

With detailed reference to the text, account for the overriding emphasis on the theme of brothers in the book of Genesis.

The theme of brothers dominates the book of Genesis. The number of stories that deal with male siblings may appear to be coincidental, a preoccupation on the part of the its chauvinistic writers. Nevertheless, the naming of a theme makes it a particular 'object or target'¹ of interrogation. By presupposing this theme, the reader unites all such characters into a relationship of significance that frames the meaning of the text around that archetype. These characters in the book of Genesis are significant as brothers, and in taking this theme, we designate this relationship as a special concern. This is a matter of creative instinct, and that is true whether we come to view the relationship is one of equivalence or divergence: 'The ambiguous relationship between brothers bespeaks one of the deepest problems inherent in all family life'². Through this ambiguity, the stories are made remarkably open in their scope for interpretation. The 'indeterminacy of meaning, especially in regard to motive, moral character and psychology'³ that ancient Hebrew writers aimed at, the 'elaborate system of gaps between what is told and what must be inferred'⁴ may leave a greater space for play than later literatures. These gaps provide 'the necessary catalyst to develop a story that thrives on ambiguity'⁵. The larger and more prevalent the gaps in the

¹ Walder, D., 1990. *Literature In The Modern World*. Oxford University Press, p.218.

² Kass, L., 2006. *The Beginning Of Wisdom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p446

³ Alter, R., 2011. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Philadelphia PA: Basic, pp.12.

⁴ Alter, R., 2011. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Philadelphia PA: Basic, pp.30.

⁵ Vermeulen, K., 2014. Mind the Gap: Ambiguity in the Story of Cain and Abel. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 133(1), pp.29-42.

narrative, the more they will be filled with the reader's own psychic energy in an attempt to make determinate every indeterminacy. One's attitude to Jacob, or indeed Esau, is predicated not just on the personal experience of the culture of brotherhood in one's own home, but more broadly as it performs its drama in the wider cultural sphere. This is quite right. Not everybody has a brother and the natural rivalries of childhood often become less pressing when children grow up and move away. The overriding emphasis on brothers in Genesis must, then, turn our attention partly away from the narrow confines of family life towards the familiar concept of universal brotherhood. Whilst always making a fair exploration of the relationships between brothers, the book of Genesis broadens the theme of the other beyond the strictly filial realm to include a consideration of brothers at in a broader, local, national and international sense.

It is through the figure of the brother that we often get our first intimation of difference, 'the irreducible strangeness of "the other"'⁶. The early stories in the Book of Genesis coalesce around the ongoing differentiation of stuff, which begins with the creation of the world⁷. A further differentiation between individuals and peoples begins in Chapter 4 and continues until Chapter 50. If it is not a process of narratological necessity that this movement towards division continues throughout the whole of Genesis it at least fits with the trajectory outlined in the first chapters. Genesis moves from absolute simplicity to greater and greater complexity, from wholeness to fractalesque division. De Saussure identified the seemingly self-evident point that meaning emerges through a process of differentiation: "Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content

⁶ Spiro, M., 1992. *Anthropological Other Or Burmese Brother?*. Plymouth: Transactions Publishers. P55.

⁷ Genesis 1:1-2

but negatively by their relations with other terms of the system.⁸” God though, being immutable: the unmoved mover, represents, in origin, absolute undifferentiated meaning. The world was spoken into existence either through the establishment of difference at its founding, or in the recognition of difference by God. In creating the world out of the formless void⁹ he transforms the universe from a state of undifferentiated sameness, speaking division into it¹⁰: light and dark; water and water; water and land and so on. This paradigm is carried through into humanity and human as a separate realm from the created world.

This speaking difference into being was repeated (mimicked) by Adam¹¹ who named each creature through language making difference. The significance of this is that chaos is brought into order through a recognition of differentiation. That is the order symbolised by the garden that God created. However, there is an irony to this. Each iteration moves the world out and away from that unity and oneness that we come, instinctively, to seek to return to in the peace of God. Yet God created our world to be full of difference and otherness, division and strife. The serpent in the garden is at the heart of this irony: this paradise of order is founded upon differentiation created by God, but it is through that differentiation that we encounter the dangers that otherness poses. The story of Adam and Eve places humanity into the over-arching narrative of difference. However, Adam and Eve are not, themselves, other. They are essentially the same: ‘Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh¹².’ They are set apart from creation, but not each other. So, when they are exiled,

⁸ Saussure, F., Bally, C., Riedlinger, A. and Sechehaye, A., 1959. *Course In General Linguistics*. Taipei, Taiwan: The Philosophical Library, Inc., p.117.

⁹ Genesis 1:2

¹⁰ Genesis 1:3

¹¹ Genesis 2:19

¹² Genesis 2:23

there is an unreality to the events. God's punishment has none of the drama that the destruction of the earth had in the time of Noah¹³ or of the Tower of Babel¹⁴ or of Sodom and Gomorrah¹⁵, the like of which might have quite apt to the circumstances. Instead Adam and Eve's punishment has the quality of mundane, procedural justice. God makes Adam and Eve garments of skin¹⁶ and sets them outside the walls of the garden and bars their return¹⁷. We discover nothing of the effects of their punishment. Adam's early struggles with agriculture in this new normal are unknown to us, and whilst we learn that Eve twice gives birth, no further mention is made of the sorrows promised in Genesis 3:16. The smarting shame of having disappointed him is different from the lived experience of carrying the chronic burden of the effects of the punishment.

These effects lie to the future, in another story. The gap that opens here exists precisely because the reader is very well acquainted with these effects. Adam and Eve remain essentially undifferentiated, with a memory of Eden. In Cain and Abel we see the fully articulated psychology of the other. Sprung from the patriarchal order: detached from God, detached from Adam, the brothers are fully individuated, isolated, free people. It is the beginning of atomisation when one man can ask "Am I my brother's keeper?"¹⁸ It is the first question in the Bible that is asked by a human¹⁹; it is, perhaps, *the* significant question of the whole book and of our whole individuated existence. This is an unsustainable mode of living and in the story of Genesis, it represents a backward step in the march toward a civil and functioning society under the rule of law. From out of this division the order of Eden is

¹³ Genesis 5-9

¹⁴ Genesis 11:1-9

¹⁵ Genesis 18:20-21, 19:23-28

¹⁶ Genesis 3:21

¹⁷ Genesis 3:23

¹⁸ Genesis 3:9

¹⁹ Boice, J., 2006. *Genesis*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, p.253.

slowly and uncertainly reinfused. But the unspokenness of this haunts the story of Cain and Abel, hinting at the nightmarish experience of childhood; there is a concomitant paucity of information – very little is made explicit. Into the dark space of what Machery calls ‘the unacknowledged co-existence of the visible and the hidden²⁰’ come the two hapless brothers, latent, filled with concealed potential.

If Adam and Eve enact the fall in the face of the father, Cain and Abel is its dramatizing. Sparse facts emerge: one brother herds sheep, one brother grows crops. All manner of signification presses forward at this point, seemingly to no avail. Abel’s herding is interpreted as prefiguring Christ, early struggles of farmers and pastoralists²¹, or each an undifferentiated identity. Yet, it is the arbitrariness of the difference that alerts us to the point. They are different, but fundamentally the same. Abel does right by God, but it does not profit him. Cain is somehow remiss, although where he failed is not made explicit by the text. God asks, ‘If you do well, will you not be accepted?’²² However, in any given situation, what it is to do well often appears to rest on arbitrary factors. One brother succeeds and one brother fails. One is blessed and the other is not. This is the way the world runs today. God makes the connection between this difference and our resentment: ‘if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it²³.’

The figure of the brother operates here as that of a brother, of course. We may desire to usurp our fathers, but it is with our brothers that we must first contend. The ‘fundamental rivalry that naturally accompanies the relationship between brothers²⁴’ provides the first

²⁰ Walder, D., 1990. *Literature In The Modern World*. Oxford University Press, p.218.

²¹ van den Brink, R., Bromley, D. and Chavas, J., 1995. The economics of Cain and Abel: Agro-pastoral property rights in the Sahel. *Journal of Development Studies*, 31(3), pp.373-399.

²² Genesis 4:7

²³ Genesis 4:7

²⁴ Kass, L., 2006. *The Beginning Of Wisdom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.198.

intimation of the conflict and cooperation that is the commerce of the world outside the nursery door. As Genesis moves towards the relative modern-day stories of Exodus and beyond, the theme of the brother takes on a more metonymic significance, while still concentrating on domestic hygiene of interpersonal and fraternal relations, of brothers besting brothers and hunting game with petty deceits²⁵: the nip and tuck of tribal life. The bridging stories between Cain and Abel and Joseph and his siblings move the theme of brothers onto a broader geopolitical realm by explicitly tying the stories into the aetiology of the tribal groups and nations in the Middle East and the world. Shem, Ham and Japheth provide the three basic divisions out of which the nations of the earth were formed following the Flood of Noah: the Semitic, Japhetic and Hamitic nations²⁶. The notion that that the first human was created at a fixed point and became the progenitor of all humans is so widespread as to be almost unremarkable. But re-emphasising the consanguine origin of mankind undoes the division that follows the eviction of Cain and the founding of the line of Seth and re-establishes all peoples under the Noahide code²⁷. The laws, detailed in Genesis concern abstaining from the blood of animals, and murder. Specifically, God makes explicit the restatement the fraternal bond between all people: 'Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.²⁸'. All people of all tribes and nations are now truly brothers, protected under a universal set of laws, citizens 'whose equal moral worth is recognized, triggering full equality under the law.²⁹' The unsustainable atomistic mode that was instituted with Cain's

²⁵ Genesis 27:20

²⁶ Sanders, E., 1969. The Hamitic hypothesis; its origin and functions in time perspective. *The Journal of African History*, 10(4), pp.521-532.

²⁷ Eisen, R., 2011. *The Peace And Violence Of Judaism*. New York: Oxford University Press, p100

²⁸ Genesis 9:5-6

²⁹ Walzer, M., 2006. *Law, Politics, And Morality In Judaism*. Princeton University Press, p.23.

slaying of Abel is put to a sudden end. The long-delayed answer to the question 'Am I my brother's keeper' is emphatically answered in the affirmative. From this point, society comes into existence.

Once the germ of common law has been planted, the story of Genesis turns away from a narrative of archetypes, becoming more cosmopolitan. Having established a single unified people on earth in Chapter Nine, Chapter Ten moves with remarkable economy to repopulate the postdiluvian world and fix difference into the narrative once again. Where the previous genealogy³⁰ dealt with temporal expansion, the Table of Nations has its focus on geographical reach of humankind³¹. This is important for the emergent story of Israel and its position within the brotherhood of nations. Brodie points out that the Table of Nations 'is primarily concerned with something else... namely with people's relationship to curse and blessing³².' The concept of a nation or a people can only make sense in relation to other nations, other peoples. The election of a chosen people is predicated on the possibility of choice: the necessity that some are not chosen. Ham and Shem are divided, and from Ham's offspring arise 'Shem/Israel's greatest enemies—Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, the Philistines, and Canaan³³.' The interesting thing about the curse and the blessing is the seeming arbitrariness with which they are delivered. Whatever the various charges that have been laid against Ham: voyeurism, castration, paternal or maternal incest³⁴, or whether he simply mocked his unconscious father to his brothers³⁵, nothing is made explicit in the text. It

³⁰ Genesis 5

³¹ Metzger, B. and Coogan, M., 1993. *The Oxford Companion To The Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press. P246.

³² Brodie, T., 2001. *Genesis As Dialogue*. Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, p.187.

³³ Brodie, T., 2001. *Genesis As Dialogue*. Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, p.188.

³⁴ Bergsma, J. and Hahn, S., 2005. Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27). *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 124(1), p.25.

³⁵ Boice, J., 2006. *Genesis*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, p.398.

scarcely seems just that Ham should be cursed for having stumbled upon his drunken father in his nakedness. Even if it did, it hardly seems just that the punishment should fall upon his son Canaan.

The story repeats the pattern of Cain and Abel, but now in this expanded paradigm, brothers also metonymically stand for nations. We have seen this gap exploited before in Genesis, and it will be more and more in the stories to come. Ham's punishment and Canaan's burden hark back to the seeming injustice of God's rejection of Cain's sacrifice. Here, two brothers succeed and one brother fails. In the history of peoples, as with individuals, what it is to do well often appears to rest on arbitrary factors.

Further splintering produces other tribal groups: half-brothers Moab and Ammon spawn the Ammonites and Moabites³⁶, Esau, Jacob's brother, founds the Edomites, and Isaac's half-brother founds the Ishmaelites. These further ground the Hebrews among the peoples round about, emphasising the Semitic link that binds them through language and ethnicity. In the harshness of war and the struggle for land, the place of the Hebrews is contextualised in a fraternal bond. This bond is brought to its apotheosis when the narrative of Genesis folds back on itself to account for the twelve tribes of Israel and the formation of Israel as a nation³⁷. Joseph, it has been said, exploited 'paternal favouritism at the expense of fraternal harmony³⁸.' He was able to demonstrate himself worthy of his father's favour in a way that the Israelites themselves were habitually unable to do. And in the event, God's

³⁶ Genesis 19:30-38.

³⁷ Berthoud, P., 2008. The Reconciliation of Joseph with his Brothers. *European Journal of Theology*, 17(5).

³⁸ Greenspahn, F., 1994. *When Brothers Dwell Together*. New York: Oxford University press. p.140

chosen people spring ultimately, not from him, but from the so much less-than-spotless person of Judah, from whose line 'the sceptre shall not depart'³⁹.

Overall, there is a sense of arbitrariness in everything, planted first in the story of Cain and Abel and amplified in the stories of the many brothers that came after the Flood. We can bring this together into some sort of meaning. There is scarce a brother or a people that can set himself higher than a sibling in terms of moral worth, scarce a patriarch who did not engage in some scandal that might have justifiably led to his being cursed instead of blessed. Nevertheless, Israel was chosen by God, not from any intrinsic virtue but with the same seeming arbitrariness and, as Greenspahn points out, 'almost in spite of themselves'⁴⁰. The story of the Israelites is the story of the world. Circumstance, fate, God himself has elected us to whichever state of privilege we enjoy. Like Israel, our 'chosenness [is] not something to be taken for granted... it [has] been paid for by someone else'⁴¹. The theme of brothers answers the primary theme of division which begins in Genesis 1. All humanity is tied into a bond which, unlikely though it seems, will not be broken.

³⁹ Genesis 49:10

⁴⁰ Greenspahn, F., 1994. *When Brothers Dwell Together*. New York: Oxford University press. p.134.

⁴¹ Greenspahn, F., 1994. *When Brothers Dwell Together*. New York: Oxford University press. p. 132

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