



Am i, an American, my brother's keeper?

genesis 4.⁹

Introduction

The Old Testament Book of Genesis is a work of genius. Its authors and editors have a story to tell and important principles to teach—lessons and principles that are not only applicable, but vital to our times. The editors present their lessons and principles with incredible imagination, creativity, and inspiration.

As its English title suggests, Genesis is about beginnings. It starts with the creation of our planet, along with its cosmic surroundings. This is followed by the creation of the human race. In their generation, creation and humans are good. This goodness is the consequence of their having been imagined and created by an intelligent, imaginative, involved, and committed God.

But anyone who looks about them with any degree of honesty knows that the world we have inherited is not always good. So, Genesis goes on to describe the genesis of evil, and the forces that inspired and propelled it. The texts that review this genesis possess their own brand of creativity and imagination. Genesis provides a focused perspective concerning the genesis of human society, the evils found in it, and the strains and struggles suffered because of those personal and societal evils.

This is a very simplified summary of the first eleven chapters, sometimes referred to as the,

“Prehistory.”¹ This prehistory, preceded by what I call a “Prolegomenon to Creation (1.^{1-2.3}),” is made up of four narratives of varying size (2.^{7-4.26}; 6.¹⁻⁸; 6.^{11-9.29}; and 11.¹⁻⁹). These four narratives are interspersed with five “genealogies, also of varying length.”² With chapter 12, we come to our fifth narrative and enter a new beginning or a new genesis.³

In today’s homily, we will closely examine two stories found in the first narrative. The first tells the story of the well-known, Qayin. The second tells a story about the lesser-known Lemek. After exploring these two stories, we will then briefly explore the second, third, and fourth narratives. These narratives report the run up to the flood, the flood itself, and the aftermath of the flood. We will then move to the fifth narrative, where we will examine one story concerning Abraham and Lot.

In examining these stories, we will ignore questions related to the historicity of the events reported in the narratives. The tale the writers and editors tell is far less about history than it is about the nature of humans and human society. It is really more “commentary” about humans, than it is a history of humans.

In keeping with our desire to avoid becoming lost in details, but getting right to the point as it relates to a Just Society, we will provide little explanation or justification for every assertion.⁴ We will focus on only a couple of the many lessons and principles that can be drawn from the examined texts.

After reviewing the narratives and drawing out the principles, we will go one step further.

¹ I refer to the material found in Genesis 2.^{4-6.8} as “First Genesis,” and the material found in Genesis 6.^{9-11.26} as “Second Genesis.” I have placed my scheme for structuring the entire Book of Genesis at the end of this homily.

² Genesis 2.⁴⁻⁶; 5.¹⁻³²; 6.⁹⁻¹⁰; 10.¹⁻³²; and 11.¹⁰⁻²⁶

³ What I call “Third Genesis” includes the material from 11.²⁷ through 50.²⁶. It is old in three narratives (Genesis 12.^{1-25.11}; 25.^{19-35.29}; and 37.^{2b-50.26}) and five genealogies (Genesis 11.²⁷⁻³²; 25.¹²⁻¹⁸; 25.¹⁹⁻²⁰; 36.¹⁻⁴³; and 37.^{2a}). This genesis progresses in fits and starts and reversals until, with the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, a new genesis is brought into being—what I call “Fourth Genesis.” We will not take time in this homily to explain and justify my division of Genesis. Hopefully, at some point, my commentary on Genesis will find its way to this sight, where I will offer such explanations and justifications.

⁴ Again, we hope to provide such justifications in my translation, critical notes, and commentary on Genesis.

We will make just one of the many potential direct and specific applications of the ancient text in relation to the modern Just Society. In drawing out the application, we hope for more than understanding. We hope to incite a spirit of mission in Christians, indeed in all who take seriously the Bible and biblical truths, such that they leave their pews and enter their larger communities in order to call the adulterous nations to repentance, demanding that they begin to move toward the Just Society from which the nations have so grievously strayed.

Genesis 4.1-18 (Narrative 1, Scene 6, 7, & 8)⁵

For the purposes of this homily, we are going to begin with Genesis 4.¹⁻⁸. It is the first text to focus on events surrounding the genesis of human society after the expulsion from the garden.⁶ In it we enter the story of “mortality,” or the “testestial” world, the world in which we live today.

Now, one can imagine any number of stories with which the author/editors of Genesis might have begun. What momentous times! How many are the “firsts” that could be recorded! The Book of Moses, for example, begins with a wonderfully inspiring story about divine revelation, the nature of sacrifice, and the power of atonement—a very fitting beginning, indeed. One could imagine stories in which the first human family sits in a tight little FHE circle sharing stories of God and his commitment to mankind—I believe the LDS picture library contained such a piece of artistic fantasy at one time.

But not Genesis. Not these purposeful editors. They have another story to tell. And it begins with the darkness that resides in the human heart. I would have you take a moment and consider this: Genesis begins its human story with a murder. We will pause for a moment and let that sink in. Human history begins with a murder!

⁵ I divide the first narrative (2.⁷⁻¹⁴; 2.¹⁵⁻²⁵; 3.¹⁻⁶; 3.⁷⁻²¹; 3.²²⁻²⁴; 4.¹⁻⁸; 4.⁹⁻¹⁵; 4.¹⁶⁻¹⁸; 4.¹⁹⁻²⁴; and 4.²⁵⁻²⁶).

⁶ The previous scenes, particularly scenes 3 and 4, dealing with the introduction of evil and its consequences, make contributions to the theme of our homily. However, because my readings of the two mentioned, 3 and 4, run afoul of tradition readings, I have chosen to pass them by so as not to detract from our main objectives.

With all the other possible tales to tell, why begin with a murder? How twisted is that!? This inauspicious beginning is no accident. It is very, very deliberate. It is brilliant and insightful and revelatory. If the book had ended after just this one narrative, it would have been worth its weight in gold; its revelation instructive and saving. Let's just do a quick recap of this first narrative dealing with the first human events after the expulsion from the garden.

We are introduced to two brothers, Qayin and Hebel. The older, Qayin, according to the text's understanding of his name, is someone who is to be taken seriously.⁷ His name bears the double meaning of "beget" and "acquire." But, as the story unfolds, and we see him in relation to his brother, Hebel—who is, after all, also "begotten"—it becomes clear that the meaning of "acquire," "possess," "retain," and "maintain" possesses pride of place in understanding Qayin and the message of the narrative.⁸ Qayin is to be thought of as a man of action; a man made for and driven by "acquisition," "gain," and "profit."⁹ He is an acquisitive man.

We will note, here, that according to the account found in the Book of Moses, "gain," or "profit" is precisely Qayin's motivation for murdering his brother. There, before killing his brother, Qayin is recorded as having said, "Truly I am Mahan, the master of this great secret, that I may murder and *get gain*."¹⁰ After murdering his brother, Qayin is heard to exult, "I am free; surely *the flocks of my brother falleth into my hands*."¹¹

But none of this is present in Genesis. What the Book of Moses shouts out, Genesis leaves implicit rather than explicit. We might ask, "Why?" We might conclude that the Pearl of Great Price's Book of Moses is insightful and even "inspired" in ways that Genesis is not.

⁷ It matters little to Genesis' author what the "true" etymology of Qayin's name is. We should follow the author's lead.

⁸ "...the primary usage of the verb *qānā* is concrete and economic..." TDOT, Vol. XIII, p. 59.

⁹ In addition to Qayin's name, signifying his "acquisitiveness," we have his punishment. Here, we apply the "Law of Restoration" with its principle that punishments fit the crime, whatever one sends out, comes back to them. As part of his punishment for the murder, Qayin is informed that "when thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength" (4.12). In other words, his capacity to acquire and get gain will be restricted. The very thing that drives him will be denied him. Very fitting.

¹⁰ Moses 5.³¹

¹¹ Moses 5.³³. It is of interest and worthy of more thought that Qayin associates "freedom" with the power to acquire at any cost to others.

But I would exhort caution here. We might just find that it is Genesis that is in possession of the deeper truth. But before considering this, let's have a look at the other brother, Hebel.

Hebel's name means "breath," "vapor," a "wisp," and then "lightness," or "vanity." It is likely an onomatopoeic word signifying the sound of the "exhale of breath." We might hear in his name, the last exhaling breath he took before dying at the hands of his murderous older brother. Now, pause again to consider this: The first human story is about a victim.

That could keep us busy for a bit. But we must move on. Hebel's name could come to signify a "lightness" of character and energy in comparison to Qayin. This would be consistent with the fact that the elder son is normally considered to possess and is granted more "potential" than younger siblings.

And yet, as the narrative unfolds, the older brother, the acquirer, finds the younger brother threatening. Notwithstanding Qayin's skills in acquiring, Hebel, seeming to be favored by God, threatens Qayin's sense of self. Hebel undermines Qayin's self-confidence and sense of worth. Hebel threatens Qayin's very being. Qayin covets his brother's sense of self, which comes from God. He wishes to possess this sense of self and worth. He wishes to "acquire" it.

Herein can be seen Genesis' insight. It knows that Qayin is a man of "acquisition," driven by "profit" and gain." But the need for "acquisition" is, in the end, not really about the possessions themselves, and so Genesis does not, as does the Book of Moses, focus on Qayin's desire to acquire his brother's sheep. The desire to acquire material "stuff," to obtain economic gain is a means to an end, not an end itself. What is the end sought in acquiring materialistic gain? It is the sense of self, of self-worth and value. It is the acquisition of honor and prestige. Here we enter the realm of idolatry: materialism becoming god.

That is a good bit of detail and analysis. So, let's pause to recap and summarize. This scene, the first concerning mortal existence, is not a light and cheerful tale. It is a dark tale about a man who, insecure in his very being, murders his brother, not, in the end, to "acquire" material possessions, but to "acquire" a sense of personal worth and being that he perceives

his brother possesses. He desires, through acquisition to gain honor and prestige and meaning.

Here, at this early stage, we are already introduced to the Hebrew Bible's principle boogey man or sin: idolatry. Idolatry is, in part, to be understood as that inclination, with its attending attitudes and actions, to see one's worth, security, and being in relation to one's material possessions, acquisitions, and profit. It is, as we have discussed elsewhere, covetousness and perverted materialism made into a god. Hebel's sense of self-worth comes through his encounter with a gracious God. Qayin, misunderstanding, believes that acquisition and gain are signs of divine approval. He therefore seeks to acquire his brother's sheep in a vain attempt to manifest God's approval and his own sense of self-worth. You can, after all, buy anything in this world with money.

Again, brilliant. Our author's and editors are incredibly perceptive observers of the human condition, the personal insecurities that abound, the misunderstandings concerning these insecurities, the lengths to which we will go to feel some sense of security, worth, and self, and the harm that comes when security is sought in the wrong places.

The next scene of narrative 1 (Genesis 4.⁹⁻¹⁵) reports the consequences of Qayin's murderous, being-stealing-actions. It begins with a brief dialogue between Qayin and Yahweh. It is explosive and revelatory. After Qayin kills his brother, God challenges him with a question.

“YHWH said to Qayin, ‘Where is your brother, Hebel?’”¹²

We are all familiar with the King James' beautiful rendition of Qayin's reply.

“I know not...” [a pregnant pause] “...Am I my brother's keeper?”¹³

Were uglier words ever rendered more beautifully? Qayin's reply is not, of course, an honest, searching question. It is, in fact, not a question at all. It is a statement: “I am NOT

¹² Genesis 4.⁹

¹³ Ibid.

responsible for or to my brother.”

We know that not only is this a declaration rather than a query, but we know that it is a *false declaration*. We know what the text is telling us. We know that it is telling us that, in very deed, we ARE responsible for and to our fellow man. We ARE our brother’s keeper. And we know that *this declaration comes from none other than God Himself*.

Now, note, please that this is found in the very first narrative. Note too that these words, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” are the very first words to escape the mortal tongue as recorded in the Bible.¹⁴ Never mind that there were certainly words and conversations previous to these. The master story teller isn’t interested in any of them. It is these words, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” that advance the story and focus the reader’s attention on a foundational principle that is, sadly, operative among mortals.

These words reveal at least one aspect of the author’s/editors’ intent and purpose in writing. Right out of the chute individuals and societies concluded that they only had responsibility to and for themselves. They were justified in using any means, including violent means, in advancing their interests against those of others. This is the Bible’s first estimation and opinion of mankind and the false and unholy manner in which they think and act.

You tell me. Is the author/editor on to something? Is he right in his estimation? Based on what I see of individual attitudes toward money, corporations’ business practices, world governments’ economic policies and regulations, and all of their attitudes concerning “acquisition,” it seems to me that the author/editors of Genesis are dead on. But, we get ahead of ourselves. We will return to this later in the homily.

The remainder of this encounter between God and Qayin has been a source of the most amazing speculation and bigotry. Therefore, we will pass over the remainder of the encounter, except to say this: the consequences (often viewed as “punishment”) of Qayin’s

¹⁴ Previous conversations were conducted in the garden before the expulsion. As for Eve’s “I have gotten a man from the LORD” (4.¹), we understand this to be an internal thought. And while God speaks to Qayin in 4.⁶, no human response is recorded.

evil tell us much about the nature of the evil. This is consistent with the “law” or “plan of restoration,” which informs us that “the punishment fits the crime”—relates in some way to the crime. Alma, in his instruction to his son Corianton, provides the classic statement of this law or plan.

“And now behold, is the meaning of the word restoration to take a thing of a natural state and place it in an unnatural state, or to place it in a state opposite to its nature?

O, my son, this is not the case; but the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful....

For that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored; therefore, the word restoration more fully condemneth the sinner, and justifieth him not at all.”¹⁵

If, then, there is uncertainty about the exact nature of a sinful or evil action, the plan of restoration would have use look for a consequence that enters the life of the offending party. If we find the consequence, we can say a good bit about the exact nature of the sin or evil committed.¹⁶

It is Yahweh himself who describes the consequences that flow from Qayin’s actions.

“You are cursed in regard to the soil, which opened its mouth to accept your brother’s blood from your hand. Though you work the land, it will never again yield you its produce. You will become a wandering beggar in the land.”¹⁷

How fitting. The man driven to acquire will be denied the acquisition he so desperately needs

¹⁵ Alma 41.^{12-13, 14}

¹⁶ At some point, we will examine the discourse of Samuel the Lamanite as found in the Book of Mormon. In it, he discusses in the vaguest of terms the “wickedness” that exists among his people. It is with his discussion of the consequences (at utilizing the plan of restoration) that we gain an appreciation for the exact nature of that wickedness. This narrative with its discourse has much to contribute to our understanding of the Just Society.

¹⁷ Genesis 4.¹¹⁻¹². Qayin, unable to support himself through agricultural efforts, will have to leave his fields and go in search of sustenance elsewhere.

to gratify his sense of being.¹⁸ The consequence fits the crime. Qayin's acquisitiveness will be curtailed and, unable to support himself through agricultural efforts, he will be forced to leave his fields and go in search of sustenance elsewhere. Applying the "plan of restoration," seems to confirm our suspicion that Qayin's decision to murder his brother was driven by his need to acquire. Therefore, he will forfeit the ability to acquire.

The story of Qayin concludes with Genesis 4.¹⁶⁻¹⁸. Here we learn that, incapable of sustaining himself as Yahweh had predicted, Qayin leaves his native land and settles a previously unsettled district, where he founds a city (establishes a culture, society). Presumably, the society is based on his personal "acquisitive" principles, and operates on the assumption that individuals and groups need only look after their own interests, even at the expense of others.

Genesis 4.¹⁹⁻²⁴ (Narrative 1, Scene 9)

In our next narrative, found in Genesis 4.¹⁹⁻²⁴, we are introduced to a man, Lemek, a descendant of Qayin, who represents the seventh generation of mankind.¹⁹ Symbolically, we understand that with this man and his generation we have arrived at a kind of completion or fulfilment. In this man and his generation, we see a kind of fulfilment of Qayin's acquisitiveness and his refusal to accept responsibility for others, especially if it comes at his own expense, interests, and advancement. Here, we will utilize my translation of Genesis 4.²³⁻²⁴.

“‘ādâ and Şillâ, listen to what I have to say.

You wives of Lemek, give ear to my words.

¹⁸ We could, of course, understand this to mean that some negative climatic or naturistic phenomenon will always attend his agricultural labors. On the other hand, we may have an insight into the acquisitive nature. Enough is never enough. Individuals feel impoverished, not because they are, but because they have unrealistic and inappropriate, even ungodly expectations. They are simply, like Qayn, insatiable. They will never be satisfied. Their appetite is so ungodly large, that they will never, never, never feel full even though they are, already, bloated with more than is healthy for anyone to have.

¹⁹ Some, feeling that my proposed outline for Genesis is arbitrary, might point out that there is a genealogical list at 4.¹⁷⁻¹⁸. However, the genealogical lists that I use for the structure are all identified as such, usually with a pointed notice: "These are the generations..." (2.⁴; 6.⁹; 10.¹; 11.¹⁰; 11.²⁷; 25.¹²; 25.¹⁹; 36.¹; 37.²), and "This is the book of the generations..." (5.¹). It still could be arbitrary, but not for this reason. This notice is missing in 4.¹⁷⁻¹⁸.

‘Because I have killed a man for a trifle,²⁰
and a young man for merely striking me;²¹
though an offense against Qayin might bring vengeance seven
times more severe than the offense,
one against Lemek is avenged seven times seventy.’²²

We will not, now, enter into a discussion concerning the mark placed upon Qayin, and its relation to Lemek.²³ Nor will we explore the very, very important message concerning “vengeance” or “reciprocity.” Rather, we focus on Lemek’s actions. In his poem, Lemek informs us that over the generations that have passed, Qayin’s assertion that violence may be used to advance one’s desire for gain has “developed” its own logic; a logic in which one exercises violence for violence’s sake.

Additionally, Lemek’s poem reveals that violence is used to acquire and protect one’s “honor,” however slight a threat to that honor might be. In fact, Lemek has baldly explained the point that we made earlier. The real concern, the greatest good to be found in the material world—“the stuff” acquired—is not to be found in “the stuff,” but in the “self-worth” or “honor” that is acquired through “the stuff.” It is our “honor” for which we fight and struggle. Though we may not even be aware of it, the material stuff imparts a sense of self—false as it is. It is this sense of self that we seek above all else, no matter its cost to others.

Before moving on, we would make one other point. Qayin tells no one of his murder. It has to be exposed by God. Having had God expose it, Qayin seems to feel some remorse—if not for the murder itself, certainly for the fact that he has been caught and will suffer the consequences. But all of this is missing in Lemek’s murder, perpetrated because of an insignificant slight committed against him. He openly reveals his murderous deed while

²⁰ Lit., “a bruise.”

²¹ The idea throughout is that his response to an offense was completely out of all proportion. In the following verse, he boasts about this new-found power.

²² Lemek wears his insistence on vengeance as a badge of honor, courage, and real manhood. One thinks of the old Scottish attitude, “No one hurts me unharmed.” It is ironic that Qayin’s line, one in which the progenitor did not experience the vengeance, is the very line most insistent on its right to vengeance against those who wrong them.

²³ We will just point out that the “mark” is for the purpose of protection not “curse.”

seeming to revel in it. We see no indication of remorse or fear of consequences. In the generations that have passed from Qayin to Lemek, violence has seen “progress.” It has become unexceptional, acceptable, and open. It’s how things get done; how business is done.

The world is becoming a worse, more cut-throat and more violent place. What Qayin set in motion has grown, and, as will be made clear in our next narrative, has become a contagion.

Genesis 6.^{1-8, 11-13} (Narrative 2, Scene 1 & 2; Narrative 3, Scene 1)

As is often the case in Genesis, the long genealogical list that proceeds our next narrative can cause us to lose our sense of the ongoing story line. From a narrative perspective, Genesis 6.¹⁻⁸ follows immediately upon the heels of the account of Lemek. We will not take the time here to enumerate all the reasons for reading one in light of the other.

This narrative begins with one of the most difficult and ambiguous passages (6.¹⁻⁴) in a Hebrew Bible chunk full of difficult and ambiguous passages. The uncertainty concerning its meaning calls for a healthy dose of caution in drawing too definitive an interpretation. Though its exact meaning is uncertain, it should certainly be read in light of what follows in the next scene. Whoever the *b^enê-hā’ēlohîm* and *N^ephilîm* are, they are guilty of and contributing to the contagion of evil that began with Qayin, metastasized with Lemek, and has now spread world-wide. Indeed, the acquisitive induced violence of the first narrative has grown into a worldwide contagion.²⁴

“...YHWH saw that human evil had spread world-wide, and that *every* thought devised in the heart was *only* evil *all* of the time.”²⁵

Talk about overkill! “Every.” “Only.” “All.” Any one of these would have been sufficient to

²⁴ The previous genealogical list introduced the principle figure of this and the following narrative: Noah. Noah is the 10th generation from Adam. The number ‘10’ like the number ‘7’ is used in Genesis as a symbol for completion. With Noah, then, we have arrived at another “time of fulfilment.” Noah will represent both an end to the previous “Qayinian” order and a new genesis.

²⁵ Genesis 6.⁵ Author’s translation and emphasis.

allow us to appreciate the depth of evil. Would “*Every* thought devised in the heart was evil” have left us in doubt as to the depth of evil? Surely “Thoughts devised in the heart were *only* evil” would have done the trick! Would we have somehow underestimated the evil had we read, “Thoughts devised in the heart were evil *all* of the time”? Human evil has grown such that there is simply no longer sufficient vocabulary to describe it. Exaggeration of the evil is impossible. What Qayin started has reached a “fulfilment.”

But, can we say anything concerning the nature of the evil? Does the text augment this general introductory statement? We answer this in the affirmative. Looking back, we should connect the Lemek scene with this one. The evil we found there is present in the current narrative. Looking forward, we find that the next narrative does indeed enhance our understanding of the epidemic evil.

Our third narrative (6.¹¹-9.²⁹) begins by clearly expanding our appreciation of the world-wide contagion of evil. The third narrative examines that which is taking place in the life of Nōah, the 10th generation. The number ‘10’ like the number ‘7’ is used in Genesis as a symbol for completion or fulfilment. As with Lemek, we have with Nōah arrived at a “time of fulfilment.” Symbolically we should see both narratives as representing the same simultaneous situation.

“In full view of ʾēlōhîm, the earth had come to a complete and willful ruin.^a Earth was full of oppressive cruelty.^b As ʾēlōhîm looked upon the earth, he beheld a world in ruins; for, throughout the world every nation had dashed^c God’s hopes.^d So ʾēlōhîm warned Nōah, “Because those on earth are engrossed in oppressive cruelty, the end of all mortal life is coming;²⁶ for I am about to destroy them.”²⁷

²⁶ It may seem inconsistent for God to complain about the punitive way people live and then engage in his own punitive destruction of the earth with all its life. Two things should be kept in mind. First, this is consistent with both the Old Testament’s and Jesus’ statements that, using an Old Testament image, “those who dig a pit for others, fall into the very pit they dug.” As Jesus put it, you get judged just as you judge. Second, while the text presents YHWH as very actively involved in the destructive processes, we should probably understand that he allowed nature to take its course. Mankind, being so fractious toward one another, could not deal with the threat in any kind of unified and effective way. Such explanations do not, to be sure, do away with all the questions and seeming contradictions. We are still left with the difficulty of being finite beings trying to describe the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and actions of an infinite being.
²⁷ Genesis 6.¹¹⁻¹³

Remember, our first narrative involved two acts of “violence,” perpetrated for the purpose of “acquisition”—outwardly and apparently to acquire “stuff,” but in reality to acquire and preserve one’s personal sense of self and honor. With our second and third narrative, we continue to be enmeshed in the same violent story line. But now, the “acquisitive violence” has become a contagion. It has become “institutionalized.” It is not only how individuals interact, it is how institutions and nations interact. This acquisitive violence is certainly deemed, falsely, “just” by those involved.²⁸

The remainder to this third narrative tells how this contagion is brought to a screeching halt through the flood. The flood narrative can be viewed as representing the death of this violent world. However, it also harkens back to Genesis’ original creation story in a number of ways. In doing so, it can be viewed as a representation of new life, or a new creation. The “genesis” that the flood brings into being is uneven, as the stories of Noah’s sons and the tower of Babel (4th narrative) bear witness. Because of this unevenness, something newer still will be needed. Genesis introduces us to this new way and this new genesis in the person of Abraham.

We now turn to the fifth narrative where we meet Abraham. However, in doing so, we must keep all that we have learned so far in mind. We must keep in mind the acquisitive and violent world Genesis has portrayed. Has that acquisitive and violent world truly ended, or will new characters pick up the old ways?

Genesis 13.¹⁻¹² (Narrative 5, Scene 4)

The fifth narrative is quite long (Genesis 12:¹⁻²⁵:¹¹). In it we are introduced to Abraham. We learn of his “call” (12.¹⁻³) and his departure from his native land and his entrance into the “Promised Land” (12.⁴⁻⁹). We watch as he enters Egypt, there to be abused by the oppressive nation led by an acquisitive monarch (he wishes to acquire Abraham’s wife, Śāray, as his

²⁸ In my own lifetime, the so-called “three strikes” laws are a parade example of “violence” masquerading as “justice.”

own) until Yahweh comes to his rescue and delivers him and Śāray from the Egyptian oppression.

Things are not looking good. We might be excused if we conclude that nothing has really changed. The earth's acquisitive hordes are still up to their same violent tricks. We are anxious about the future. We can be excused if we bring our anxiousness into the next story.

Upon leaving Egypt, Abraham re-enters the Promised Land, accompanied by his nephew, Lôt. They have both acquired considerable material wealth. *Gulp*. As they compete for grazing lands to feed their large flocks of cattle, strife breaks out between them. *Oh, no. Here we go again. Someone is about to die... No, someone is about to kill for gain.*

Let's let the text tell the rest. We have finally gotten to our punch-line.

“And Abram said unto Lot, ‘Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left.’

And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other.

Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom.”²⁹

We will just pause here for dramatic effect. We will pause here to appreciate and bask in the genius of our authors/editors. In the four narratives of their “pre-history,” the authors/editors presented us with how things work “in the world.” They are dark and depressing. They produce only schism and death. We were prepared for more of the same. But glory be to

²⁹ Genesis 13.⁸⁻¹²

God, something new really has arrived. There is a new genesis. We almost want to place an exclamation point behind every sentence that follows! (We will not do so, but allow this one to suffice for all the rest)

Abraham, at least in part by virtue of his calling in which he was instructed that he was to “*be a blessing*,” does not deny the truth that he is “his brother’s keeper.” Rather, he acts upon the truth in the most radical way imaginable. He makes a decision that has the potential to ruin him financially. He allows his competitor to have first choice of resources. He concludes, apparently, that he, Abraham, has no more “right” to the choicest resources than does his “brother.” He concludes that to think otherwise is ungodly, unholy, and unworthy of one who claims to be a follower of the One and Only True God. Abraham trusts, apparently, that God knows he has need and that God will provide. This is so utterly “irresponsible” (This does require an exclamation point... or two... or three)!!!³⁰ This is so.... So... otherworldly!

This is so.... God-like.

It is so... Christ-like.

It is so.... Christian.

and thus we see

We now come to the new me. The “Post-~~Trump~~” me. The pointed and sharp me. The penitent me.

In a whisper, as it were, I have led groups of students and entire congregations to this point a dozen times in my thirty years of preaching and teaching. I have asked them how they might apply this revelation—for it really is revelatory—to their personal lives. I have asked them how it might affect the way they treat others. I’ve then walked away and left them to do as

³⁰ It is of interest, and worthy of more thought, that according to Moses 5.³³ Qayin associates “freedom” with the power to acquire at any cost to others. But Abraham has discovered a new type of “freedom.”

they deemed best.

But there is to be no more whispering. I now demand a consideration concerning how this revelation will be applied to our lives as citizens of an ungodly nation. I now demand an examination of how it might impact our public and political life. I now ask, “How will this impact the way you vote, the people you choose to represent you and your values? How will this revelation impact the laws that you demand your elected representatives propose and pass? How will this impact how you agitate for a Just Society?”

There are many, many “political” and “policy” applications that we could make from this revelation. We will, here, only suggest one of the many.

Economic development incentives

Put simply, an economic development incentive is an offer of cash, buildings, worker training, tax breaks, etc. offered to a business by a state or local government in order to induce said company to locate (most often *re-locate*) their business or certain business enterprises in the state or local area offering the incentive. It can be initiated by either business or government agencies. If this practice was not exactly “invented” in the 1970’s, it certainly established itself as a major practice during the 1970’s.

The 1970’s motivation for such incentives is to be found, in large part, in the economic recession of the time—effectively the first such recession after the economic boom of the post-World War II era—which, understandably, produced individual and group economic hardship and insecurity. For many this economic insecurity was the first encountered in their lifetime. For some it was a grim if miniature reminder of the great recession of the pre-war years. Whether because it was the first experienced economic downturn or a grim reminder of past catastrophes, it was unnerving out of proportion to the perils. It seemed to justify extreme measures.

In addition, and at the same time, American business leaders were preaching and hearing a false and devastatingly evil gospel of prosperity. This false gospel can be heard in the

writings of such individuals as Milton Friedman, who, as one author put it, “told every executive, financier, and shareholder not only that it was okay to make a profit, but that making as much profit as possible, without regard to some broader social responsibility was a duty.”³¹ These same business leaders began to organize and form associations in which they could act in concert to practice the false gospel of prosperity with greater effectiveness—and subterfuge.

As we have already said, economic development incentives can be initiated by business or government. In them, there is an agreement between the business and government partners that the business will locate all or portions of their business enterprises in a particular locale. Commonly, perhaps most commonly, the agreement involves a *re*-location. It often looks something like this.

Company XYZ currently employs 350 workers in Flint, Michigan to manufacture a company product. Columbus, Ohio offers XYZ 50.2 million dollars in tax breaks over 10 years as well as 6.5 million dollars toward the construction of a new facility if it will move its production from Flint to Columbus. As is common, negotiations take place, not only between the company and Columbus officials, but between the company and Flint officials. Flint and Columbus and XYZ make offers and counter offers until, finally, Columbus wins the bidding war and XYZ moves the facility from Flint to Columbus.

Consequently, 350 employees in Flint are out of work. They have lost their jobs and all that comes with them—for example, health care coverage (maybe, if XYZ still had an ounce of integrity remaining, they offered such a benefit). In addition, several businesses dependent upon the incomes of those fired employees suffer losses causing them too to downsize or, worse case scenario, go out of business entirely. Those 350 lost XYZ jobs quickly turn into 700 lost jobs in Flint.

After months of worry and stress (often causing health issues that cannot be adequately dealt with due to the lack of health care coverage), citizens in Flint, unable to keep up with mortgage or rent payments, lose their homes or apartments. The local housing market goes

³¹ *Glass House: The 1% Economy and the Shattering of the All-American Town*, Brian Alexander

into decline, houses losing 8% of their value. The most lucky home owners keep their homes. The less fortunate sell their homes for less than they owe on them. The least lucky lose their homes along with any equity that may have been accumulated (here is one “upside” to the difficulties—I am being sarcastic, here—investors swoop in and purchase homes at bargain basement prices. These monied interests will later sell those houses, often to the very people who sold them or lost them in the first place, at a significant profit to the investor).

In addition, with the loss of jobs comes a loss of income for the local government. There is less money for road repair, less money for schools, less money for the homeless shelter, etc., etc., etc. Individuals who consider moving to Flint from elsewhere, chose to live elsewhere due to poor schools, etc.

Putting it lightly, this is all most unseemly.

But what about Columbus? How are things going down there? Surely things are looking up there, such that we can justify the harm that has been inflicted on Flint. Well, let’s have a look. But remember, however good things might be in Columbus, Flint will remain as it has been described.

But, alas, things are not so great in Columbus either. There are 350 people now working at XYZ. However, these individuals were already in the local economy, so, XYZ has directly brought no new jobs into the community. The community has seen a few new jobs indirectly. These are mostly low-paying service industry jobs. The salary of the 350 new employees at XYZ is no more than that which they were previously making, so no new tax dollars are coming into the local government coffers—and, actually, the salary paid to the 350 employees in Columbus is less than that which was being paid in Flint.

No one new has moved into the area for the jobs, so the impact on the local housing market is minimal. Due to the loss of taxes devoted to the economic incentives provided to XYZ, the roads are more pot-holed than they were previously. Local school teachers find that, with fewer tax dollars available, not only will they not receive the measly 2% raise that they had

been promised, they are actually asked to accept a cut in their benefits. Teacher moral falls and school children suffer.

We could go on. Need we do so?

Oh, but don't forget about XYZ. What about them? They have a brand spanking new building that cost them nothing. Let's just call it the result of corporate welfare. XYZ sold their old building in Flint, not for a huge amount of money, but every little penny helps. They have no financial obligations to Columbus for 10 years—at which time, they can find another community who is willing to enter a bidding war with Columbus, providing XYZ another sucker to swindle.

The company's "financial obligations" to shareholders is being fulfilled quite nicely, thank you very much, Columbus, Ohio—stock prices are up, dividends are going great guns, and, talk about the rewards going to those inventive CEOs who orchestrated this entire shameful scam... oh, you should see their new palaces (built in Connecticut, by the way, not Columbus). Oh, and by the way, those same CEOs, bloated with their corporate welfare checks, will be the first to contribute to their favorite conservative politicians, who promise to clean up those welfare rolls and reduce the measly amount going to the poor—the sick ironies are simply too numerous and thick to keep up with.

But what a marvelous 10 year run it will be for XYZ. No obligations to the community. No assistance with repairing and widening roads—not even the one right out front of their business. This will all be taken care out of the local government's tax coffers into which XYZ pays not one red cent while stealing 50.2 million.

Oh, yes, we should mention that the "creative" mayor who accomplished all of this.... You got it, he was rewarded for creating 350 "new jobs" by being elected to the U.S. house of representatives (where he sits next to the corporate lawyer who made this moral bankruptcy look respectable). It will be another 10 years before the community realizes that they were conned by the corporate pirates and the mayor. Too late, though. Mr. Mayor is now working in a K-street lobby firm where he is rolling in the doe as a lackey of America's corrupt

business bandits, and quiet seriously suggesting that your community should do exactly as his did.

Let's see, have we forgotten anything? Oh, yes, I almost forgot. Besides the fact that this corporate murder is, at best, a zero sum game—no new jobs created (only transferred from one community to another), no new local government revenues (rather, a loss to both, either through loss of private incomes or business incentive costs), and victims everywhere—THIS ECONOMIC PRACTICE IS IMMORAL!!³²

It would be immoral even if there were huge gains to Columbus—and there are not.

It is immoral. It is ungodly. It is anti-Christ.

Those companies that pit communities against each other through such pillaging practices, and those state and local governments that betray their public trust through such practices are practicing the dark arts of Qayin. These are violent acts inspired by an unholy and impure desire to acquire at any expense and regardless of the harm it perpetrates against others. Columbus is perfectly happy sacrificing its brother up in Flint for its own—what turns out to be—meager gains. After all, the people of Columbus can't be expected to be their brothers' keepers. Too bad if those folks in Flint aren't quite as smart and clever as we folks in Columbus. We Columbus folks must look after our own. Survival of the fittest you know, and all that.

Columbus practices acquisitive violence against Flint. XYZ practices acquisitive violence

³² For reasons that should be clear from our review of Genesis, and which we will summarize below, this practice would be immoral even if there were all sorts of gains to be had in Columbus. But the gains to Columbus, so harmful to Flint, as time, experience, and research as suggested are minimal. Certainly not worth the violent slaughter of one's brother. See, for example, "Tax Incentives: Costly for States, Drag on the Nation" found here http://itep.org/itep_reports/2013/08/tax-incentives-costly-for-states-drag-on-the-nation.php. See also, "How Local Taxpayers Bankroll Corporations, at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/02/us/how-local-taxpayers-bankroll-corporations.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. Also, for example, "Should We Ban States and Cities from Offering Big Tax Breaks for Jobs" at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/09/15/should-we-ban-states-and-cities-from-offering-big-tax-breaks-for-jobs/?utm_term=.b619c646a88a. A 2017 book publication, "*Glass House: The 1% Economy and the Shattering of the All-American Town*" by Brian Alexander provides an excellent real-life example of the violent devastation produced by these unholy financial schemes.

against Flint and Columbus. People's lives are in financial ruin. Hearts are hardened. Inequality widens. Cynicism and mistrust increase. The ability to cooperate disappears. National unity disappears (until an outside common enemy, even if invented, comes along to unite us). Government is seen as the enemy. Petty demagogues spouting lies and false hopes are elected. Cynicism and nihilism rise to flood stage. Society collapses. People suffer and die.

Hell rejoices.

No Just Society would countenance such violent evil being perpetrated by and against its own population.³³

And what are we to say about the “Christians” living in full view of this accepted evil? What are we to make of their complete silence in the face of this Qayin-like society? What are we to do with their all-too-frequent, willing, and energetic participation in this violence?

How can they scream at the sin of the gay man or woman, while they are silent concerning and even participating in this shedding of blood? Do they not know they are covered in blood themselves? Are they really such hypocrites?

Can they feign ignorance? Have they not read their Bible? Were they not paying attention when Jesus came into their life and sacrificed his own life for them? When he became their Keeper? How could they not understand?

No “Christian,” understanding the Bible and having experienced the redemptive love of the Son of God, could or would personally and willingly participate in such immoral behavior. Neither could they remain mute.

Every “Christian,” upon seeing such immoral behavior even being contemplated, let alone

³³ We will have to leave the discussion concerning the latest American style Qayin doctrine of the “America First” movement which justifies this same violence, not against its own citizens, but those of other nations.

put into practice, would and should preach and shout and agitate against businesses involved in such viciousness. Every one of them would and should vote against politicians that propose and carry out such ungodly acts against individuals and society.

This is but one example of dozens we could offer in which we have adopted Qayin's attitudes and behaviors. Our individual, institutional, and community covetousness, our idolatry, is everywhere evident if one but knows how and where to look. The Bible sheds a bright spot light on all of it. But few are looking. Fewer yet, believe. And almost none act.

America with her multitudes of professing Christians has great cause to repent. Otherwise, the curse of Qayin hangs threateningly over our heads.

If we were to adopt the poetic style of the Old Testament prophetic tradition, the message of this homily might go something like this:

Where and when did that first community decide to sell itself,
prostitute itself for company favors,
put itself first
at the expense of its brother?

“Leave your current community,
Leave your present lover,
and come to us.

Neither we nor you have any responsibility to or for our suffering brother.

Let him fend for himself.

Bring your hundreds
or your dozens of jobs.

You'll have no responsibility to our community.

You'll not be asked to do a thing for or among us.

No request will come your way to make improvements.

You can live amongst as a squatter.”

The prostitute steals another's husband.

The whore pays the John!

Oh you foolish people.

Why prostitute yourselves in this manner?

Do you not perceive?

Do you really think that your new lover,
having left another for you,
will remain true to you?

Do you not see that coming to you
merely for your enticements,
your lover will leave you for another
a younger lover who offers additional pleasures?

Do you not see that in considering only your own pleasures,
you have stolen from another
only to have yet another steal from you?

While the companies, reaping profits for their shareholders,
going from one orgasm to another,
leave broken communities in their wake.
No concern of theirs.

Jobs lost,
and nothing to show for it.
But suffering.

No improvements to roads.
No parks for the children of the unemployed.
Nothing.

In your guilt ridden adultery,
You have left the company's previous lover forlorn,
As you are now.

What kind of a whore are you, anyway?
You pay the rapist to rape you!

And what of those so-called Christians?
Those in business, government
And those of the citizenry?

They too enjoy the fruits of whoredom

Participate in the violent banditry, pillage, and rape.

Who started this infidelity?

Who first put their desires above those of fellow citizens?

Oh, yes, of course.

It was Qayin.

Master Mahan.

Master of this great secret.

In this world, violence pays.

There are millions to be acquired by it.

It's how the rich get richer.

It's how the poor get poorer.

It's how nations fall.

Yet, they all glory in their wickedness,

Calling the evil, "good."

While the heavens weep.

And the End descends,

And the final exhaling breath vanishes into mist.

^a Heb., *šāḥat*. This word appears three times in verses 11 and 12 alone—more times in succeeding verses. Most often in the hiphil stem, it means, 'to destroy, spoil, mar, ruin, corrupt, pervert,' etc. Two of the three occurrences in these two verses are in the niphil stem. As ^ʿlōhīm looked down upon the earth it looked marred, wasted, ruined. Above, he is said to have been saddened by his workmanship. Hence, here, it is viewed as a failure. Readers may not like the notion that God can somehow experience a "failure." However, Moses 7.³³ presents us with just such a notion. "And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should chose me, their Father: but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood." What God had hoped to accomplish through creating the earth was not being accomplished. His "self-image," which he had placed upon human kind at creation, has been corrupted, perverted, and lost. Humans are beyond all recognition.

^b Heb., *ḥāmās*. "Violence" is the most common translation. But in our day, we tend to associate violence almost exclusively with physical acts of aggression. We see clearly the violence committed with a fist or a gun, but do not see the violence that is to be found in the businessman's unethical and immoral business practices. The latter are, I would suggest, every bit as devastating and destructive to the individual and society as the former. Because of our modern twisted perspectives in this regard—our only seeing violence in too limited a manner and creating laws that reflect our twisted morality—I avoid using the word.

Now, the Hebrew Bible does acknowledge an extreme, "physical" form of violence. But the word also alludes to non-physical forms of aggression and violence. *TWOT* mentions the Arabic cognate, which means, "to be hard, strict, severe." It also suggests that *ḥāmās* represents notions of 'injustice.'

“For the verb, we may take as our starting-point Zeph. 3:4, a sermon detailing with the offenses of various classes, in which the priests do *hms* to the law. The context as a whole points to wronging of the powerless, to whose disadvantage the religious law is bent. The socio-ethical aspect of *hms* stands in the foreground from the very outset....” (TDOT, Vol. IV, p. 479)

“The most common synonym of *chāmās*, however is *shōdh*, which means primarily oppression of the “*nīyīm* and ‘*ebyônīm* and even suggest that this is the basic meaning of *chāmās*. The pair *chāmās*, and *shōdh* seems almost to have been felt to constitute a single concept” (TDOT, Vol. IV, p. 480).

The mouth can do *hāmās*. It is not restricted to men, for women can engage in *hāmās* as well. For example, Hāgār practices *hāmās* against Šāray while no physical violence takes place (Gen. 16.⁵). There, the *hāmās* is an over-exacting rivalry that manifests itself in the judgmental feelings Hāgār possesses toward Šāray. Ex. 23.¹, of a “false” witness. Ps. 140.^{1,4}, of individuals who seek the Psalmist’s demise. Proverbs 4.¹⁷, of those who seek to diminish others. Ps. 73.⁶, of the wealthy (how they obtain and maintain). Isaiah 53.⁹, parallel with deceit. Gen. 49.5, of Simeon and Levi’s violence. Judges 9.24, of Abimelek’s murder for hire. Psalm 7.16, falsehood used for another’s demise. Psalm 27.¹², 35.¹¹, false witness. Zephaniah 3.⁴.

^c Heb., *šht*.

^d Heb., *darkô*, ‘his way.’ Though this has traditionally been understood to refer to mankind, there seems to be nothing to exclude the possibility that it refers to “^elôhîm’s way.” ^elôhîm’s “way” here is taken to mean ^elôhîm’s plans, intentions, hopes. ^elôhîm is portrayed here as being much more than angered. Just read through chapter seven of Moses and note the number of times that God, angels, heavens, prophets, etc., weep over the mess on the earth and the destruction that follows on its heels.