

2. Bani Adam, Bani Qabil

In each of the three Holy Scriptures — Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic — all of humanity is understood to have been descended from Adam and Eve, the parents of Cain (Qabil) and Abel (Habil). In each of the three Holy Scriptures, Cain kills his brother Abel. In each of the three Holy Scriptures, God condemns Cain's action; brother killing brother is presented as a tragic evil, the result of someone turning away from God.

Violent passions sometimes arise from personal affronts, and they often arise from a conflict between religious or political beliefs. They come from within, what the Scriptures speak of as the human heart. The human species has a problem.

The three **first** questions recorded in the Bible are instructive. Satan's first question, addressed to Eve/Havah, was, "Has God said...?" God's first question, addressed to Adam, was "Where are you?" And humanity's first question, addressed by Cain to God, was "Am I the guardian of my brother?"

There is a natural progression with these three first questions. They are recorded to teach some deep lessons about how this world became what it is, and how humanity might be set free from the evil in it.

The Serpent/Satan deceptively asked his first question of Eve/Havah: "Has God really said...? He wanted her to doubt and reject what she knew God had said. Eve embraced the deception because of her own desire for appearance, pleasure, and pride. The critical and ongoing source of evil in this world is presented as humanity's decision to reject what God has said.

The first question that God asks is directed to Adam after Adam had joined Eve in the rebellion. God asked Adam, "Where are you?" but not because God did not know. God knew where Adam was foolishly hiding, but Adam did not yet understand where he had gone. He was hiding from God because he had broken their relationship and had just begun to see some of the consequences of that action.

Humanity's first recorded question came a generation later, when more of those consequences had appeared. God asked Cain a question hauntingly similar to what He had asked Adam: "Where is your brother Abel?" It is then that humanity's first recorded question appears. Cain cynically responded: "I don't know. Am I the guardian of my brother?"

Eve, the mother of all, had chosen to believe the Serpent/Satan's lie; now her son defiantly asserts a lie of his own. Cain knew where Abel was. Did Cain, like his father Adam, think that God could not see?

Cain had invented fratricide. The different Holy Scriptures tell us that the dispute arose because he and his brother chose different ways of serving God. Yes, one was right in his approach to God, and one was wrong, but they were still brothers.

It was the one who was wrong who committed the gratuitous murder. It was the murderer who lied about what he had done. It was the liar who vehemently rejected the implication that he had an obligation for his brother's well-being. He rejected a significant part of the core identity of what God had created humanity to be.

We are not told explicitly what caused Cain to kill his brother, but it does not seem difficult to connect the dots in a plausible way. In the Biblical account, Cain brought an offering to God which did not please God. Cain didn't like being told that he was wrong, not even by God. God didn't say, "Why can't you be like your brother?" He simply said, "You can do what's right if you want to, or you can let Sin rule over you."¹

Rather than humbly accepting that he had been wrong, Cain's pride, and perhaps some jealousy too, led him to confront his brother, as though Abel/Habil was the one at fault. Qabil killed his brother in anger, as though that would eliminate the need to change himself.

Cain continued down the long road that has changed humanity into something other than what it was meant to be. "In this vein, a *hadith* states, 'Satan has an inspiration (*lammah*) for the son of Adam, and the angel has one. As for Satan's inspiration, it is a promise to do evil and tell lies against the truth. As for the angel's inspiration, it is a promise to do good and affirm the truth.'"²

That would seem to be the explanation for some of what the Quran records God saying. For example, "Truly We created man in the most beautiful stature, then We cast him to the lowest of the low."³ God created man to be something high and beautiful, but man chose a new identity, one which God condemns and will condemn. Throughout human history, not everyone has chosen to kill his brother, but many have.

The Quran gives a description of the conflict between the two brothers, Cain (Qabil) and Abel (Habil), over how God responded to their differing ways of offering worship to Him. Commentators differ, as they tend to do, over how the account and its purpose should be understood. "Al-Tabari, however, suggests that the reason for telling this story

was to encourage the Muslims to deal leniently and forgivingly with those Jews who had been plotting to kill Muhammad and some of his followers, and hence to follow the example of Abel, who did not raise his hand against his brother despite his brother's threat to kill him. He cites a *hadith*, 'Verily God gives you the example of the two sons of Adam; so take [the path of] the better of the two, and leave [the path of] the worse' (T)."⁴ Simply put, in the eyes of God, it is better to not kill your brother.

The Quranic account continues: "For this reason, We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whosoever slays a soul — unless it be for another soul or working corruption upon the earth — it is as though he slew mankind altogether, and whosoever saves the life of one, it is as though he saved the life of mankind altogether. Our messengers have certainly come onto them with clear proofs. Yet even after that, many of them are prodigal on the earth."⁵ God expresses an unequivocal approval for saving a life, a prescription He has given to both the Children of Israel and to Muslims, and, one might expect, to all the Children of Adam.

"The Jewish commentary tradition as contained in both the Mishnah and the Talmud similarly connect this specific idea, which became an important part of Jewish ethics, to the story of Cain and Abel."⁶ Here is the way it is expressed in the Jerusalem Talmud some 400 years earlier: "Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."⁷

The Babylonian Talmud has some additional observations, which I have underlined. "For this reason, man was created alone to teach you that whosoever destroys a single soul*, Scripture imputes [Guilt] to him as though he had destroyed a complete world; and whosoever preserves a single soul*, Scripture ascribes [Merit] to him as though he had preserved a complete world. Furthermore, [he was created alone] for the sake of peace among men, that one might not say to his fellow, 'My father was greater than yours.'"⁸

This is preceded by a portion that speaks of monetary restitution for certain transgressions of the Law. "In civil suits, one can make monetary restitution and thereby effect his atonement; but in capital cases he is held responsible for his blood and the blood of his [potential] descendants until the end of time, for thus we find in the case of Cain, who killed his brother, that it is written: the bloods [plural] of your brother cry unto Me: not the blood [singular] of your brother, but the bloods of your brother, is said — i.e., his blood and the blood of his [potential] descendants."⁹

That is the reasoning behind the statement that "Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world..." And since we all have the same father, Adam, no one has any basis for exalting himself over another because of physical descent.

The common ancestry of Cain and Abel should have been sufficient to prevent each from killing the other. It is intended to be an incentive for all the remaining descendants of Adam to pursue living in peace with one another.

An unrepentant murderer can pretend that he is doing what his “faith” requires, but the validity of that faith can be challenged. “The Prophet said, ‘None of you will have faith till he likes for his brother what he likes for himself.’”¹⁰ And Moses said, “Today I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore be choosing life, so that you and your descendants may live.”¹¹

The “Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam” was issued by the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers. Article 1 states that:

“(a) All human beings form one family whose members are united by their subordination to Allah and descent from Adam. All men are equal in terms of basic human dignity and basic obligations and responsibilities, without any discrimination on the basis of race, colour, language, belief, sex, religion, political affiliation, social status or other considerations. The true religion is the guarantee for enhancing such dignity along the path to human integrity.

“(b) All human beings are Allah’s subjects, and the most loved by Him are those who are most beneficial to His subjects, and no one has superiority over another except on the basis of piety and good deeds.”¹²

Life, whether your life or the life of your enemy, is highly valued by God. Life is the one gift of God that enables us to receive and benefit from all the others. And life, eternal life, is also God’s reward for those who live this present life in humility and faithfulness before Him. Those who demonstrate a contempt for life should not expect that reward.

We live in a world where war is commonplace, as is self-exaltation and contempt for others. In Mikhail Bakunin’s anarchistic analysis, “Every time a State wants to declare war upon another State, it starts off by launching a manifesto addressed not only to its own subjects but to the whole world. In this manifesto it declares that right and justice are on its side, and it endeavors to prove that it is actuated only by love of peace and humanity and that, imbued with generous and peaceful sentiments, it suffered for a long time in silence until the mounting iniquity of its enemy forced it to bare its sword.

“...And its antagonist answers with a similar manifesto, in which naturally right, justice, humanity, and all the generous sentiments are to be found respectively on its side.

“Those mutually opposed manifestos are written with the same eloquence, they breathe the same virtuous indignation, and one is just as sincere as the other; that is to say both of them are equally brazen in their lies, and it is only fools who are deceived by them. Sensible persons, all those who have had some political experience, do not even take the trouble of reading such manifestos. On the contrary, they seek ways to uncover the interests driving both adversaries into this war, and to weigh the respective power of each of them in order to guess the outcome of the struggle.”¹³

One need not agree with Bakunin in his universal characterizations of ALL wars and ALL proclamations. One may instead understand that there are times when war is a necessary lesser evil, but it is, nonetheless, an evil, even if an everpresent one. There are times when someone can be right; when someone can truly be seeking justice; but it is therefore all the more disappointing and painful when people and States make false claims simply for appearance. For there are also times when someone is wrong, and has no desire for justice or anything virtuous.

Each of the three Holy Scriptures presents cases when war is not only justified, but necessary. Yes, God is sometimes wrathful, but it would appear that wrath is not His first choice. We are told in the hadiths, “When Allah decreed the Creation He pledged Himself by writing in His book which is laid down with Him: My mercy prevails over My wrath.”¹⁴

That is not always the case with human beings. Sometimes people deceive others and/or themselves about their own motives. As it is said in the *Hadiths*: “I heard the Messenger of Allah say: The first of people against whom judgment will be pronounced on the Day of Resurrection will be a man who died a martyr. He will be brought and Allah will make known to him His favours and he will recognize them. [The Almighty] will say: And what did you do about them? He will say: I fought for you until I died a martyr. He will say: You have lied — you did but fight that it might be said [of you]: He is courageous. And so it was said. Then he will be ordered to be dragged along on his face until he is cast into Hell-fire. ...”¹⁵

So it is part of the Islamic faith that the goodness of deeds will be evaluated in terms of the actual motive in a person’s heart. People are encouraged to keep that in mind in living their lives. For, “It is of *Shirk* [having more than one god] to perform a (righteous) deed for worldly reasons.”¹⁶ “Surely God knows those who believe, and surely He knows the hypocrites.”¹⁷

The book of Proverbs says, “All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes; but the Lord weighs the spirits.”¹⁸ God uses equal weights and balances, but it seems that He

Himself assigns a higher priority to peace between brothers than much of humanity does. Within every religious ideology, there are priorities, sometimes clearly articulated, sometimes not.

It is only logical to ask here what level of priority God assigns to saving the life of all humanity. How important is it as an object of faith? What level of priority is assigned in Islam or Judaism or Christianity to having “saved the life of mankind altogether”? With my limited acquaintance with the three Holy Scriptures, I would suggest that it is not possible to articulate a higher priority.

One might say, “To have and proclaim saving faith is the highest priority.” And I would respond, “You may be right, but proclamation is more than words. Your attitude and behavior towards others also communicate what you believe. Are not right attitude and behavior an essential component of ‘saving faith’?”

The saving of a human life is presented in the Holy Scriptures is qualified upon there being no justified cause for putting the individual to death. (There are justified causes, though there is consideration of the possibility that the one guilty unto death might repent from whatever action constitutes his or her guilt.) We all understand that many murderers feel justified in killing those they kill, regardless of what any religious or legal text might say. But God is understood to be the One who justifies and the One who judges and condemns.

Habakkuk the prophet prayed, “O Lord, I have heard Your report [of coming judgment], and I was afraid. O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known. In wrath, remember mercy.”¹⁹

There is an interesting *hadith* that says, “the Messenger of Allah said: ‘The gates of Paradise will be opened on Mondays and on Thursdays, and every servant [of Allah] who associates nothing with Allah will be forgiven, except for the man who has a grudge against his brother. [About them] it will be said: *Delay these two until they are reconciled; delay these two until they are reconciled.*’”²⁰ Another *hadith* records that “Allah’s Messenger said, ‘The testimony of a deceitful man or a woman, or of one who harbours a grudge against his brother, or of one who is dependent on a family (to testify) for members of the family is not allowable.’”²¹

If that is the case when someone merely has a grudge against his brother, what will the case be for those who have hatred/murder in their hearts? “The importance of displaying the virtue of mercy among all human beings is emphasized by a *hadith*: ‘God is not merciful to one who is not merciful.’ ... another *hadith* states, ‘The merciful are

shown mercy by the Merciful. Be merciful to those on earth, and He who is in Heaven will be merciful unto you.”²²

In the Hebrew Scriptures, David said to God, “With the merciful You will show Yourself merciful”²³. Certainly, God wants people to know and believe the truth. And He also wants people to live the truth that they know. That extends to how we treat one another.

In the Islamic Scriptures, “[T]he believers are similarly warned not to let hatred for a people lead them to transgress; transgressing the limits set by God is one definition of injustice (R). To stand for justice, even against one’s family or toward one’s enemies is to stand for God, and being just is *nearer to reverence*. To *be just* toward one’s enemies means to refrain from treating even the idolaters in a manner that transgresses the limits established in divine law, including killing their women and children or breaking treaties with them (R, Z).”²⁴

But humanity is a strange species, capable of strange reasoning, and strange actions. Every aspect of this strangeness is often magnified in human rulers. Everywhere in the world, there are cases where rulers have killed their brothers and closest relatives in order to feed their own jealousies and lust for power.

At times in the Ottoman Empire, fratricide at the highest level was protected by law. “According to a law code introduced by Mehmed II (r. 1444–46; 1451–81), a ‘prince who would succeed to the throne could kill his brothers for the integrity of the empire.’”²⁵ “Under Sultan Selim, a new policy emerged, which included fratricide, or the murder of brothers. When a new Sultan was crowned, his brothers would be imprisoned. When the Sultan’s first son was born, his brothers and their sons would be killed. This system ensured that the rightful heir would take the throne. But, not every Sultan followed this harsh ritual. Over time, the practice evolved. In the later years, the brothers would only be put in prison—not killed.”²⁶

The Ottoman Empire ceased to exist after World War I, but killing one’s brothers has persisted at the highest levels, the lowest levels, and the levels in between. If anyone had any questions or doubts about what humanity is capable of doing, World War II should have provided the answers. And it didn’t stop then.

Today, as I write this, 46 people have been killed in riots in Delhi, India’s capital. A BBC article entitled “Delhi riots: The Sikh father and son who saved Muslims,” says that a particular father and son “hid people in their home before whisking them to safety during the violence, sparked by anger over a controversial new law. But Mr Singh has

been quick to dismiss the praise, telling BBC Punjabi he was just repaying a debt he owed after he himself was saved by people during riots in the city 35 years ago [when 3,000 Sikhs were killed].”²⁷ (Punjab, it will be recalled, is one of those two provinces split by Partition.)

One of those saved said, “No one else dared to help us. The Sikh man and his son drove us Muslims to safety on their motorbikes. [Another said] “They saved everyone. [Another said] “We may not have survived without him.” [The Sikh father, who] “hid many Muslim families in his house,” said, “I believe the entire human race is one. We didn’t see people as Muslims. We just saw them as human beings.”²⁸

The Sikh who saved Muslims (from Hindus and other Sikhs) had himself been saved by Hindus (from other Hindus). Who was a brother to whom? Or rather, which kind of brother did each show himself to be?

In different places, like 7:172, the Quran speaks of the Oneness of God and the oneness of humanity. “This verse is also connected with the Quranic notion of the *fitrah* (IK, T), the primordial nature (30:30) with which all human beings were originally endowed, indicating that the innate recognition of God’s Oneness constitutes the essence of being human (see 30:30c).”²⁹

The oneness of humanity is a consequence of the Oneness of God. That would indicate that the recognition of humanity’s oneness is an integral part of the recognition of God’s Oneness. I.e., all of humanity was created by the same one Creator. The denial of humanity’s oneness would be a form of *shirk*, attributing some creation to an entity other than Allah.

Accordingly, how one speaks and lives is said to be a part of striving in Allah’s Cause. “A man asked the Prophet, ‘Whose Islam is good or what sort of deeds of Islam are good.’ The Prophet replied, ‘To feed and to greet those who you know and those whom you do not know.’”³⁰ “To feed” is to sustain the life of someone; “to greet” is to recognize and value their humanity and seek peace upon them from God.

“The servants of the Compassionate are those who walk humbly upon the earth, and when the ignorant address them, say, ‘Peace.’”³¹ It is sometimes not easy to desire peace for the ignorant, especially if they are also arrogant. That is why humility is absolutely necessary for those who seek to be servants of the Compassionate.

What will be the reward of those who save a single life? or more? Not everyone wants to or is willing to do that. And not everyone who wants to do that ends up being

able to somehow manage to let that desire overcome all fears and obstacles. You may make yourself a target if you seek to save the lives of others.

Admittedly, it is not an advanced revelation to say, “I believe the entire human race is one. We didn’t see people as Muslims. We just saw them as human beings.” But it may nevertheless still be true. There are some among the children of Adam who live as though it is still true. There are certainly enough children of Cain who are doing otherwise. We can surmise that they will find out the punishment for those who destroy a single life, or more.

FOOTNOTES

1. Paraphrase of Genesis 4:7
2. *The Study Quran*, comment on 2:268, at 7843.
3. Quran, The Fig/*al-Tin* 95:4-5:
4. *The Study Quran*, Comment on 5:27-32, at 17307
5. Quran, The Table Spread/*al-Ma'idah* 5:32.
6. *The Study Quran*, Comment on 5:27-32. 17426. The Mishnah and the Gemara are the two intersecting parts of the Talmud; sometimes the Gemara alone is referred to as the Talmud.
7. *Jerusalem Talmud*, Sanhedrin 4:1 (22a), Soncino Translation [cf. Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer ch. 47, Eliyahu Rabbah 11, Yalkut Shimoni on Exodus 166.]
8. Mishnah 4.5, appearing in Sanhedrin 37a (*Current editions of the Babylonian Talmud contain the phrase “of Israel” in these two places. There is a textual issue over whether or not the phrase is part of the original text of the Babylonian Talmud. It does not appear in the Jerusalem Talmud nor in the rabbinic writings cited in footnote 6.)
9. Talmud Sanhedrin Mishnah IV.5 [in 37a]
10. Bulugh al-Maram 6.13 “Narrated Anas ...” Compiled by Al-Hafiz Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani (Riyadh: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 1996)
11. Deuteronomy 30:19

12. Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, Aug. 5, 1990, U.N. GAOR, World Conf. on Hum. Rts., 4th Sess., Agenda Item 5, U.N. Doc. A/CONF.157/PC/62/Add.18 (1993) [English translation].

13. Bakunin, Mikhail, *The Immorality of the State*, p. 9

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/various/state-im.htm>

14. Hadiths Qudsi 1. "On the authority of Abu Hurayrah... related by Muslim (also by al-Bukhari, an-Nasa'i and Ibn Majah)." [\[sunnah.com\]](http://sunnah.com)

15. Hadiths Qudsi 6. [\[sunnah.com\]](http://sunnah.com) "On the authority of Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him), who said... It was related by Muslim (also by at-Tirmidhi and an-Nasa'i)."

16. *Kitab At-Tauhud*, Sheikh-ul-Islam, Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahhab, Trans. by Compilation and Research Dept., Dar-us-Salam, Dar-us-Salam Publications, Riyadh, 1996/1416, Chapter No: 37, p. 128

17. Quran, The Spider/*al-Ankabut* 29:11

18. Proverbs 16:2.

19. Habakkuk 3:2

20. *Hadiths Qudsi* [\[sunnah.com\]](http://sunnah.com) 20. On the authority of Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) It was related by Muslim (also by Malik and Abu Dawud). The phrase "who associates nothing with Allah" seems to be the Quranic equivalent of Exodus 20:3, :You shall have no other gods before Me."

21. The Book of Judgement, Chapter 1, The Testimonies, 1203. Narrated 'Abdullah bin 'Umar: [Reported by Ahmad and Abu Da'ud], *Bulugh al-Maram*, p.496

22. *The Study Quran*, comment on Victory/*al-Fath* 48:29 at 74394

23. 2Samuel 22:26

24. *The Study Quran*, comment on 5:8, at 16875 Cf. v.2

25. *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters, (FactsonFile: NY, 2009), p.207

26. <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/ottoman-empire>

27. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-india-51758233/delhi-riots-the-sikh-father-and-son-who-saved-muslims> March 6, 2020

28. Ibid., in the accompanying video.

29. *The Study Quran*, comment on 7:172 at 27217.

30. Sahih Al-Bukhari, Translated by Muhammad Muhsin Khan, (Riyadh: Dar-us-Salam, 1996) Ch. 5.12, narrated by “Abdullah bin ‘Amr.

31. Quran, The Criterion/*al-Furqan* 25:63