

“BROTHER’S KEEPER” IDEA CHALLENGED

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Quite clever, that Cain, to throw such an innocuous question back in the Lord’s face. Especially since he had just throttled his brother Abel.

You can check out this homicidal case of sibling rivalry in Genesis 4. It’s a rather fascinating tale which can be read on several levels: as a report of the first murder in human history, as a moralism which shows what happens when divine fellowship is broken, even as a reflection of the ancient rivalry between farmers and herdsman.

The story goes something like this: The two brothers each offer sacrifices to the Lord. For some not clearly explained reason, Cain’s offering of agricultural produce is not acceptable. Abel’s sacrificial sheep, on the other hand, is OK.

Subsequently Cain kills Abel in a fit of jealousy. However, the Lord discovers the crime and sentences the murderer to a life of wandering.

Stuck in between his detection and sentence is Cain’s rejoinder about not being his “brother’s keeper.” Most interpreters assume that Cain was grabbing at straws here.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” he asks with thinly disguised arrogance. The obvious answer (which, however, I *not* spelled out in Genesis) is: “Yes, of course, every man is his brother’s keeper.”

But don’t be so sure. The answer may not be as obvious as all that. More than likely Cain was throwing a red herring across the Lord’s path, trying to throw him off the track. He had been caught and was trying to wriggle away with the kind of question which would do a Philadelphia lawyer proud.

He is like the boy who gets caught with his hand in the cookie jar and who quickly challenges his Mom: “You don’t expect me to

starve, do you?” Of course not. Obviously not. On the other hand, that’s no excuse for filching cookies half an hour before supper time.

Cain was pulling the same stunt. He had been caught with his hands dripping blood. “Well, you can’t expect me to be a jailer or a zoo-keeper and keep track of my brother’s whereabouts all the time. Am I my brother’s custodian, his warden?”

Of course not. Obviously not. On the other hand, that’s no excuse for doing your brother in.

The key to understanding this matter is the word “keeper.” There is no other passage anywhere in the Bible which even suggests that one human being is supposed to “keep” another human being.

Shepherds keep their sheep. Rich people keep their property. The Lord keeps his people. But no person is ever asked to “keep” another person. That word “keep” is too strong for the way people are to treat people.

People are supposed to respect each other. They are to help each other. They are to protect each other. They are even supposed to love each other. But they are not supposed to “keep” each other, because that would be demeaning.

The upshot of all this is that the Cain-and-Abel story does not give anyone license to poke their nose into somebody else’s business.

Do-gooders of all stripes need to be careful that they don’t use this “brother’s keeper” stuff as an excuse to butt in where they’re not wanted.

Crafty old Cain was quite correct. Nobody is supposed to be their brother’s “keeper.” On the other hand, people are encouraged to respect and support each other. There’s always room for real helpers, but keepers belong in zoos.

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