I. Research articles

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Cain's sin: New interpretive contexts*

The author reinterprets the biblical story of Cain and Abel. The account in *The Book of Genesis* is viewed as ambiguous and in need of a new anthropological interpretive approach. The sense of the story extends beyond known interpretations: Jacek Filek's philosophical interpretation, Alan Aycock's anthropological interpretation, and Jose Saramago's atheist viewpoint. The new interpretation proposed here is labelled *mysterious*. Why did Cain kill? Could he have avoided killing? Why did God accept Abel's offering and reject Cain's? Why does God place a protective mark on Cain? And who is the figure of Cain in the first place?

The basis for the new approach to Cain's sin is Michał Klinger's book *Cain's Mystery*. Klinger concludes that the biblical account of the fratricide contains the message of the vagueness of God's decrees and the universality of evil, which, besides good, is an inalienable element of humanity. Cain is interpreted as being similar to the sinners in Gospels, who encounter Jesus and receive forgiveness and salvation.

Key words: anthropological interpretation, biblical account, Cain and Abel, good and evil

1. The problem: Cain and Abel

The biblical account of Cain's crime (Genesis 4:1–16) plays in Western culture a role of a paradigmatic narrative. "Cain killing Abel", writes

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Baudrillard somewhat ironically, "is already a crime against humanity (there were only two of them!)" (2013 [2005]: 111). In fact, of course, it is not about a crime against humanity, but rather about the paradigmatic crime and about Cain as the model figure of a sinner. That is why the story of the two brothers is still important to us.

What does it say? It functions as part of the spiritual "genotype" of Western culture, familiar also to those who do not identify with Judaism or Christianity. However, I have the impression that it is often taken as an indecent mental shortcut ("a brother killed a brother"), and its understanding is not much different from a lukewarm reception of a folklore legend about two brothers at variance or of a moralising story about the executioner and the victim. However, contrary to common belief, this is not a simple story with a moral. Rather, it is a complex and ambiguous text with obscure semantics, whose exegesis usually omits all "inconvenient" fragments that could make it less unambiguous.

If one reads this passage outside its linguistic and exegetical context, its meaning appears obvious, both in its storyline and in its moral plane. There is a murderer and a victim, there is murder and innocently shed blood. The biblical characters play the roles assigned to them by the Divine Author with some pre-established fatalism. Whatever happened was bound to happen. Abel played the role of an innocent victim, Cain that of a cunning murderer. Hence, it may seem that this well-known tale does no longer present any interpretive problems, that its explanation is laid down here almost directly, with the meanings attributed to characters and events being morally and theologically unequivocal. In short, it would seem that Cain's crime and punishment, and in particular his sin, do not leave room for questions. All of this is perfectly lucid and explicable through the logic of the Bible. The good found in the figure of the innocent Abel is elevated, the evil whose archetypal emblem is the sinful Cain is condemned, and the murderer himself, stigmatised with social odium, is rightly relegated into oblivion.

However, it seems to me that a cognitively credible reading of Cain's story stands in strong conflict with the above explanatory approach. I thus argue that if one adheres to the letter of the biblical account, the black-and-white scenario usually activated with respect to it clearly fails. Not only is it insufficient to explain the story away, but it also misinterprets its elemental meanings. At a closer and more careful look, it turns out that nothing in it is simple and unequivocal, that it is not, as some would see it, an ancient version of contemporary stories of brotherly conflicts. It is rather Ricardo J. Quinones who is right – in the introduction to his brilliant analysis of literary refractions of the story of Cain's crime, he puzzlingly writes:

> From the very beginning the story of Cain and Abel was a mystery. This is already visible at the level of the story itself. From the terse original to the most complicated and elaborate story of *Finnegans Wake* there had been restraint if not confusion as to why that happened and even as to what happened. (Quinones 1991: 17)

First of all, I suggest that the story hides in its midst more questions than can be answered by common sense or routine biblical exegesis, which usually follows unambiguous and predictable moralising paths (Läpple 1975–1977). Secondly, the story contains meanings that go far beyond the Hebrew social and cultural environment, which is a limitation that some religious and anthropological interpretations are based on. And thirdly, I claim that in addition to the interpretation of the first murder most prevalent in Western Christian theology (in particular, in the Roman Catholic version), or besides explanations from cultural studies scholars trying to unequivocally rationalise the story, there is another interpretation that I propose to term *mysterious*. It is an interpretation in which the "edges" of the biblical narrative remain unsmoothed with respect to the intention inherent in the text, which finally goes beyond narrowly understood rationality based on the principle of non-contradiction. In short, I claim that there is an inherent mystery in this story, which can hardly be submitted to a historical, a philological, or a conceptual exegesis, a mystery that perhaps can only be reasonably expressed within the logic of the paradox.

The perspective I will try to outline here is essentially anthropological, although understandably in many aspects it connects with the theological approach. In interpreting the story, I would not like to completely hide behind the veil of this or that school of thought. The biblical account is moving on the personal level, with the issues it raises not being limited to the past that can be interpreted only within the framework of specialised knowledge. Therefore, obviously, I use the analytical and exegetical tools available, but try to maintain the personal perspective of directly relating to the biblical world of history, concepts, and symbols. Therefore, for me the text possesses an inalienable existential value. And finally, I want to emphasise my focus on reconstructing meaning from the biblical text, without considering the pragmatic conclusions that could be derived from it for normative ethics, codes of law, or present-day morality. In the present study, these issues are treated as secondary.

2. Interpretations of the Biblical account

The biblical account is extremely compact, laconic, and tenuous in it storyline; it only gives the most important, "bare" facts: the who, what,

when, and where. It is totally a-psychological, the characters are presented through their actions. The gaps and omissions, which every story necessarily contains, provoke the reader to complement them with something that could (or should) have happened: such is a characteristic feature of the midrash.[1] The careful reading of the Book of Genesis lends credence to the initial presumption that nothing in that story is really coherent. Indeed, nothing there is black and white. Yes, we have the perpetrator and the victim; yes, Cain killed. It is also true that Abel died from his hand. Where is any place for doubt in the face of these hard facts? Yet, there are also other questions, no less important and stimulating to the reader's imagination. Why did Cain kill at all? Could he have avoided killing? Why did the Lord accept Abel's offering and reject Cain's? And moreover: if Cain is the archetypal murderer, if he is a model sinner, if God despises him, if he should only be damned and forgotten – as it is usually the case in moralising readings – why does God put a protective mark on him? What is it really about? Why is the murderer protected? Who *is* Cain, in the first place? Is the biblical text really as simple as we would like to believe? Let us not hurry with the answers.

We shall first open up a space for conjectures and preliminary suggestions by reviewing three different attempts to answer these questions. This is to draw a broad spectrum of possible solutions, as far as the language, the style of expression, and specific interpretive proposals are concerned.

2.1. A philosophical interpretation: Jacek Filek

First, let us review a philosophical reading of the story from a philosopher and a lecturer in ethics, Jacek Filek (2001, "Cain's sad face"). In his essay, Filek seeks the primordial structure of evil, which he says most often hides behind its emanations. He argues that whenever evil manifests itself most ostentatiously, its nature can hardly be understood. We are thus led astray, cursing sinister deeds themselves, without noticing that they have a deeper foundation. This primordial basis, according to the author, is the bad way of life from which an evil deed grows and in relation to which it can be comprehended. Such is the true condition for the possibility of committing evil deeds. Evil is deceptive, in the sense that its most spectacular manifestations can veil its fundamental nature, i.e. the very state of being evil, not particular events. Filek's reading of the biblical story is as follows:

[1] The American writer and essayist Anita Diamant writes: "The compressed stories and images in the Bible are rather like photographs. They don't tell us everything we want or need to know. Midrash is the story about what happened before and after the photographic flash" (in Finding 2004: 17).

Let us consider [...] the most obvious example. Here is the act: Cain kills Abel. It would seem that it constitutes a "clinical" case of evil, the evil of Cain's deed. Everyone sees that Cain is evil. If one could stop Cain, there would have not been any evil. But Cain is not evil because he killed; it is the reverse: he killed because he was evil. If we had managed to prevent Cain from doing this, we would not have destroyed evil in him. Cain would still have remained evil. And that means that no police, no institutional prevention is able to free us from Cain's evil.

Even before he killed, Cain's face was already sad. "Why are you upset? Why are you depressed?", asks God. "If you do what is appropriate, you'll be accepted, won't you? But if you don't do what is appropriate, sin is crouching near your doorway, turning toward you" (Gen 4:6–7[2]). Sin as a new occurrence, but a newly committed sinful act is not the beginning of evil. Sin is only "lying" and "lurking", and obtains access to a person when they do not live well, when the "inclination of the thoughts of the human heart [is] only evil all the time" (Gen 6:5). So Cain kills his brother. "And why did he murder him? – asks St. John – Because what he was doing was evil [...]. The person who does not love remains spiritually dead. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:12–15). (Filek 2001: 192–193)[3]

This is an instructive example of the radically and unequivocally moralising interpretation of Cain's story. Cain is here an archetypal villain, and the whole story seems to be devoid of any questions. We immediately notice the presence of a significant distortion in this commentary. Cain killed, says the philosopher, because he was an evil man inside, at his very heart, and the clear proof of that was his sad face with which he flaunted. But how does the exegete know that? Certainly, not from the text itself! Indeed, the *Gdańsk Bible*[4] says enigmatically "his face has fallen" (which probably denotes a sad facial expression), and in the *Millennium Bible*[5] we read without ambiguity: "your face is grim" – but the insightful commentator did not ask himself what was the reason for that. After all, the whole passage from Genesis 4:1–16 is a sequence of *events*, a sequence with a clearly increasing causality. Both brothers had previously made their offerings to God and the text says nothing about their intentions. There is no mention of one of them making his offering in good faith and the other in bad. The text also says nothing about the quality of the gifts offered; it does not suggest in any way that Cain's offering was less valuable. And that was exactly what happened: for some unknown reasons, Yahweh did not approve of Cain's offering. This and only this was why Cain's face was sad!

[2] All biblical quotations come from International Standard Version, available at www.biblegateway.com. [translator's note]

[3] All translations from non-English publications by R.A. [translator's note]

[4] Pol. *Biblia Gdańska*, a protestant Polish translation of the Bible from 1632. [translator's note]

[5] Pol. *Biblia Tysiąclecia*, the main Polish Catholic translation of the Bible; 1st ed. 1965, 5th ed. 2000. Its text was used as the basis for Polish Jerusalem Bible (2006).

But the real question is why the Lord did not approve of Cain's offering. This is what continues to intrigue serious exegetes, but there is no mention of it in the philosophical interpretation cited above. Nor is there any trace in the biblical text of the presumption that, as the interpreter persistently holds, Cain "killed because he was angry". Frankly speaking, from the source text we do not learn much about the two brothers, their nature, personalities, and preferences. The excerpt cited is an example not so much of a peculiar text exegesis or even of a carefree reading, but rather of frivolous use of text to illustrate a previously conceived of hypothesis.[6] Cain turns out to be a monochrome, poster-like figure, devoid of any depth or trace of ambiguity. In this situation, it is less surprising that the puzzling elements of this story (such as Cain's mark) have been completely omitted in this hasty, one-dimensional interpretation.

2.2. An anthropological interpretation: D. Alan Aycock

The anthropological reading follows a completely different trajectory. In the collection of texts devoted to the structural analyses of various elements of the biblical myth, we can also find a short study by D. Alan Aycock (1983).[7] It is primarily a detailed interpretation of the meaning of Cain's mark, but – as if incidentally – it is also a courageous attempt to anthropologically interpret the entire story of Cain and Abel. In his explanation, the author exploits a wealth of ethnological and religious knowledge, searching there for analogies to unveil the meaning of Cain's mark. In spite of religious references, the author's entire interpretation is carried out consistently from a clearly unconfessed position. Cain is treated there as simply a cultural hero (one of many), and the biblical text is regarded as any other "cultural text" that may be subject to a structuralist treatment. Naturally, there is nothing wrong with that, but this kind of interpretive decision is not as epistemologically innocent as it might seem to its author.

Perhaps the most intriguing idea in that study is that Cain and Jesus, the two cultural "heroes", are "exact reciprocal structural analogues" (Aycock 1998: 156). The author is aware of the peculiarity of his position in the context of Christian theology (and probably in terms of common sense), but argues boldly that his study will allow the reader to "be persuaded very quickly" (Aycock 1998: 156). The key points of comparison are Cain's mark

[6] That said, the idea of invisible but real structures of evil is undoubtedly inspirational and deserves attention.

[7] The English original is referenced here but the quotations below are back translations into English from the Polish version of Aycock (1998). [translator's note]

and Christ's stigmata. Both types of wounds are treated here metaphorically as information about the specific status of the two figures. First, Cain's and Christ's stigmata reveal the contradiction between physical mortality and spiritual immortality. Second, the stigmata separate a marked person from the rest of the society and thus exclude them from the accepted moral principles. Third, they mediate between the divine and human reality. Fourth, a stigma also mediates between creativity and destruction, and the hero marked with it resembles a trickster, a well-known figure from North American mythology.

Citing arguments of various degrees of credibility in support of his structural analogy, Aycock also refers – which is particularly interesting for us – to Cain's offering that God refused. The author argues that Cain's story is customarily interpreted in ethical terms as a moral reprimand for killing, while it also contains another important lesson of grave cultural significance:

> Cain's murder of Abel is a direct compensation for the inferiority of the bloodless sacrifice [...]. We sense in this subtle irony that God rejected the pious offering of Cain the farmer, giving priority to the produce of Abel the shepherd only to receive an alternative sacrifice of the shepherd himself. (Aycock 1998: 162)

I will not go into the details of Aycock's study with its many debatable points. Like in the previous case, I am more interested in the method itself, the tool of interpretation rather than its final results – which are, incidentally, exceptionally misleading. As a commentary, let us just consider Edmund Leach's note from the introduction to this peculiar "biblical" book – for some reason, this great British anthropologist had the misfortune of lending his name to the whole enterprise.[8] Leach openly says what is intuitively felt from the beginning: "The stories of Jesus and Cain may be analogues, but, at least at the first level of transformation, they are inverse" (Leach 1983: 4). In brief, the logic of the story of Cain and Christ unambiguously suggests that Jesus is rather the equivalent of Abel than Cain! Abel's figure was usually used in patristic and liturgical texts as an antetype of innocent sacrifice prefiguring the future sacrifice of Christ. Either way, omitting the obvious nonsense, this "exegesis" is similar to the previous one in that it completely ignores the complexity and ambiguity of Cain's story. This is a purely formal type of analysis; an analysis in which individual elements and characters are merely carriers of meanings, helping the analyst to determine the infamous "structure" (based on binary oppositions), and that is the final destination of

[8] This is a surprising statement from the present author in the light of the quotation from Leach a few lines below, as well as from the latter's other comments, in which he epxressed his reservations concerning Aycock's study; cf. "I am less happy about Dr Aycock's second essay" (Leach 1983: 4) and the explanation the follows. [transl. note]

the whole undertaking. From the beginning, it is noteworthy that the whole theological context, crucial for understanding this story, is here completely disregarded. The "solution" to the problem of Cain's unaccepted offering is fairly straightforward, albeit rather risky: it turns out that the God of Genesis apparently favours carnivorousness, and the whole story with both offerings, amusing for Aycock (we naturally admire Yahweh's "subtle irony") is in fact an illustration of the superiority of bloody sacrifices (of animals) over offerings of agricultural products. In still other words, it would be a brutal illustration of the superiority of shepherds and breeders over farmers, an illustration that structuralists could find legible. Of course, as we will see later, the story of Cain takes place in a particular cultural environment and necessarily contains a strong local "residue", therefore there is no reason to completely ignore ethnographic data in its reading. But naturally, the story should not be reduced to its historical and cultural context.

All in all, maybe we did not learn much about Cain from Aycock's risky interpretation, but we learnt much (far too much) about the possibilities and effectiveness of the structural method. But that is unimpressive because the biblical text is resistant to structuralist engineering. It seems that its mysteries have not been even partially unravelled. The anthropological reading approach – and I write it *à contre-coeur* – proved to be surprisingly flat and epistemologically barren.

2.3. An atheistic interpretation: Jose Saramago

The third interpretation is a passage from *Cain*, an extraordinary book by Jose Saramago, a Portuguese Nobel Prize winner, an author ostentatiously demonstrating his atheism, also known for his anti-clerical attacks. It is hence worth saying right away that in this book, just as in Saramago's other novels, we do not deal with *ad hoc* journalism wrapped in secondary literary form, but with a well-thought-out and intelligently written prose, whose outstanding literary quality is non-debatable. In the literary apocrypha dedicated to the figure of Cain, Saramago asks first about the identity of the title character. He asks who essentially was the one that had to play the murderer? The author tries to explore that character's motives; he tries to figure out how it could have happened that the man raised his hand against his own brother. Saramago develops a detailed history of Cain's life and reflects on the latter's tragic fate after his exile from Eden. In a way similar to Jewish midrashim, the novelist fills in the empty and ambiguous places in the biblical narrative, creating an apocryphal story of Cain. Of course, his novel is not an interpretation in the literal sense of the word, but its literary concept

itself and the way the intrigue is presented already contains a kind of exegesis of the biblical passage, even if not worded in academic language. After the murder, a peculiar dialogue between Cain and the Creator takes place:

> Where is your brother, he asked, and cain responded with another question. Am I my brother's keeper, You killed him, Yes, I did, but you are the one who is really to blame, I would have given my life for him if you had not destroyed mine, It was a question of putting you to the test, But one put to the test the very thing you yourself created, Because I am the sovereign lord of all things, And of all creatures you will say, but not of me and my freedom, What, the freedom to kill, Just as you had the freedom to stop me killing abel, which was perfectly within your capabilities, all you had to do, just for a moment, was to abandon that pride in your infallibility that you share with all the other gods, and again, just for a moment, to be truly merciful and accept my offering with humility, because you shouldn't have refused it, you gods, and all the others, have a duty to those you have created, This is seditious talk, Yes, possibly, but I can guarantee you that if I were god, I would repeat every day Blessed are those who choose sedition because theirs is the kingdom of the earth, That's sacrilege, Maybe, but no more sacrilegious than you allowing abel to die, You were the one who killed him, True, but you were the one who pronounced sentence, whereas I merely carried out the execution, That blood over there wasn't spilled by me, you could have chosen between good and evil, but you chose evil and must pay for it... (Saramago 2011 [2009]: 25–26)

One cannot miss the irony, and maybe even sarcasm, with which Saramago treats the inspired text. One would like to say that we have already heard this song somewhere: this is of course a variation on the well-known Enlightenment note. Saramago's spirit is entirely Voltairean. He looks at the whole story with a cool rationalist eye, tracking the gaps and inconsistencies in the whole narrative. From Enlightenment there derives the critique of the anthropomorphic perception of God (who in the text, according to the well-rooted mental imagery, bears king's attributes) and the monarchic metaphor deeply rooted in the Christian rhetoric. But there is something in this text that makes Saramago's interpretation of Cain's story more serious than the rationalist criticism of religious imagery. First of all, the irony of his narrative, even the frivolity with which the biblical story is treated, cannot overshadow the author's awareness of what he is saying. He knows the details of and the commentaries to the biblical passage well (this is testified by the scene of Abel being killed with a donkey's jaw – known from one of the midrashim). Secondly, for an anti-clericalist and atheist he exhibits a surprisingly lively, emotional, not to say a fervent attitude to it. The whole fragment is a rather poorly concealed attempt to defend Cain: this is done through the elaborate sequence about the alleged personality of Abel. Saramago tries to add to the original text a psychological motivation behind Cain's "righteous" wrath. Thirdly, it is clear that the author is especially intrigued by what deprives some of us of the peace of mind: an attempt to

unravel the reasons why God did not accept Cain's offering. And as we shall see this is not a trivial matter.

So much is probably enough to notice in this "atheistic" interpretation of Cain's myth something more than a delayed joke, a very distant Enlightenment derivative. Saramago brings up the secret of evident divine injustice, the object of which is Cain's offering. And it must be said that the explanation of this fragment is a weak point of many exegeses: Saramago is absolutely right when he writes earlier that it is an issue that "remains unexplained until today" (Saramago 2011 [2009]: 23).

In order to see this, let us recall the views of Lev Shestov, vastly diverging from the thinking of the Portuguese Nobel Prize winner:

> The so-called ultimate questions troubled mankind in the world's dawn as badly as they trouble us now. Adam and Eve wanted "to know," and they plucked the fruit at their risk. Cain, whose sacrifice did not please God, raised his hand against his brother: and it seemed to him he committed murder in the name of justice, in vindication of his own injured rights. Nobody has ever been able to understand why God preferred Abel's sacrifice to that of Cain. (Shestov 1920 [1905]: 68)

Saramago's doubts, although explicitly expressed "from the outside" of the biblical text, from the openly atheistic position, could be seen as a continuation of the mental schema whose "canonical" shape comes form Shestov's roguish book.

True, Saramago's literary remake of the biblical myth sounds suspiciously human, arch-human. This is clearly a unilateral paraphrase, in a way the reverse of the philosophical interpretation discussed above. There Cain was clearly accused of the sin of wrongdoing, here we have a clear accusation against the Creator of provoking the deed and an equally clear defence from Cain. As it comes from Saramago, this should not be surprising: the author sides with the man against incomprehensible and rationally unjustifiable divine decisions. In his text, the theological layer has clearly been removed, the dispute takes place on the psychological level, and all the characters in this story disturbingly resemble human beings. Therefore, Saramago, who so intensely anthropologised the scene of the "original murder", is also clearly theotropic in his thinking, as well as being largely paradoxical. He highlights, probably by accident, a very important feature of Cain's story: its irrational or mysterious dimension. He exposes an element that cannot be fully explained, rationalised, or translated into human standards: the central role of the Creator in this entire story, the non-susceptibility of his decision to any human interpretation, to any – be it ethical, anthropological, or psychological – explanation. All explanation bounces off the autonomous Divine choice like off a wall, it seems that not even irony can have any effect on it.

3. Cain revisited: Michał Klinger's theological interpretation

We shall keep the quoted interpretations in the back of our minds. They should create a multi-layered, expressive background for a little known but intriguing theological interpretation of Cain's story that comes from an Orthodox theologian Michał Klinger in his book *Tajemnica Kaina* [Cain's Mystery] (1981). I refer to this work for a few reasons, the most important of which is that I do not know of any other study that would try to address this biblical account in greater detail and in a more comprehensive and multifaceted manner. Nor am I familiar with any text that would treat the "Cain case" with greater spiritual zeal. In Klinger's study, the whole set of issues related to Cain is not just a pretext for an erudite exegesis, although the biblical, philological, and anthropological erudition of the author is truly impressive. But his profound and intricate analyses always aim for a higher goal, that of deepening our theological and anthropological sensitivity.

For our purposes, however, it is enough to reconstruct Klinger's essential interpretive line of Cain's sin. This is also why, in the presentation of his work, I focus on only a few axial and most relevant points in our endeavour to find a new context for understanding the essence of Cain's offence. Yet, lovers of clear and unquestionable truths should be forewarned: within this understanding there lurks a certain non-understanding. There is light but also darkness in the hypothesis proposed here.

The author's point of departure is his anxiety that although Adam the first man has long been present, in Christian tradition, in the orbit of salvation, his son Cain in common Christian awareness continues to be an unmistakable symbol of evil, forgotten in soteriology. But the mysterious mark placed by Yahweh on the perpetrator should make us reflect for a moment: is the matter really as unequivocal as we commonly believe? Klinger's book does not contain a cheap apology for Cain, nor is it a defence of a murderer; it rather asks the difficult question whether there is a place for Cain in the plan of salvation. Or, to personalise the problem: are we all, readers of the biblical passage, already so comfortable with our righteousness and justice that we do not want to look at Cain at all? Does his terrible sin "by nature" remove him beyond the field of our perception and moral awareness? It is noteworthy that Klinger, clearly following the Orthodox tradition, does not judge Cain the sinner, does not turn him into an object of moral qualification. He rather follows the intuition of the *Great Canon of Repentance* of St. Andrew of Crete (7^{th}–8^{th} century), the wonderful text that puts every sinner on a par with Cain. The penitent reciting the canon

confesses: "I have willfully incurred the guilt of Cain's murder, since by invigorating my flesh I am the murderer of my soul's awareness, and have warred against it by my evil deeds" (Song 1, as sung on Clean Tuesday).[9] Incidentally, for Jerzy Nowosielski, a painter and Orthodox theologian, the public reading of the *Canon* was an ideal of the Christian confession (Podgórzec 1985: 154). In Orthodox consciousness, confession before the icon of Christ is not an act of will or a gesture of self-accusation, but is always understood as an act of a transformation of consciousness. In the perspective set by the *Canon*, Cain is the archetype sinner, but as it turns out, he is also in the centre of the plan of salvation. Such is, in Klinger's book, the most general point of departure for further reflection.

How does the author construct the image of Cain? If one sticks to the letter of the biblical text, it seems that both brothers, even before making their offerings, are opposites. This is revealed already at the level of their names. The Hebrew *Qajin* 'javelin, lance, spear' conveys the sense of power, strength, and firmness, whereas *Haebel* 'breath, breeze' seems to personify weakness, elusiveness, and sensitivity. In other words, the names of the brothers express two contradictory aspects of reality. Irrespective of what happens in the story, the brothers are already in conflict by decree of language. In this context, Jung remarks that the antagonism between the brothers at the human level is a historical realisation of the conflict that occurs in the Divine pleroma and is an essential component of the divine drama. There are also suggestions from biblical scholars that Cain and Abel are twins and are therefore even closer than they would have been otherwise. In any case, they are opposites, which at the symbolic level is the essence of twinhood. Certainly, in one way or another, the story revolves around the mystery of good and evil.

What is the essence of the conflict between the two brothers? Their occupations are different. Cain, as we remember, is a "servant of the soil", a farmer, Abel is a shepherd. A large number of exegetes, including anthropologists, locate the very essence of the dispute in this circumstance, constructing around this notion a number of cultural hypotheses (e.g. on the superiority of nomads over sedentary peoples etc.). There are many attempts to explain the fraternal disagreement, such as René Girard's idea that a bloody sacrifice channels the conflict, which cannot be done with an offering of farm produce (Girard 1977 [1972]). Indeed, Yahweh did not accept the agricultural offering but certainly not because it was an offering of farm produce! It should be emphasised that in the biblical text there is no credible

[9] Available at www.orthodox.net/greatlent/great-canon-of-andrew-of-crete-explanation.html; accessed 22 May, 2017.

evidence that Yahweh prefers bloody sacrifices, which some exegetes try to suggest with stubborn persistence. But notice that for example in the *Book of Leviticus* there are detailed descriptions of the offerings of both "food" and animal (Klinger 1981: 45). It is quite certain that Yahweh can be offered anything: from the first grain of corn to the firstborn child. And that was the initial situation of both brothers. Upon careful reading of the biblical text, one unmistakably feels that Cain is rejected by Yahweh and that the kind of his offering is completely irrelevant: "But he did not look favourably upon Cain and his offering" (Gen 4:5). In a similar manner, but with opposite axiology, the text describes Abel and his offering. The essence of the conflict of the brothers does have a cultural aspect but certainly it does not boil down to culture – it seems to be rooted deeper. What are then the reasons for rejecting one offering and accepting the other? Here, of course, begins the hard part. Commenting on the various interpretations in which the role of occupations (shepherd vs. farmer) was strongly emphasised and which allegedly had a decisive influence on Yahweh's choice of the offering, Klinger follows the text literally and makes his point clear:

> The text [Genesis] is perfectly resistant to assign Yahweh any motives for his choice. We will see [...] that the assignment of particular professions to the brothers was probably an editorial exercise and a very "feeble" one, so that we cannot go too far in exploring the role of the cultural factor. Nothing can be found out about God and his plans – this has to remain undisclosed. The question "why?" is thus ill-posed. We have to learn from facts and not to investigate motives, which – even if it makes sense to be speaking of those – are hidden in the Divine pleroma. According to C. G. Jung, who follows Clement of Alexandria in that "God rules the world with his right and left hand", Cain is the reflection of Satan, who in the Book of Job is named the son of God. This would be in line with the famous anti-dualistic statement by prophet Isaiah: "So that from the sun's rising to the west people may know that there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make goodness and create disaster. I am the Lord, who does all these things" (Isa 45:6–7).
>
> This also reflects the existence of two elements: good and evil, bright and dark, but the fundamental difference with regard to Zoroaster's teachings lies in the union of these two elements in one God. Evil is also part of God's inconceivable plans. God is a *coincidentio oppositorum*, a notion strongly emphasised by philosophers of nature. The narrative of Cain seems to develop in this spirit and with a certain fatalism: God rejects Cain and his offering without an apparent reason. (Klinger 1981: 46–47)

Perhaps the most important lesson that can be derived from an unprejudiced and honest reading of Chapter 4 of Genesis is the following: we must accept that we do not really know much or even that we know nothing about God, and that his motives are completely incomprehensible from the human perspective – for us they are and must remain hidden. In other words, we must accept that the paths of God's thinking do not coincide with ours, even if it is difficult for us to acknowledge it.

The "apophatism" of this reading stands in radical opposition to the suspicious verbosity of other exegetes who have so much to say about the Divine mind that they might be suspected of being equipped with a special instrument for its detection. But this is doubtful: their enunciations rather testify to their epistemological vanity and omission to remain silent in the face of interpretive deadlock. To do that does not have to be an act of intellectual surrender, it is rather a fair acknowledgment that the human mind has its impassable limits. We shall thus note that the biblical account read in this way is not black and white, it is not a binary story for amateur theologians. It contains some disturbing semantic surplus, and the contradictions inherent therein are perhaps a clear sign of the mystery concealed from the human reason.

Klinger is thus right in his claim that Cain's story is

> ... brilliant in its brevity and simplicity, truly inspired, extremely condensed despite many distortions and editorial inconsistencies, bringing the problem as if to a head, so that all literary developments, supplements, and interpretive "explanations" inevitably tilt it to one side or "turn it over". (Klinger 1981: 47)

The validity of this conclusion rests, *inter alia*, on the previously invoked interpretations and commentaries on Cain's case. This is also partly why they have been mentioned.

4. Cain's mark

We have previously noted that a very important element of the story of Cain is the strange, peculiar mark that God placed on him after killing Abel and before his exile to the land of Nod ("Then the Lord placed a sign on Cain so that no one finding him would kill him", Gen 4:15). It is an important "emblem" of his dual identity, therefore it is important to clarify the meaning of the Hebrew sign *'ôt*. Based on the text alone, it is impossible to determine what the sign was and what it looked like. But first and foremost, one cannot find in the text the answer to another fundamental question: why does Yahweh, with that sign, so zealously defend the murderer? Analysing the available answers to these questions, Klinger states that many of them are dubious, and none of them is totally convincing.

There is considerable indecision on this matter in the Jewish Aggadah. Sometimes the mark is interpreted as a protective sign (i.e. the sign of a repentant sinner), at other times it is considered a sign of shame (and so of a murderer). Together, the two notions express an important complexity of Cain's spiritual situation. However, Klinger suggests that constraining oneself to these two possibilities is limiting. The intention of the inspired

Author is clear: he wants to clearly show that God himself cares for and protects Cain. There are many indications that the meaning of the sign in the text is blurred and that it seems to carry a more general theological idea – unfortunately, we do not know what it is.

The hypothesis of the mark being a "burden of crime" also misses the point, as it is not clear why the Lord should protect Cain by imposing remorse on him. The concept of the ritual mark (S. H. Hooke) associated with the agricultural myth is not quite convincing either, nor is the rather commonly accepted idea of the mark representing tribal vengeance (E. Meyer, R. de Vaux). On this interpretation, the mark was meant to be a sign of belonging to the Kenites, which means that the tribe practiced bloodshed for vengeance. The story of Genesis 4 apparently explains the origin of this tradition. But it is hard to find strong empirical confirmation for it. Klinger even suggests that if the story is a description of the rejection of Cain by Yahweh (which, in fact, it is), then in the very gesture of protection there should be at least a hint as to the mystery of this rejection. In other words: the story cannot have a simple historical or ethnographic explanation (a description of the Kenite custom), but it must reveal a fragment of the divine drama. It must carry in itself an outline of a more serious theological idea.

This is what happens in Jung's interpretation, which triggers Klinger's lively response. The Swiss psychologist suggests that since Cain is a reflection of Satan (i.e. the son of God!), who also acts according to secret God's plans unbeknown to us, he is subject to protection on this account alone. This hypothesis has important theological features: it is perhaps the only one that addresses the difficult connection between this episode and the wider spiritual perspective. The problem is that there is no confirmation for it in the ethnographic material. Besides, it is clearly influenced by Jung's notion of duality.

On yet another interpretation, Cain's mark is a testimony of belonging to the worship of Yahweh. After all, the sign clearly comes from God and protects Cain on God's behalf. This can be linked to the worship of Yahweh in nomadic cultures and perfectly complements the theology of the passage in its take on the tragic duality of Cain's fate: Cain belongs to Yahweh, even though he is exiled from his presence. Klinger's proposal leans towards this latter interpretation, albeit after considerable refraction. In the course of a complicated and meandering exegesis (which also links Cain's mark to the tefillin), through discovering of parallelism between Genesis 4 and Isaiah 66, Cain's mark is included in the set of salutary, Messianic signs. Let us recall: in the final passage of the Book of Isaiah (66:19), at the end of time, God puts a sign on the persecuted righteous people, who in Messianic times will

be sent with God's light to the ends of the world. This image is interpreted as the prophetic version of Cain and the archetype at a later stage of its development. In short, there can be no doubt that Cain's mark has many meanings and does not have to be a sign of shame. In its mystical semantics it also disconcertingly evokes the end of time, in which Cain himself is involved.

5. Conclusion: Cain in the New Testament

What I have discussed so far is a testimony to the originality of Klinger's book. But there is more. One of the most interesting and subversive fragments of Klinger's work is an attempt to find Cain's traces in the world of the New Testament. Among the various partial hypotheses and courageous conjectures included in the book, the attempt to find Cain in the world "alien" to him, or to link Cain's drama to certain situations described in the Gospels, is to me a most creative and cognitively inspiring endeavour. It is certainly risky, too. The basic intuition is very unusual here: Klinger tries to show that Cain, whom we meet at the beginning of the Bible and immediately lose sight of (further mentions are scarce), appears again intensely in the New Testament. But not necessarily explicitly and under his name.

In fact, Cain's name is not mentioned in the Gospels at all – it is several times in the letters, but it is not a significant presence. Where does one find him then? In the Gospel narratives, there is one constant in Christ's life: his co-existence with sinners and his sympathy for them. The well-known episode with the harlot (John 8:3–11) is sufficiently telling in this respect: Christ reverses conventional thinking based on elementary, moral sensibility. He does not condemn the woman caught in adultery, not does he demand her punishment. On the contrary, he orders everyone in the crowd to think of his or her own sins, thereby preventing an objective judgment – and finally, all resign from proceeding with it. Justice experiences a strange paralysis. Olivier Clement, one of the great Orthodox theologians, calls this text "unbearable". Why? Because the moral and religious consciousness of people cannot understand that Christ refuses to judge that woman, who says nothing and does not show any remorse. Christ embarrasses the accusers reminding them of the universality of evil.

That is, as Klinger suggests, the basis of Christ's ethical revolution. It is not a revolution against someone but an announcement of general salvation. We can certainly recall here the lesson from *The Brothers Karamazov*: according to Dostoyevsky, love of the sinner is a reflection of God's love of people. Klinger writes:

> This is probably because God always sees us in our sin. The dark, painful side of life enhances and urges love – and in this, an essential mystery of love is revealed. Evil becomes the fuel of love that wants to burn it in itself. In the same way God is urged in love through our sin, in need of our salvation. Christ is the hero of this image, since he burnt for our sins, out of love for sinners. (Klinger 1981: 131)

Therefore, the circle that surrounds Christ is complete – one of its elements is the Devil ("I chose you, the Twelve, didn't I? Yet one of you is a devil"; John 6:70). Thus, we have here a full spectrum of humanity, the spectrum encompassing good and evil.

Also pertinent for this interpretation is the symbolic presence of twins among the twelve (Zebedee's sons, Thomas Didymus, meaning "twin"), which, as we have mentioned, involves the mystery of good and evil. All this means that Christ approaches the dark side of humankind.

But that is not all. We should also reflect on who accompanies Christ on the day of his execution. The most eager students are no longer able to follow him. And who accompanies him on the night of suffering and darkness? The prophecy clearly says: "He was counted among the criminals" (Luke 22:37; cf. Isa 53:12), and the Orthodox Church sings in the Orthros of the Holy Thursday: "As the council of Christ's disciples dispersed, the villain took the true fruit of the vine and was sentenced to the cross with the Lord". In the moving final paragraph of his book, Klinger writes:

> It is the wicked and only them who share Christ's fate with him. Christ took the fate of one of them, the murderer Barabbas: they exchanged their fates. In the last moment, Christ went to Cain – and we must appreciate the fact that only he was able to keep up with Cain. And if the earthly Church recognised the Roman centurion as the first follower of Christ, then the heavenly Church received first the criminal and murderer ("I tell you with certainty, today you will be with me in Paradise"). The Church cannot forget it! She must live in constant awareness that she may be the heart of the world, but the margins of Cain's wilderness may even be more important. Its joy and pneumatophoric reality began on these margins, among the few criminals, condemned without hope. For when the city quietened down and the people lit the Paschal candles, Christ was dying outside the walls, and next to him was Cain. On the cross, the brothers Abel and Cain met again. (Klinger 1981: 134)

To find Cain in the salutary vision of the Gospel is, in a sense, "truism", such as is the fact that Christ came to save sinners, but does the fact – asks Klinger – that this unfortunate villain finally enjoys relief fill us with joy? The author adds immediately that in the face of this hope and joy we should suspend our discursive mind, which will always tend to capture this inconceivable, paradoxical supposition in simple formulas. Also, says Klinger, it would be quite absurd to look at this paschal joy for premises of some "new ethics". That is not the point. It is not about the justification of

evil deeds or some dubious moral relativism. The theological intuition that restores Cain's place in the history of salvation aims rather to confirm what the faithful of the Orthodox Church profess when praying with the words of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom: "I believe and confess, Lord, that You are truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the first".

If Cain's life and Cain's sin are to be seen in such a light, then it can be said that in the Christian awareness (though perhaps mainly in Eastern Christianity) Cain has hardly been marginalised, he has hardly disappeared from view. On the contrary, he is present at its very core. Maybe that is why Nicolas Berdyaev found himself capable of writing these extraordinary words:

> [M]oral consciousness began with God's question: "Cain, where is your brother Abel?" It will end with another question on the part of God: "Abel, where is your brother Cain?" (Berdyaev 1937 [1931]: 277)

translated by Rafał Augustyn

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