CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WAY OF CAIN

“I incline to Cain’s heresy” he used to say
“I let my brother go to the devil in his own way.”
(Robert Luis Stevenson, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde)

How bad was Cain?

As with Abel, Cain was saddled by interpreters with titles and character traits that do not appear in the Genesis 4 story. While Abel received a number of descriptive titles, it is the identification of his “righteousness” and his role as an ideal figure in biblical history that was most common. In Christian writings Abel’s status as “righteous” can be attributed to the words of Jesus in Matt 23:35 which were repeatedly quoted by interpreters in the Christian era. A survey of the literature demonstrates that exegetes were just as happy to employ any number and type of descriptions to identify Cain as the first murderer, but, as would be expected, in a much more negative light.

Among the earliest documents to attach a descriptive to Cain is the Wisdom of Solomon. As noted in the previous chapter, Cain is presented in 10:3 as the first person to reject Wisdom and to be labeled “unrighteous” (ἀδικος). The significance of this presentation is that he has the notoriety of being the only person in this list to be referred to in this way. Even the collective enemies of the “righteous” are not called ἀδικοι. It seems that as the first one to commit murder, and as one to head the list of the enemies of the righteous ones, Cain’s crime became the archetype of all wrongdoing and thus earned him an extraordinary name.1 Furthermore, in 10:4 Cain is regarded as the reason for the flood thereby making his responsibility for evil far greater than is communicated in Genesis 4.2 The result is that the author of Wisdom has

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2 John R. Levison, Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism: From Sirach to 2 Baruch (JSPSup 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 60–61. For an overview of those
sharpened the evil of Cain so that he is responsible for three crimes, each related to and more serious than the first. He rejected Wisdom, murdered his brother and brought destruction upon the world.

In Ant. 1.53, Josephus contrasts the dispositions of Cain and Abel. Following the order in Gen 4:2, he describes Abel’s occupation first, but then adds an interpretive gloss stating that Abel was “one who had regard for righteousness.” Similar to the author of Wisdom, however, Josephus sharpens the depiction of Cain’s evil as demonstrated by the way he uses the adjective πονηρός. In 1.53 Josephus portrays Cain as “wholly evil” (πονηρότατος) using the superlative form of the adjective which seems to be a calculated move to present a totally depraved Cain. In 1.61 Cain is described as advancing evil to the extent that not only does he increase his own wickedness, but he even becomes a teacher of evil activities to others (διδάσκαλος αὐτοῖς ἅπερχε πονηρῶν). Lastly, in 1.66, using the superlative form of πονηρός again, Josephus claims that Cain’s descendants became even more evil than him and that each one, in succession, surpassed the other in their evil exploits (Κάιος τοὺς ἐγγόνους πονηροτάτους συνέβη γενέσθαι). As in Wisdom, no longer is Cain only the first to commit murder. According to Josephus, Cain is the institutor, teacher and progenitor of all evil. Cain and his children are responsible for the decline of humanity.3

Among the numerous negative descriptions that Philo uses for Cain he says that Cain is an atheist (Worse 103, 119) and those who think like him are a part of the race of Cain (Posterity 42). Elsewhere he calls Cain wicked (QG 1.59), the representative of evil doctrine (Sacrifices 1.5) and the ultimate symbol of wickedness (Flight 1.64).

Christian authors also followed this interpretive trajectory. 1 John 3:12 describes Cain as unrighteous and a murderer (πονηροῦ ἦν καὶ ἔσφαξεν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ). In Jude 11 those who walk in the way of Cain are condemned (τῇ ὁδῷ τοῦ Κάιν), a statement which resonates with the claim made by Josephus that not only was Cain evil, but he also instructed others how to perform evil deeds.4 1 Clement 4:7 views

interpreters who attribute the reason for the flood to Cain and his descendants see chapter 5 above.


4 Richard J. Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter (WBC 50; Waco: Word, 1983), 79.