

Adam, Eve, Cain, and Lamech

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Readings and Commentary

There are really two stories of creation in the book of Genesis. The first one is all good. God says so himself, repeatedly.

Genesis, chapter 1 (RSV)

- 1: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
- 2: The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.
- 3: And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.
- 4: And God saw that the light was good...

God goes on to separate the waters and make the earth and the plants and trees, and then the sun and moon and stars, then the birds and sea animals, then the land animals, and He pauses after each act of creation and every time sees that it is *good*, and says so.

- 26: Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."
- 27: So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

This makes sense to me--that a *creator* would be a combination of both male and female. There's none of that Adam first, Eve second made from his rib stuff. Male *and* female *in* God's image, the story goes, or this one does. It ends with God giving the world to the people for their enjoyment. There's no Garden of Eden separate from the world, and no threat about the fruit of any particular tree. The only Garden is the world itself, all open and available, sexy and sweet.

- 28: And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."
- 29: And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.
- 30: And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.
- 31: And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

It looks at first like nothing is ever going to be harsh or bloody in this good place, in this good story of a gentle, vegetarian-sounding world: "...every plant...and every fruit...you shall have them for food," no meat, so no blood, not yet. Things are not so gentle in the next story. We'll find that living flesh is being opened and altered almost from the start. This is the one with

Adam made first and Eve made second from Adam's rib, and the snake and the forbidden tree and the punishment, and it all takes place in a Garden set apart from the ordinary earth.

Genesis, chapter 3 (I'm jumping to where things start to go wrong.)

1: Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, `You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?"

2: And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden;

3: but God said, `You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

4: But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die.

5: For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6: So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.

7: Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

Making these loincloths is the first work we've yet heard of the people doing--the first they've felt they had to do. Notice that they use tree leaves to make their clothes, still in keeping with the first story's instructions to use plant materials for their needs.

8: And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

9: But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

10: And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

11: He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

12: The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

See, it's sort of her fault, and sort of Your fault, says Adam to God.

13: Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate."

It's the serpent's fault, says Eve. Now here come the punishments. Listen to what they are. First,

14: The LORD God said to the serpent,
"Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all cattle,
and above all wild animals;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

"Upon your belly you shall go," with your dirty mouth. It's as if the serpent had been a creature with arms and legs, and now God has mutilated it by removing them. That should get the people's attention, as well as the serpent's.

15: I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your seed and her seed;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel."

That'll fix him for telling her the truth about that fruit. Remember, God said, "You'll die when you touch it." The serpent said, "No you won't." Who was right? It's hard enough to forgive when someone tells lies on you; it's even worse when they tell the truth.

16: To the woman [God] said,
"I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children, > *Here's the curse of fertility.*
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you." > *Here's the curse of sexual desire.*

17: And to Adam he said,
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you; > *Watch this:*
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; > *The ground itself is caught in*
18: thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; > *the curses that follow!*
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

19: In the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread > *Here's the curse of labor.*
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return..." > *And last is the curse of death.*

Now the first killing in the whole Bible takes place without being mentioned as such--and it's done by God, His first work since the work of creation. It's shocking work, and he does it to make certain he's really gotten these people's attention:

21: And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.

There's no blessing for the animals that have been skinned or the people who have been clothed with their wet hides. There's no blessing to "be fruitful and multiply" in this second story. God punishes Adam and Eve by adding four new elements to human life, the really serious elements: Fertility, sexual desire, labor, and death. The story suggests that, if God could have forgiven the first generation of humans, they would never have had to experience any of these things, and neither would we--there never would have been any further human generations. The blessing, Be fruitful and multiply, has been replaced with the curse, Get out of here in your sorry skins; now get out, and breed.

You could say that God punishes the first generation with all the generations that follow: the sexuality that brings them into being; the labor to keep them alive; and the reality of death to make it all matter or at least make us ask why it should. If God had forgiven the first humans, there would have been no more to follow them--you and me and all of us included. Orthodox believers might say, see, this proves that God's punishment and His mercy are all of one piece. We owe our lives to His strictness. But perhaps the God of the Bible doesn't forgive in the beginning simply because He doesn't know how to. How could he? No one else has done anything yet! He hasn't had any practice forgiving, yet. It follows that if we were made in His image, we might also still have some learning to do ourselves. We poor mortals need some practice, too.

(Jews dedicate this time of year, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to just such practice. That's not a bad idea, given where we are and where we're supposed to have come from. We get a lot of good ideas from the people who gave us Einstein and Freud, and Woody Allen.)

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Cain was the first child of Adam and Eve, the very first person ever to be born, instead of shaped from dust and stuff. His brother Abel was the next, the first person to follow another in birth; the first person to be born second, you could say. He adds a new complication to human life: Rivalry, the struggle for position; for first place, second, last. He wins. You lose.

Abel was a shepherd and Cain a tiller of the soil. The day came when Cain brought some of the produce of the soil as a gift to the Lord; and Abel brought some of the first-born of his flock...

No one has told them to do this. It seems to have been a spontaneous act of worship, initiated first by Cain then imitated by Abel, however

The Lord received Abel and his gift with favor; but Cain and his gift he did not receive.

We're not told why not, but we're told that Cain was very angry and cast down. He's unable to forgive Abel, or unable to forgive God, so he attacks one, maybe to get back at the Other.

“Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go into the open country.’ While...there, Cain attacked his brother... and murdered him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ Cain answered, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’ The Lord said, ‘What have you done? Hark! Your brother’s blood that has been shed is crying to me from the ground. Now you are accursed and banished from [this] ground... When you till it...it will no longer yield you its wealth. You shall be a vagrant and a wanderer on earth.’ Cain said..‘My punishment is heavier than I can bear; you have driven me from the ground and [made me] a vagrant and a wanderer..and anyone who meets me can kill me.’ The Lord answered..‘No: if anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged sevenfold.’ So the Lord put a mark on Cain, in order that anyone meeting him should not kill him. “(Gen 4, NEB)

Cain’s was the first act of worship, a spontaneous gift for God, out of special gratitude for his existence, maybe. Remember: if God hadn’t exiled his parents from the Garden, there wouldn’t have been any Cain! So maybe Cain’s unexpected gift of gratitude confused God. But then Abel gave God his gifts, and a second chance, and God understood this time, and accepted. Cain rages and kills, and will never get his second chance. How would it feel to know that the God for whom you cut your first fruits, for whom you cut your first brother, the God you gave so much without being asked to, will not come near you again until you’re dead, but even then only if you are murdered ? The story has suddenly gotten so dense that it’s natural to be confused. We have to stay alert.

So please notice that the famous “mark of Cain” was not for punishment but for protection, a warning of sevenfold retribution for anyone who kills Cain. Please also notice that this first “vengeance ratio”, 7 to 1, is said to be the ratio established by God, a God who is still pretty new to the job of dealing with humans, but who may be making progress in learning how to forgive and to temper His punishments.

Later on in the Bible, we will hear ratios like: 1 to 1, “an eye for an eye”. Still later, we’ll hear questions like this one: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I still forgive him? As many as seven times?” And we’ll hear answers like this: “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” But that’s way ahead of where we’re starting today, when we should also notice that there is exile for Cain, but no imprisonment or execution for the first murder. God lets Cain live with it. for a very long time, as we’ll see. Cain’s out of a job with no place to go, but he’s alive enough to help bring another generation into this cursed blessing of a world.

Then Cain lay with his wife[we’re not told where she came from--that’s another sermon] ; and she conceived and bore Enoch...Enoch begot Irad; Irad begot Mehujael; Mehujael begot Methushael; Methushael begot Lamech...Lamech married two wives, one named Adah and the other Zillah [and he said to them]...’ Wives of Lamech, mark what I say: I kill a man for wounding me, a young man for a blow. Cain may be avenged seven times, but Lamech seventy-seven.’

Lamech's story ends abruptly with these numbers, but they say a great deal. We are told that the first vengeance ratio set by a human being for himself is 77 to one, not 10 but 11 times more than what God first established! 'I kill a man for wounding me, a young man for a blow. Cain may be avenged seven times, but Lamech seventy-seven.' Could be 7 for the days of the week times 10 fingers--plus one more thing those other men had better notice!

Reading Genesis, we get the impression that there must also have been more to this story of Lamech. It seems like a fragment of a fuller narrative. Where's the rest? Do you know? Could it be that we are the authors of the continuing story of Lamech? Don't we provide the details in the stories of our lives, especially in the grudges and grievances that we bear, the fantasies of vengeance we so often entertain?

Let's pause for a moment of silence to consider how we forgive; how we do not; and why so often it seems that we are unable to escape the loop of wanting to get back, get even, and even to get 77 times over what we feel we've lost.

Silent Meditation-----Ring Chime to End

Evidently, later Jewish storytellers also felt that the Bible's account of Lamech was incomplete. They expanded on the story, telling us in their haggadah that the mark God put on Cain turned into a horn, so he looked a bit like a unicorn, and that Cain went on living for hundreds of years, robbing and injuring people and inspiring others to do the same, but protected from vengeance by his distinctive mark. Can't miss him with that horn, but you also can't hit him! Dang!

Of Lamech they say that he became blind in time, but still enjoyed hunting. He had no vision but he still liked to shoot things. Sounds familiar, sounds like our Lamech. One of his young sons would lead him out and tell him which way to point his bow and arrow when he spotted game.

One day the boy saw a horned creature in the distance and he told Lamech, who drew an arrow and shot. Father and son approached the beast, and the little boy told Lamech that whatever it was he'd just killed, it looked like a man except for a horn on its forehead. Lamech realized immediately that it must be Cain, and struck his hands together in rage and despair that he must now suffer God's curse, seven times over. [Clap!] He abandoned himself, and in such abandon his movement became quite powerful... [Clap!]

He didn't know that his son had drawn close to him, perhaps in fear of this strange dead creature, and Lamech's hands struck the child in such a way that he was killed instantly. Without his son to be his eyes, he couldn't even go home. He could only sit by the two bodies until at last his wives found him and brought their vengeful, broken man back to his house. How could they ever forgive him? How could he ever forgive himself? So powerful was that force in Lamech, that 77-to-one thing, that he had killed both his ancestor and his heir--but by what power can he now be forgiven? Will he, like Cain, have to simply live with it?

It's probably easier to forgive another person than to be forgiven. It's terribly difficult to forgive yourself, a kind of double duty, to at once be and let yourself be. I can't tell you which of these is most important; or if there is forgiveness available from some other source or Higher Power; or if that forgiveness would be any easier to endure than yours or mine.

I'm sure that the best practice for not forgiving yourself is not forgiving others; the best protection against having to forgive others is to not forgive yourself. Forgiving is not easy for one person, or two, for a family or for a community--even a community of worship. I can't close today by calling on everyone here to forgive--to forgive what? You know best. What did he do to you? What did she say, and why did she have to say it like that? How could they have hurt you like they did? You try so hard to keep those wheels of sexuality, childbearing and childrearing, work, and death all in line and on the road--why should you be mistreated, misunderstood, abandoned? Must you really forgive all this?

I can't make that call from inside of you or your situation. But if you do hear such a call in there, where you sit and live and breathe, please listen. And please: write your own story. The story of Lamech is quite long enough already. (Silence.)

Closing words

Once during a discussion of forgiveness I heard at another church, a young man made a graceful movement with his hand, saying, "It's not just like this." It was a sort of switching movement, and it touched the thing exactly.

To forgive me does not mean saying that I never did you an injury.

To forgive does not mean to "make as if it had never happened."

To be forgiven does not mean to be treated as if I had never done what I have done; not to lie or pretend, but to act in truth.

Forgiveness is dynamic, not static;

Daily, not once and for all;

A turning, rather than a switch.

Amen.

Notes

God does the first killing in the whole bloody Bible although it's not named as such. It's his first work that we've heard of since the work of creation, and he does it to make certain he's really gotten the attention of certain people:

...The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them. (Gen 3:21)

He has just punished Adam and Eve for eating the fruit of the Garden by adding four new elements to human life, the really serious elements: fertility, sexual desire, labor, and death.

The story suggests that, if God could have forgiven the first generation of humans, they would never have had to experience any of these things, and neither would we--there never would have been any further human generations. The blessing, Be fruitful and multiply, has been replaced with the curse, Get out of here in your sorry skins. Get out, and breed. There's no blessing for the animals that have been skinned or the people who have been clothed with their wet hides. All that's left of them is meat, and a message.