

the evolution of the blemished priest

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This essay is a study in religious psychology. It is about Cain, the son of Adam, and it describes his growth from a battered human being into a spiritually mature individual — the Blemished Priest. It is also about the physically disabled, although the evolution described here takes place not in the body but in the soul. While the circumstances of the disabled person's life may appear more dramatic than those of other people, the truth is that they are merely more external, more visible.

In reality, Cain's inner wounds are commonplace, and they are shared by many people, whatever their physical condition. The true subject of this essay is the healing of inner wounds, and of the long and arduous path that must be followed by anyone who wishes to move toward godliness.

The biblical account of the story of Cain, a tale replete with drama and mystery, focuses only on the earlier part of his life. In order to understand the older Cain, the person Cain became, we shall have to draw upon other sources. First, however, let us review the story as it appears in Genesis:

And the man knew Eve his wife; and she conceived and bore Cain, and said: "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." And again she bore his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and unto his offering; but unto Cain and his offering He had not respect.

And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the Lord said unto Cain: "Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shall it not be lifted up? And if thou doest not well, sin croucheth at the door; and unto thee is its desire, but thou mayest rule over it." And Cain spoke unto Abel his brother. And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him.

And the Lord said unto Cain: "Where is Abel thy brother?" And he said: "I know not; am I my brother's keeper?" And He said: "What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's

blood crieth unto Me from the ground. And now cursed art thou from the ground, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a wanderer shall thou be in the earth." And Cain said unto the Lord: "My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, Thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the land; and from Thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer in the earth; and it will come to pass, that whosoever findeth me will slay me." And the Lord said unto him: "Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance will be taken upon him sevenfold." And the Lord set a sign for Cain, lest anyone finding him should smite him.

And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and he dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden. And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bore Enoch. (Genesis 4:1-17)

Let us examine this story closely. It can reveal a great deal about who Cain was, and the person he was destined to become.

1. God participated in the making of Cain—that is, there was a spark of the divine within him. This is his soul, an entity that resides within him throughout his life. This divine spark, however, is not identical with the presence of God from which Cain flees at the end of the section.

2. In the story of the two sacrifices, Cain is being tested. He fails, but not, as he presumes, because God prefers Abel's offering over his. His failure, rather, lies in his inability to distinguish between disapproval and rejection. When the world is not "fair," Cain feels that he is unloved—an unfortunate character trait in anyone, and one that presages disaster for someone about to become disabled.

3. Cain receives the teachings on the necessity to accept responsibility for his life and to be aware of his propensity for both good and evil. These remain central themes throughout his life, but he is never able to understand them truly.

4. Cain does great evil and is punished by God.

5. When God informs Cain of the nature of his punishment— which appears to be to live in perpetual awareness of his iniquity—Cain is overwhelmed by guilt and anguish. He feels that he is being driven from God's presence, that it is impossible to know such guilt and to remain with God.

6. God places the Mark of Cain upon him with the explicit intention of protecting him. (It is not, as often thought, the punishment.) The account in Genesis does not identify the nature of this sign, but it is easy to interpret it as a blemish. This blemish had the double

effect of setting him apart from other men and of drawing attention to him. Cain was disabled.

7. Cain leaves the presence of God and starts a new life as a blemished, disabled person.

The Bible tells us no more about Cain, but let us look ahead some ten or twenty years into the future. We know what manner of person Cain had been, and now we must discover who he became. Cain has overcome the immediate shock of his misfortune, his Mark and his banishment. He has married and has a son. He is no longer able to till the land but has found alternative occupations and has apparently done well in them. He is reasonably rehabilitated. The areas in his life in which his disability, his blemish, limits him have been contained, and he has made the necessary adjustments. Nevertheless, all is not well. The Mark should have declined in significance, but in fact it has grown monstrously. It has invaded every aspect of his being. The Mark has become the primary aspect of his identity. Cain is now disabled by a disabling image.

According to the tenets of our "religious psychology," Cain's new situation is a consequence of his flight from the presence of God. When a person removes himself from a frame of reference in which there is an absolute, fixed point, objectivity is lost. The individual is no longer able to observe himself from a disinterested, uninvolved perspective. He no longer possesses the means to assess the significance of his own life. In our religious lexicon, objectivity is a clearly defined concept, which is fundamentally different from the pragmatic or scientific usage of the same word. Objectivity is the ability to distinguish between the essential and the accidental, between the real and the illusory, between the permanent and the ephemeral. It is the elective hallmark of humanity. A person can choose to develop his objectivity or can abandon it. Under conditions of great stress, Cain has adopted the latter path. However, it is not only Cain who has made such a choice. The people with whom Cain works and lives have done the same, at least in their attitudes towards him. Before we can understand the inner dynamics of Cain's disabling self-image, we must look at how society perceives him.

Outside a small group of intimates who know him well, who are aware of the complexities of his being, and who seek to understand him, Cain is a public figure. He is recognized by more people than he recognizes. Strangers see him from a distance and think, "Oh, that's Cain." People he has never met talk about him as the person with the

Mark, as the blemished man. He is easily identifiable; and as Humpty-Dumpty pointed out to Alice, the way to be remembered is to be deviant. For society at large, a disability is a label, and a label can easily become a person. The blemish is the person.

It is pertinent to note here the difference between disabled and able-bodied persons. All humans are marred by flaws, which may distort their psyches and impair the way they conduct their lives. However, unless the person is disabled, such flaws and blemishes remain a private matter. The flaws and blemishes of the disabled are visible; indeed, this is a working definition of disability. Disabilities are public property. Any member of the public may ponder about, relate to, write scholarly or popular articles about, dream about, fantasize about another person's disability without accepting responsibility towards that person. When this happens, the disabled person becomes a symbol or an image in the eyes of the beholder; he is no longer a person, but is an object. Furthermore, the meaning of the image or the symbol is largely independent of the person-object. It is determined by external variables, such as the prevalent attitudes of society and the psychic needs of the beholder.

As the overview of our subject is religious, it is appropriate at this point to take note of two such attitudes that have on occasion prevailed in religious communities and which have contributed to the labeling process. Thus, in times and places in which the demonic was emphasized, disabled Cain was perceived as a menacing monster who evoked emotions of fear and hostility. He was portrayed as someone who is essentially bitter and who cannot be trusted. In other times, however, the institutions of Church and Synagogue preached the virtues of charity and of helping the unfortunate. Then Cain was perceived as the helpless cripple, the poor innocent who is incapable of defending himself. In fact, these images which exist in the eyes of the beholder can be sometimes dramatically reversed; an individual who perceives Cain as a helpless innocent can feel betrayed when he discovers that this object of his pity can fight for himself, and may start to relate to him as treacherous and malevolent.

Whatever the significance that is attached to the image, the problem is that it elicits a response that is inappropriate. It is a response to an object and not to a unique human being. For Cain, the consequences of being so stereotyped are baleful. In the first place, there is a natural tendency to internalize such attitudes; Cain, a person lacking in objectivity, is particularly likely to do just this. However, there are other effects that are more subtle and pernicious. One of these is the reinforcement of Cain's attitude that he

is not responsible for his own life; irrespective of what he does or says, people will relate to him in the same way. He feels that nothing that he does can make any difference to his life.

On another level, the way that others perceive him may bolster his private image of his own identity. Just as others perceive him primarily as a blemished person, so Cain too makes an ontological rearrangement of the script of his life: his primary characteristic is his disability. We know, of course, that both society and Cain are wrong. The Mark of Cain is not part of his essential nature; it is secondary to his being. It is a feature of the conditions in which Cain has to learn to serve God. It is one of the rules of the game; it is not the game itself.

So much for the social impact of Cain's disability. Let us return to Cain as a unique individual. We have already noted that he has lost his objectivity. Paradoxically, as a temporary stage, this is not necessarily a negative development. After his crisis he needed to mobilize all his resources in order to survive. He had to create a new identity for himself, one that could contain the new datum, the fact of his disability. He had to create a new mythology of his life. He could not have done this with objectivity; he had to focus on himself, on the solution of his real and his subjective problems. The eyes of others, and especially the eyes of the ultimate relevant other, God, would have impaired his efforts to rebuild himself. This abandoning of objectivity was a proper, or at least an understandable, device in its time; however, as the years elapsed, what had begun as an adaptation to a new reality became a habitual response to one that no longer existed. The image of himself that he had created in a time of emergency now defined him and blocked him at every turn. He was circumscribed by his own private picture of himself, and he had no identity beyond this image. His soul was imprisoned.

We are now able to understand in greater detail the dynamics of the evolution of Cain's personality. Cain was blemished. He had become aware of the fact that he was marred, was deviant from the statistical or the ideal norm. In Cain's particular case, the model with which he compared himself unfavorably was most definitely an ideal. His father, Adam, who had been created in the divine image, was a physically immaculate, unblemished and perfect creature. The Jewish sources say of Adam that before the Fall his beauty was so great that the apple of his heel dimmed the sun, and even after the expulsion from Eden his physique was remarkable. Adam's form was godly, or so it appeared to Cain. When Cain realized that he was blemished, it was as if there was material proof that he was ungodly, unbeautiful, imperfect. It placed him, as it were, in an

inferior status. This identification of himself as an inferior being was spurious, but, as we shall see below, it alleviated his terrible burden.

The mistake that Cain made in comparing himself with Adam was in not recognizing that the image of God in man resides in the pure essence of the soul, and not in the body or in the various manifestations of the soul (such as personality). Cain could envisage no differentiation between body and soul, and so, if his body was marred, his whole being was flawed. By a process of generalization, the physical disability of a limb or of a function became a metaphor of the person as a whole. He did not have a lame leg, he was lame; he did not suffer from defective vision, he was blind. He was not marked by a blemish, he was a blemished person. In adopting this new identity as a blemished person, Cain was, as we have noted, supported by society. However, in a paradoxical way, Cain derived considerable short-term benefits from accepting his degraded status. Being in his own eyes an inferior, blemished person made his sense of being unlovable and his sense of guilt easier to bear. Previously he had to live in ambiguity and anxiety. Now he was certain who he was. Long ago he had been tested and had had to live with the anguish of not knowing whether he was loved. Now he was certain—the blemish proved that he was rejected and unloved. Once he had been told that he could choose between good and evil. Now he was certain—the blemish showed that he was wicked. Paradoxically, this new mythology of his life that permitted him to admit his worthlessness also neutralized its impact. He was unloved and he was guilty, true, but it was hardly his fault. These attributes were identical with his blemish, his disability, and so he was not responsible for them. They were acts of God.

Cain derived another benefit from accepting his inferior status — an economy of effort. All the energy that previously had been invested in coping with ambiguity could now be directed to building up an unequivocal new image. Cain no longer had to strive to become a better person; he could strive to become a better blemished person.

This, in effect, was Cain's disabling image. By classifying himself as an inferior person, he was denying an important aspect of his humanity. As a short-term tactic, this was probably effective, but as a strategy for life it was disastrous. The knots he was tying grew progressively tighter, and it became almost impossible to release them. But there was another casualty in this maneuver. Not only had Cain fled from the presence of God without, he had to deny the divine spark within himself, his soul. Cain's resolution had been to create for himself the image of an inferior being. There was no room within such an image for a divine soul, which desires to align itself with God through the pursuit of

truth and virtue. Cain avoided the depths, but he also eliminated the peaks. Cain was an incomplete human being. Our next task is to observe the completion of Cain.

The three major aspects of Cain's sense of his own being—that he was blemished, that he was rejected and unloved, and that he was guilty and wicked—were interlocked, inverted in a protective shield that buttressed his image but which imprisoned his soul. In order to observe the emergence and the evolution of this soul, we shall have to abandon the person of the historical Cain, the typological Cain we have studied. Our typologies, as noted above, are manifestations of the human condition, not biographies of historical personalities. In his lifetime, Cain could go no further. As a type, he remains for us a valuable depletion of a blemished or disabled person who is seriously and permanently handicapped by his image. But the soul of Cain is eternal, and by accompanying it as it passes through three more biblical types, we will learn of a path of purification and alignment. It is not that the soul of Cain is reincarnated. It is, rather, that each of the three major aspects of Cain's being that were inverted during his lifetime is placed in a new situation, one in which it can be resolved.

The first aspect of the soul of Cain that must be realigned is his sense of being unloved, or unlovable. In the case of the Cain of the biblical narrative, this became manifest following his feeling of being rejected in the test of the two sacrifices. The biblical archetype of the person who emerges triumphant from such an ordeal is, of course, Job. However, whereas the story of Cain was contained in seventeen terse verses in the Book of Genesis, that of Job fills forty-two chapters of a book devoted exclusively to him.

Let us note immediately that our concern is with the person of Job as a biblical type, and not with the Book of Job as a treatment of a profound philosophical problem. What interests us at this point is not why evil and suffering exist in the world, but how one particular human being deals with his lot; not why God let all this happen, but how Job emerged from his troubles as a more complete human being. Job was a person who was severely tested but who never acquired the image of being rejected or unlovable. He is thus an important type, a "role model." By understanding the dynamics of Job's survival, we shall be able to see possible solutions to one of the problems that dragged down Cain.

The source of Job's strength appears to be his objectivity. Job has a point of reference beyond himself, even in his most trying moments. Although at times he does come close to a state of self-pity, this is more in the nature of exploring an option than committing

himself to the pit of despair. When Cain cut himself off from God, from objectivity, his self-involvement became his only identity. He could not relinquish it, for he had no alternative mode of being, of relating to himself. Job, on the other hand, does possess a certain flexibility. He can take risks. He can try out a response, and when he sees that it is inappropriate, he can abandon it. In this manner, Job is able to experiment, for example, with being angry with God. The objectivity that he possesses, the knowledge that there is a reality beyond himself, permits him to move in and out of such positions. Job is seeking to understand the significance of his life, and his objectivity enables him to refuse to accept the first solution he finds.

Job's objectivity also gives him another remarkable weapon in his fight against self-involvement and self-pity. Job is aware of the fact that no matter how painful and miserable his condition, it is in fact only an illusion when compared to the absolute reality of God. This does not mean that Job is a kind of otherworldly visionary who overcomes pain and wickedness by entering into a trance. Job's response is not quietistic. On the contrary, he is a worldly person who accepts responsibility for his life. But Job knows that there are different levels of reality and that compared with the divine, nothing that occurs in his private life should be taken too seriously. He is a responsible person and must live and act accordingly, but he is not the center of the universe. This is a central teaching for Job. It is not that his pain does not hurt, that his loss is not a heavy burden, but rather that every aspect of his physical existence is relative, a detail in a plan that he does not, cannot understand. Ultimately, the only part of Job that can approach the absolute is the yearning of his eternal soul for the divine. When he understands this, Job knows that whatever happens to him, he is beloved of God. Thus in Job we see the first stage in the realigning of the soul of Cain.

The second aspect of the being of Cain that must be set straight is the overwhelming sense of guilt. Our type here will be Manasseh, ancient king of Judah, and perhaps the wickedest person in the Hebrew Bible. Let us recall what is said of him in the second Book of Chronicles.

Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign: and he reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, after the abominations of the nations, whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel. For he built again the high places which his father Hezekiah had broken down; and he raised up altars for the Baalim, and made Asherot, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. And he built altars in the house of the Lord. . . . He also made his children to

pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom; and he practiced soothsaying, and used enchantments, and practiced sorcery, and appointed them that divined by a ghost or a familiar spirit. He wrought much evil in the sight of God. . . . And Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, so that they did evil more than did the nations, whom the Lord destroyed before the children of Israel.

And the Lord spoke to Manasseh, and to his people; but they gave no heed. Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in distress, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And he prayed unto Him; and He was entreated of him, and heard his supplications, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God. . . . And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. And he built up the altar of the Lord and offered thereon sacrifices of peace offerings and of thanksgiving, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord the God of Israel. (II Chronicles 33:1-20)

Now a question that may be most reasonably asked is, why should a person who does such wicked things not be plagued with a sense of guilt? The same question, of course, pertains to Cain: Should a fratricide not know that he is guilty? The answer lies in the difference between guilt and remorse. Guilt is ultimately a purely subjective emotion, and it can become most destructive. Remorse, on the other hand, is the beginning of objectivity; it marks the beginning of the attempt to desist from evil and to do good. Guilt can lead to perdition, remorse to penitence.

Manasseh was the son of Hezekiah, who was perhaps the most saintly and benevolent of all the ancient kings of Israel. Manasseh ascended to the throne at a very early age, when he was clearly too young to master his inclinations and to conduct himself appropriately. He compared himself to the inevitable role model, his universally praised father, and he found himself wanting. His response was: "I am guilty. I am wicked." Being a guilty, wicked person became the essence of Manasseh's identity. He became completely involved in it and could not relinquish it.

There was, moreover, a short-term benefit in adopting this image of himself. Because he was, in his own eyes, a totally wicked person, he was relieved of the need to examine his individual actions. It made no difference what he did. Nevertheless, whenever the awareness of the enormity of his deeds did begin to intrude, he strengthened his identity by perpetrating even worse crimes. Manasseh was self-contained. He lacked objectivity. He could not admit that there is a power beyond that desires his return and can offer him a path to forgiveness and atonement. Up to this point, Manasseh is similar to Cain.

Whereas Cain was locked in his subjectivity, Manasseh can seize the opportunity to break out. The difference between the two lies in Manasseh's ability to interpret his misfortune. For him, it is not confirmation that he is a guilty, wicked person by nature but, rather, an individual who has committed the most horrible actions. It is not the individual who is extraordinary, but the deeds. Manasseh must now move from self-vilification to the examination of his responsibilities. The task is difficult, but ultimately Manasseh knows that the choice is inevitable. There are many stages in the process of repentance, and Manasseh must traverse them all. But perhaps the most important is the acknowledgement that he is a sinner, not a guilty person. He has to examine his actions and list his sins. Then he is able to ask God for forgiveness and atonement. His sense of guilt had been unmanageable and had created a self-perpetuating image of itself. Knowledge that one has sinned, however, is open-ended. It offers hope to the individual and the promise of freedom to his soul.

When we left the typological character of Cain, the three aspects of his being were locked in malignant embrace. We have now seen how, in Job and Manasseh, the sense of being unlovable and of being wicked were realigned. They were transformed by the acquisition of some objectivity. We can now proceed with the completion of the being of Cain. The problem of the blemish can now be addressed in isolation, for it is no longer enmeshed in a symbiotic relationship with unresolved forces. The type we shall observe in this process of alignment is the Blemished Priest. Once again, the technique is objectivity.

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: Speak unto Aaron, saying: Whosoever he be of thy seed throughout the generations that hath a blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God. For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath anything maimed, or anything too long, or a man that is broken-footed, or broken-handed, or crook-backed, or a dwarf, or that hath his eye overspread, or is scabbed, or scurvy, or hath his stones crushed; no man of the seed of Aaron the priest that hath a blemish shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the Lord by fire; he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God. He may eat of the bread of his God, both of the most holy, and of the holy. Only he shall not go in unto the veil, nor come nigh unto the altar, because he hath a blemish; that he profane not My holy places; for I am the Lord who sanctify them. (Leviticus 21:16-23)

The teaching of the Blemished Priest is difficult to accept. It is the kind of Bible story that seems calculated to raise emotions of indignation. It runs contrary to so many of our

sensibilities. It is almost the archetypal proof that the Torah accepts the basic lack of justice and fairness that exists in the world. Is it not enough that the individual is disabled? Why does he have to be relegated to an inferior status as well? But the teaching of the Blemished Priest does not operate on the level of sentiment. It is a central teaching of the religious life and must be seen as such.

It is obvious that the Blemished Priest would be incapable of relating to his hieratic disqualifications were he still to be involved with the problems solved by Job and Manasseh. A person who attributes his inability to perform certain ritual acts to his being un-loved by God or being wicked would surely be incapable of serving as a priest at all. But even after these aspects are put right, are aligned, the task is awesome. The questions intrude into the Blemished Priest's mind: Why, of all the people in the world, cannot I offer the bread of my God? Why cannot I worship God in the way I choose?

The lesson that the Blemished Priest must learn is that his questions are traps. These questions are the last vestiges of the image of the unfortunate that he must discard. They are rooted in subjectivity in that they fail to distinguish between the eternal and the ephemeral. The Blemished Priest will become a complete human being, and the soul of Cain released, when he ceases to relate to his blemish as a condition that restricts him, that prevents him from doing something. The question that must be asked is, How can I serve God in my condition? The person who asks that is free of disabling images. And this is true whether or not his blemish is physical.

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