moreover, the dialog pushes us to consider the response-able-ness of all concerned in the murder of Abel. Cain's question "Am I my brother's keeper?" voiced as an interrogation of YHWH's responsibility to watch over Abel raises the question of theodicy, the justice of YHWH, which sounds throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (for example, when Abraham inquires of YHWH with regard to the destruction of Sodom, "Will you indeed destroy the righteous along with the wicked?" [Gen. 18:23]). Throughout the Torah, YHWH is revealed as one "who sees" and is conscious of the suffering of those whose existence is tenuous at best, the Abels and "vapors" of the world (e.g., the plights of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 and 21, those who cry out from Sodom in Genesis 18, the Hebrew slaves in Egypt in Exodus 3, and here, the wanderings of Cain). The legal corpus is replete with admonitions to attend to the needs of the Abels, the poor, the widows, and the orphans (e.g., Exodus 22:21-23; 23:9; and Leviticus 19). And, as we have seen, the Psalms assert YHWH's role as keeper of Israel. As a prelude to all of the stories that affirm YHWH as the one who "keeps," YHWH answers Cain's question "Am I my brother's keeper?" not with a "yes" or a "no," but through action: placing a protective "mark" on Cain, and doing so in the hearing of Abel's blood. We see our first glimpse into the nature of divine responsiveness when questioned by a human being about divine responsibility.

Yet because Cain is alive and remains an unfinished personality, ethical questions remain open. In the midst of his wanderings, did Cain discover anything about the cause for his anger towards Abel? Initially, could YHWH have stayed Cain's hand and saved Abel? What happened out in the field between Cain and Abel? Did Abel provoke Cain in some way? Moreover, the way in which the dialog between Cain and YHWH resists final readings indicates the perpetual need to revisit and rethink ethical questions about human and divine responsibility to/for the other. As we journey with Cain and YHWH through the maze of interrogation, we too are confronted with questions about our motives, our actions, and our responsibilities towards others. *As we interrogate the text, so the text interrogates us*. The resistance of the dialog to easy assertions about ethical responsibilities reflects the reality that human and divine motives are best explored through on-going conversations among all parties involved: the divine, the living, and those whose voices linger from the past.

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