Reading the Cain and Abel story from the angle of Earth

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Introduction

It has come as a surprise to note how rarely the standard Genesis commentaries make a point of referring to the role that Earth plays in the story of Cain and Abel in chapter 4. Some refer to it in passing. Others ignore it altogether. And that is despite the fact that the word ‘Earth’, or more accurately ‘soil’ (‘adâmãh), occurs in the story six times, the word ‘land’ (‘erets) appears once, and there is only one word that occurs more often, the word ‘brother’ which occurs seven times.

It is safe to say that scholars have traditionally read the Cain and Abel story in terms of the unfolding story of the relationship between God and humanity. This is perfectly understandable; in fact, it is expected of commentaries. And ecological hermeneutics has arisen as an intentional branch of biblical research only in the past couple of decades. Nevertheless, with the rise of the new discipline its proponents have tried to draw attention to the overly anthropocentric orientation of traditional biblical studies, at the expense of the geo-centric. In short, it is said that traditional scholarship has not paid enough attention to the role that the Earth\(^1\) plays in the biblical text in general and in this story in particular.

This essay is a short exercise in biblical hermeneutics. Rather than downplaying traditional theological readings of the text, however, the essay starts by indicating the fine emphases that come to the fore when the story of Cain and Abel is interpreted by scholars representing two different theological traditions. Identifying these two mutually enriching readings helps to bring the theological import of the text into sharper focus. The second major part of the paper is an ecological reading of the story,\(^2\) an attempt to discover the insights that emerge when the text is read from the perspective of

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1 In this essay the capitalised Earth refers both to the soil and to the whole created realm, picking up the two senses in which it is employed in the Bible. In each case the context makes clear which is meant.

2 The exegesis of a text that focuses on the role played by Earth still qualifies as a theological reading of that text.
the Earth. Of the three major components of an Earth-oriented reading—suspicion, identification and retrieval—the ecological reading will focus mainly on identification and retrieval, uncovering the part that Earth plays in the story and letting its voice be heard.

**The mystery of God’s will**

First, however, it is important to deal with one matter of interpretation that has divided the scholarly community; that is, the motivation for the Lord’s acceptance of Abel’s sacrifice and rejection of Cain’s. Until late last century, it was held almost unanimously that Cain’s sacrifice was inherently displeasing to the Lord and Abel’s inherently pleasing. The reasons given were many and varied: the problematical attitude of Cain when offering his sacrifice (Heb 11:4), the inferiority of the sacrifice that he presented, God’s preference for the vocation of shepherds, God’s preference for meat offerings over grain offerings, or God’s special favour towards younger brothers, a recurring theme in the Old Testament.

Those who trace the rejection of Cain’s sacrifice back to Cain himself are adamant that, among other things, the story highlights the gravity of any infringement of the Old Testament sacrificial legislation, or more broadly speaking the non-negotiability of right worship. As a matter of course people offered sacrifices from the fruit of the field and the offspring of the pasture to acknowledge and thank the one who provided these rich gifts. The most common opinion among those who have taken this line is that the sacrifice of the shepherd Abel was accepted because he brought ‘the firstlings of the flock’ (vs 4), according to the sacrificial laws of the OT which insisted that the best animals must be used, those that are firstborn and free from blemish. The sacrifice of the farmer Cain, on the other hand, was rejected (vs 5) because grain offerings must be the first fruits of the highest quality. Items that cost nothing were to be avoided assiduously (eg Lev 1:3; 22:20–22; Deut 26:2). In the words of Gordon Wenham: ‘Since this is the first account of sacrifice in the OT we might well expect an allusion to this fundamental principle in this story’ (104). And in similar vein, David Cotter says that ‘[t]he reason that the story gives for Cain’s rejection is that Abel exercised his free will and brought the best, with the implication that Cain did not choose but simply took what was at hand’ (42).

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3 The essay works with the conviction that biblical exegesis is enhanced by a willingness to employ, with due discrimination, as wide a range of approaches as possible. Conversely, it is unhelpful when one hermeneutic is employed to the exclusion of all others. The more questions that are addressed to the text, the more the text reveals of the depth and breadth of God’s infinite wisdom. At the same time, it is essential that the theologian develop his or her own clear hermeneutical stance, a stance always open to refinement and re-focus as new approaches with new questions open ever new doors to the treasures within.

4 Wenham (104) provides a handy summary of the range of opinions.

5 Wittenberg has a slightly different take. He says that Cain’s sacrifice was indeed inferior and therefore unacceptable, but he should not be held accountable for that. ‘Cain realised that in spite of his hard labour his harvest was not blessed, while the animals of his younger brother were thriving. Yahweh’s curse on the ground seemed to have fallen on him’ (107).
On the other hand, most scholars nowadays insist that the text makes no explicit claim about the nature of the two sacrifices or the manner in which they were offered. In keeping with Exodus 33:19, ‘I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy’, von Rad says that ‘the narrator wants to remove the acceptance of the sacrifice from man and place it completely within God’s free will’ (1970: 101; see also Towner: 59). Brueggemann is even more adamant: ‘Essential to the plot is the capricious freedom of Yahweh’ (56). If no greater virtue is assigned to the worship practice of one brother than the other, the weight shifts dramatically to the sovereign will of God, even the caprice of God, and from there to the manner in which Cain deals with the rejection of his sacrifice. Since the author gives no reason for God’s decision, Swenson says that it is clear that ‘the issue is not what Cain might have done or not done to deserve God’s reaction, but what Cain should do to manage his anger and disappointment in circumstances that seem unfair’ (379). The author wants to beam the spotlight on Cain’s problematical conduct. Such conduct only emerges after he has received the Lord’s gratuitous disapproval of his sacrifice. It cannot be traced back to long standing irreverence on Cain’s part, an entrenched resistance to God’s claim on his life.

**Moral responsibility**

In their interpretation of the Cain and Abel story some scholars place the weight fair and square on the matter of moral responsibility, the human ability to choose between right and wrong. The key verse is verse 7, in which the Lord addresses the angry and resentful Cain with the words: ‘If you do well will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it’. Cain’s immediate response to the rejection of his sacrifice is not the problem. It is natural that he should be crestfallen after the rejection of his sacrifice (vss 5,6). But the Lord knows that his anger makes him vulnerable, and so he intervenes in Cain’s life in a remarkable manner. He identifies the potential of Cain’s despondency to wreak havoc. He has come to a critical moment in his life, where he is faced with a clear-cut choice. Doing that which is good will lead to a ‘lifting’, but to play with the possibility of taking the other direction will place him within a force-field that he lacks the power to withstand. The author portrays sin’s fatal attraction in terms of a predatory animal, lurking with evil intent at Cain’s door and waiting for its prey to let his guard slip and expose himself to attack. Sin’s desire is potent. The image of the external animal should not be pressed, however, because sin actually lurks within every person (Rom 7:17). Succumbing to its enticements cannot be blamed on the devil or on peer-group pressure. As Paul says, it gains its foothold by referring to the commandment and calling it into question (Rom 7:7–12). And Cain has received the law from the very mouth of its giver.

6 Many find it difficult to take the step of saying that the text offers no motivation for God’s rejection of Cain’s sacrifice, first because of an instinctive tendency to exonerate God at all costs, and secondly because the writer to the Hebrews does explain the acceptance of Abel’s sacrifice, and by implication the rejection of Cain’s (Heb 11:4; see also 1 Jn 3:12).

7 This is the first use of any of the Bible’s terms for sin, even though the ‘original sin’ story was told in the previous chapter, Genesis 3.

8 At 1 John 3:12 the author ascribes Cain’s conduct to the interplay between ‘the evil one’ and ‘his [Cain’s] own deeds’.

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Given an inch sin takes a mile, as envy, anger, resentment and hatred tumble on top of each other in rapid succession and culminate in murder. The sudden pouncing of a wild animal on an unsuspecting victim describes the situation perfectly.

Interestingly, sin doesn’t have to have its way. It may be lurking at Cain’s door, but in fatherly kindness God points Cain to the threat that he faces if he takes the wrong course of action and warns him against going that way before it is too late. ‘Yahweh tells Cain that his future is open. The sin of anger and violence that lurks at his door is something he can deal with if he chooses to do so. He is not a helpless victim but a human being who is capable of taking charge of his life’ (Towner: 61; see especially Brueggemann: 57,58). He can wrestle with the hostile and cunning beast of sin and overcome it.9 That is to take the more difficult path of reconciliation and restoration, if need be by forgiving the sin that the brother has committed and that has led to the breach in the relationship (Matt 5:23–26; 1 Jn 3:11–17). Cain may well be a free agent, capable of ruling his passions, but it turns out that his baser instincts, inflamed by religious envy, are more than a match for his better nature to which the Lord has made his appeal. The choice that the Lord gives Cain between two paths ‘seems to be the key to unlocking the whole story’ (Towner: 60). If one may generalise, scholars of Reformed and Catholic backgrounds tend to interpret the text in this way.

Law and gospel

It is in the DNA of Lutherans to read texts from a law-gospel hermeneutical perspective. It is our default position. Leading Lutheran Old Testament scholars such as Gerhard von Rad, Claus Westermann and Terry Fretheim are no exception. Cain has broken the law, in fact the cardinal law that forbids humans from shedding the blood of a fellow human being (Gen 9:5; Ex 20:13; Matt 5:21). The judgment falls, in the form of a curse, removing Cain from the primary source of sustenance and life—the fruit-bearing soil. In addition, as a consequence of the fratricide, Cain knows that he has also become an outlaw, so that anyone who finds him is free to take his life. He is bereft of the warmth and the security of human companionship.

Whereas the ground was cursed following the primal sin (Gen 3:17), now Cain himself is cursed (4:11). Without hoping or pleading for remission of his sentence, he emits a heart-rending cry of despair. Having turned his back on the Lord’s counsel to ‘do well’ by not giving way to his anger, Cain also relinquishes his right to the promise that he would

9 The noun ‘desire’ and the verb ‘to master’ appear together both at Gen 3:16 (‘your [Eve’s] desire shall be for your husband, but he shall rule over you’) and at Gen 4:7 (‘its [sin’s] desire is for you, but you must master it’). The imperfect aspect of the verb makes translation problematical. In both cases, the verb could have the force of a command (must) or a simple future (will). At 3:16, it would appear that the double meaning is intentional. The verb both prescribes and describes the post-lapsarian relationship between the sexes. But especially at 4:7 it may also mean ‘you may, or you can, master it [sin]. In other words, once again, the Lord is not compelling Cain to comply with his will. Rather, he is placing the alternative courses of action before him, while assuring him that he is not only at liberty to choose between them, but also that he has the ability to choose to do what is right. God has blessed humanity with the gift of moral responsibility.
enjoy a ‘lifting up’ before the Lord (vs 7). As a terrible irony, Cain is now compelled to do his own ‘heavy lifting’ (vs 13), but the burden of fratricide and its consequences is way beyond him. ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear’ (vs 13).

This is the time for the iron-clad Old Testament law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Ex 21:23–25) to be exercised with full force. Having shed the blood of a human being, Cain deserves nothing less than to have his own blood shed (Gen 9:6). Instead, like a bolt from the blue, God is on hand with the life-giving and life-restoring voice of the gospel. God graciously intervenes in Cain’s life with a word that mitigates the sentence and places on Cain the mark of protection. This is all the more remarkable in view of the legislation of ancient Israel. Blood that was shed in an act of violence was understood to pollute the holy land. Those who killed someone accidentally could flee to one of Israel’s three cities of refuge for protection (Deut 19:1–10; Num 35:22–28), but those who killed someone in cold blood were to be hunted down and put to death by ‘the avenger of blood’ (Num 35:19,21). As the ultimate avenger of blood, the Lord waives his right to take Cain’s life and stays the hand of others who may be inclined to do what they could otherwise have done with impunity.

As Gerhard von Rad says: ‘It is not God’s will that the punishment which he imposed upon Cain should give man the right to turn savage and to shed blood. So the story of Cain ends with a restrained word of a divine intention of grace and order’ (1977: 21). However, von Rad knows that those who read the text through a law-gospel lens will not be content with a restrained word of grace; they will be eager to hear the witness of the whole Bible. So after saying that there can be no expiation for the accusing cry of Abel’s blood, arising before God from the ground day and night, von Rad concludes a sermonic reflection on the Cain and Abel story as follows:

Abel’s blood, even the best and dearest, never brings salvation in the presence of God; instead it increases the burden of the curse. But Christ's blood ‘speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel’ (Heb 12:24). Thus the Bible speaks of two kinds of blood and their voices before God: one of these is million-fold, and its message is accusation, while the other is the blood of the One, and it brings healing. (1977: 21,22)

None of that is to suggest that the Lord abandons Cain to his fate. Another note still needs to be sounded, not necessarily the gospel but the note of protection and provision for all God’s children. Despite the accusing outcry of Abel’s blood, and despite Cain’s decision to lead the life of a restless wanderer in self-imposed exile from God (4:16), the text provides clear indications that the Lord does not intend to give up on Cain; the Lord cares for the wayward man as a good parent never ceases caring for a rebellious
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Cain may be a murderer and a liar, but the Lord revokes the death penalty and follows Cain into ‘the land of Nod, east of Eden’, blesses him with the gifts of marriage and family and establishes him as the ancestor of city-dwellers, Bedouin, musicians and metal workers (4:17–22).

Reading Cain and Abel from the perspective of the Earth

Even the most cursory reading of the Cain and Abel story shows the attentive reader that the Earth, or the soil, is a prominent feature. Cain is depicted as a tiller of the ground, and his offering consists of the fruit of the ground (vss 2,3). Apart from the murder taking place out ‘in the field’ (vs 8), there is then no mention of the Earth as such from verses 4 to 9. But immediately after Cain murders his brother, the references come thick and fast. The Lord calls him to account, with the words, ‘Your brother’s blood is crying out from the ground’ (vs 10). The Lord charges Cain with his offence by saying that the Earth ‘has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand’ (vs 11). The penalty the Lord imposes on Cain is entirely Earth-focused: ‘Now you are cursed from the ground’, and ‘when you till the ground it will no longer yield to you its strength’ (vs 12). And when Cain repeats the penalty in his own words, with a lament that issues from the depths of his being, he does so even more graphically, by saying, ‘Today you have driven me away from the face of the soil’ and links it with being driven from the Lord’s face (vs 14).

As for features, the Earth is said to have a face, a mouth and strength. As for actions, the Earth has the inherent ability to give of its strength to the rest of creation. But when it is compelled to open its mouth and reluctantly receive that which it simply ought not to receive, a brother’s blood, it can also withhold its strength at the Lord’s behest. And although the text says nothing about the Earth itself giving voice to the anguish that is implied in having to swallow Abel’s blood, the voice of the shed blood itself is said to emit a cry of anguish that sounds loud and clear in the hearing of God. How can the Earth not be understood as a character in the story, as first of all it suffers in equal measure with Abel the impact of Cain’s horrendous deed and then becomes the instrument of God in the judgment on Cain? But it is one thing to note these items. It is quite another to develop their significance in terms of the presence of the Earth in the story and the role that it plays.

10 It is somewhat ironical that the Lord commits himself to keeping and caring for the very man who completely fails to keep his brother (Fretheim 2005: 78). In similar fashion the [angel of the] Lord goes searching for Hagar who has ‘looked with contempt on her mistress’ (Gen 16:4). Instead of cursing Hagar, the stipulated penalty for cursing Abram—presumably Sarai included—the Lord searches for the outcast Hagar, rescues her from the perils of life in the wilderness and provides for all her immediate and long-term needs (16:7–16).

11 Not content to live on the outskirts of civilisation, the restless wandering of Cain’s descendants finally leads them to the possibly even more restless and rootless life of city-dwellers, but also with the city’s strange mixture of people engaged in the arts and crafts and useful trades, and those like Lamech who have become psychopaths and hardened criminals.

12 With the exception of the King James Version, followed by the New King James Version, and the English Standard Version, all other English translations leave out the words ‘the face of’ before ‘the soil’ in verse 14. This omission prevents the reader from reflecting on the fact that the Earth is said to have a face, and from seeing the parallel in the verse between ‘the face of the soil’ and ‘your (the Lord’s) face’.
When Cain is described as a tiller of the soil, the reader is reminded immediately of the occupation that the Lord assigned to Adam in the garden of Eden, to till it and keep it (2:15). Cain may be the murderer and liar in the story, but he is identified from the outset as the person who fulfils the first occupation mentioned in the Bible and arguably the most basic and important occupation, care of the Earth. As a translation of the verb ʾābad, the verb ‘to till’ is slightly misleading. Its basic meaning is ‘to serve’, but also ‘to work’, and by extension ‘to till’ the soil, as when we speak of ‘working’ the soil. But the verb also stretches to include the verb ‘to worship’, whether false gods or the true God of Israel (Ex 23:24,25; Josh 24:14–18; 2 Kgs 21:3). In view of this usage, it is important that the note of reverence, or awe, not be lost. Certainly the ancient Israelites would never have entertained the thought of worshipping the Earth; but as Swenson says, ‘[t] he text suggests that the human being is created in order to work in reverent service of the land’ (2006: 375).

To work in reverent service of the Earth is to do nothing less than to honour our mother. In the very beginning of creation, the Bible tells us, God fashioned humans from the soil, as a master potter moulds a vessel—humans from the humus, earthlings from the Earth, Adam from the ‘adāmāh. Physically speaking, humans are born of their natural mothers, but theologically speaking it is the Earth that is understood as the mother of humanity. Nowhere is that made clearer than in the words of Job: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there’ (Job 1:21). But the theme recurs throughout the Old Testament (eg, Gen 3:19; Ps 139:13,15). The Earth is the true source of human life, and all other life as well. Beyond its role as mother of humanity and all living creatures, the Earth is also the stage on which the drama of life is played out. Beyond its role as stage, the Earth, in the sense of the created realm, provides the sustenance on which all life finally depends. And further still, the Earth awaits all living creatures as their final destiny at the time of death (Gen 2:19; Job 1:21). As the ground of our being, as our mother in the most profound sense imaginable, it is only right that humanity should work in reverent service of the Earth.

Shirley Wurst has taken the Bible’s image of the Earth as mother a significant step further (98,99). When penalties are imposed following the fall, the most severe penalty of all is the penalty imposed on the Earth. Because Adam ate from the forbidden fruit, God cursed the ground ‘because of [Adam]’ (3:17). Sometimes it becomes essential to shake the dust of familiarity off some biblical verses; this verse is no exception. It is so well known that it has lost its impact. The Earth has done nothing to deserve the curse, which will henceforth involve a ceaseless struggle with thorns and thistles, to say nothing for the ravages of plant diseases and adverse weather conditions that deprive it of a significant portion of its innate fecundity. But when it is recalled that Earth is depicted as a mother, and when one thinks of the untold and unnumbered sacrifices that mothers are willing to make for the sake of their children, including the countless ways they suffer for their children’s misbehaviour, is it too far from the mark to think of the curse that is imposed on the Earth in the same terms? As humans wreak untold havoc on the physical world in reckless abandon, generation after generation and century after century, does not the
picture of an all-suffering mother come readily to mind? Nor does the Earth then behave like a bitter parent, constantly complaining about the children's ingratitude and their failure to pursue their God-given vocation of working the land in reverent service and guarding and preserving it around the clock (Gen 2:15). The Earth takes one hit after the other for humans, and because of humans. Is it going too far to say that the Bible accounts for this in terms of Earth's maternal compassion for the creatures that it has brought to birth?

The maternal image cannot be pressed too far. The relationship between Earth and humankind is not simply analogous to the relationship between a mother and her children. It is also highly reciprocal. While it is true that humans depend on the Earth for their life and daily sustenance, it is equally true that the Earth is dependent on the heaven-sent rain and the nurturing farmer for its vitality and fertility (2:5). In fact, one of the main reasons that God created humanity, according to the second creation account (Gen 2:4b–25), is so that there might be someone to till the Earth (Swenson 2008: 33,34).

From as early as verse 5 in chapter 2, and then repeatedly, the verb 'to till' keeps on surfacing in the unfolding Genesis narrative (2:5,15; 3:23; 4:2,12). The farmer places highest priority on working the soil and working with the soil in a way that does nothing but benefit the soil. However, the verb 'to keep' (shāmar), a word that readers typically associate with the verb 'to till', never reappears in the narrative alongside the word that one would think of as its natural twin.

It is important to pursue the question: Why is the verb ‘to keep’ (shāmar) not used in verse 2 for Abel's occupation of sheep-keeping? Surely it captures the vigilant and protective care that is required by the role. Has the word been withheld deliberately? Is it perhaps being held in reserve for a specific reason? The word finally resurfaces in the most familiar words of the Cain and Abel story. When the Lord calls Cain to account for what he has done, Cain asks: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (vs 9). Is it possible that the verb has been set to one side so that when it reappears in the narrative it can do so with full rhetorical effect? Cain's words have elicited indignation in the hearts of readers down through the ages. They are indignant because Cain's words indicate blatant disregard for the obligation that everyone owes to their 'brother', their nearest and dearest. After all, between the notice of Cain's birth and his description as a tiller of the field, the reader learns that Cain is a man (he is not called a child, not even a son), that he has a younger brother, and that the brother's name is Abel, which means futility, emptiness and temporariness. From the outset the author is signalling that Cain has been given the man to man responsibility of taking care of his more fragile young brother (see Swenson: 378). Readers are offended by Cain's lie when he denies all knowledge

13 Wurst contends 'that this mother, the ‘adamah, like Rebekah, says, “Your curse, my son, be upon me!” (Gen 27:13b). Maternal sacrifice is a theme in Genesis: mothers die giving birth, offer to die for their children, die when their children die, and risk death to have a child' (99).
14 Readers of the text in English could be forgiven for thinking that the two verbs are used in the same verse when the author notes that 'Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground' (4:2). However, the specific verb for tending or shepherding sheep (rāḵāh) is the verb that is employed in this verse, not the verb ‘to keep’ that was introduced at 2:15.
of Abel's whereabouts when the Lord asks him, 'Where is your brother?' Then they are offended even more by the impudence of Cain's question: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Cain is suggesting that the Lord has assigned to him the impossible and unreasonable responsibility of keeping a protective eye on Abel around the clock. And of course nothing could be further from the truth. He has exaggerated his fraternal obligation to an absurd extent. Readers are shocked; Cain has laughed off his brother's murder with a wisecrack at the Lord's expense. He is virtually saying: 'Do you expect me as a farmer to shepherd the shepherd twenty-four seven?' In view of what Cain has just done, his response is nothing short of blasphemous.

In what way are these observations relevant to the concern of an ecological hermeneutic to refocus the reader's gaze on the presence of the Earth in the text and to retrieve its voice? The longer that readers stay with the text, offended by Cain's wilful indifference to the plight of his brother and offended by his insolent response to the divine interrogation, the more likely it is that they will reflect on the one and only other time that the verb 'to keep' has been used in the unfolding story: 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it' (2:15).

Where is 'Earth' in the Cain and Abel story? Its presence is implied by Cain's question: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' The verb 'to keep' is only employed twice in these primal stories, the first time with the Earth as its object (2:15), the second time with the word brother as its object (4:9). Readers of the Bible readily assent to the obligation that people owe to their brothers and sisters. Therefore, outrage at Cain's failure to 'keep' his brother is intended to take telling effect in the heart of the reader. Outrage surfaces quickly in the face of fratricide. That same outrage should be directed at the matricide of Earth. The author draws on the self-understood obligation incumbent on humanity to guard the life of siblings—and all other members of the human race—and protect them with every fibre of their being, to demonstrate that this fraternal obligation extends with similar intensity to the rest of the created realm. Readers are thereby challenged to ask whether they dismiss the Bible's call to show extra special care for this fragile planet with the same cavalier indifference that Cain shrugs off the safe-keeping of his quick-vanishing brother.

Possibly no biblical text is more graphic than the Cain and Abel story in capturing the impact of human apostasy and violence on the Earth.\(^\text{15}\) It is hard to conceptualise how the murder of one man can have a detrimental effect on the Earth. Our immediate response is to say that the harmful impact of the murder is directly attributable to divine judgment. Cain acts, God reacts, and there is no inherent connection between the murder and the Earth withholding its strength. The Earth withholds its strength only at the Lord's direction. Or is there more to it than that? Who is the active agent in the judgment that falls on Cain? At first glance it is the Lord. But this conclusion has to be modified.

\(^{15}\) Jeremiah 4:23–28 speaks of Earth unravelling and returning to the formless void that obtained prior to creation, and entering a period of mourning (see also Hos 4:3). At Romans 8:23 Paul speaks of creation groaning like a woman in labour.
Theologically speaking, it is true that the Lord is the one who curses Cain by withholding from him the Earth’s strength. At the physical level, however, it has to be said that it is the Earth itself that turns on Cain.\(^\text{16}\) When Cain says that his ʻāwôn is greater than he can bear (vs 13), he is speaking of far more than his punishment. The word refers to the chain reaction that is generated by faithless deeds of greed and violence, and therefore it includes not only the originating deed but also all the deleterious consequences that flow from it. Warfare and civil strife lead to the neglect and deterioration of the land’s strength, just as the greed of over-cultivation and over-use of herbicides and pesticides inevitably depletes the Earth’s powers of generation. In the colourful language of the text, the Earth ‘will no longer yield to Cain its strength’ (vs 12). Beyond its immediate reference to the impact of one man’s murder of his brother, the text speaks of the toll that is taken on Earth’s vital powers as a result of neglect through warfare or the violence it is forced to endure as a result of harmful agricultural practices. The biblical witness indicates that such consequences are to be understood both theologically, in terms of divine judgment, and also in terms of a natural process of cause and effect.

The first three verses of the Cain and Abel story demonstrate the mutual interdependence of God, humanity and Earth—their total inseparability. God and humanity work together in order to perpetuate the human race (4:1). God waters the Earth with rain (2:5) and Cain tills it (4:2) to ensure that the Earth remains fruitful. Completing the cycle, humans bring the produce of the Earth to the Lord as an expression of their gratitude (4:3). This interlocking circle is so intimate that a disturbance in one domain immediately affects the others. Cain knows instinctively that to be cut off from the fruits of the Earth is tantamount to being excluded from the presence of God (4:14). The shedding of Abel’s blood sends shockwaves through the Earth and grieves God in his innermost being (6:6b). Blood represents a person’s life and is sacred to God (Lev 17:14), so that when the Earth is constrained to open its mouth and swallow Abel’s lifeblood, it is little wonder that the blood itself should cry out to the Lord in heart-wrenching distress (4:10). This is the outcry (tse ʻaqâh) of the oppressed, the cry of anguish that sounds out from those who suffer at the hands of the rich and powerful.\(^\text{17}\) Often unheeded by corrupt judicial authorities, the outcry then ascends to the Lord who hears the cry of the needy and delivers them from their distress (Pss 34:17; 107:6,28). Elsewhere in the Old Testament the outcry invariably issues from the lips of suffering humanity;\(^\text{18}\) but in this text it issues from the blood of the deceased Abel. When Abel’s blood is shed and seeps into the Earth, it is as if Abel himself in the form of his blood has already returned to the very ground of his being, from whose maternal womb he first emerged. In that form he cries out to the one who alone can hear and respond to his plight. Blood that is shed violently

\(^{16}\) The Earth Bible team would ascribe this to the ecological hermeneutic’s principle of resistance.

\(^{17}\) The one that calls out is ‘the voice—or the sound—of your brother’s blood’, yet the participial form of the verb is plural, literally ‘are crying out’. It is as if the author is already hinting at all God’s creatures, human and non-human, who suffer as a result of human violence throughout the ages.

\(^{18}\) Included are victims of rampant violence and injustice (Gen 18:21; 19:31; Ex 22:23,27; Isa 5:7), victims of slavery (Ex 3:7–9), people oppressed by enemies (Judg 4:3), the starving (Gen 41:55), and even a woman screaming for help while she is being ravished (Deut 22:24,27).
cries out. If the Earth is a character, with a face, and a mouth, and the ability to give and
to withhold its strength, and if it is the mother, the home, the provider, the nurturer and
the final resting place of humankind, there is fellow feeling when human blood is shed;
Earth feels it too in every fibre of its being.

Summary and conclusion

The author is adamant that the message of Earth's importance hit home. To achieve
that goal the text of Genesis 4:1–16 is designed to generate indignation in the reader's
heart and mind in response to Cain's dismissive question: ‘Am I my brother's keeper?’
As the indignation at Cain's insolence grows, the reader recalls that the only item that
humanity has been called upon to 'keep', in the sense of nurture and protect, is the
Earth, at Genesis 2:15, where the word is 'garden'. And the conclusion follows as day
follows night, that the Earth, the garden of God, deserves the same careful protection
and enhancement that is owed to its human siblings. However, the murder of the virtual
nondescript Abel would suggest that the prospect of God-pleasing Earth-care is not
good. Yet the Earth doesn't take its poor treatment lying down. It has a face, a presence;
it is fully engaged in the story as a character. 19 Initially, of course, it is seen as a victim,
constrained to open its mouth and receive Abel's blood from Cain's hand. Earth takes
into the depths of its being the fallout that results from human greed and violence. Bowed
but not broken, Earth takes the initiative and starts to address its parlous condition.
As it groans under the weight of human destructiveness, Earth provides the podium
for human lifeblood to cry out for justice, for the plaintiff—the blood of Abel—to bring
an action against Cain and seek to avenge the wrong-doing. First victim, then side by
side with the plaintiff, next Earth is seen, in a combined action with God, imposing and
enforcing the penalty. By withholding from Cain its strength, Earth acts as prosecuting
judge and prison warden.

Earth by no means fades from the scene after the story of Cain and Abel. After the
flood at the time of Noah a perpetual covenant is made for the preservation of all
Earth's creatures (8:17; 9:11,15–17). The curse on the Earth is lifted (Gen 3:17; 8:21),
with promise of the continuation of the seasons, the seedtime and harvest, for time
immemorial (8:22). And the threat posed by human violence is reduced by divine decree
(9:6). Noah himself is described as a man of the soil, in fact the first to plant a vineyard
(9:20). For all that may be said about Earth, however, ultimately it has no inherently
redemptive qualities, working as it does exclusively according to natural processes.
A new salvific word is required for humankind and the whole created realm, impacted
by sin and suffering (3:14–19), scattering and confusion (11:9). That new word will arise

19 To speak of Earth as a character doesn't mean that the author thinks of Earth in anthropomorphic
terms. Readers are tempted to do so, given that the author speaks of Earth as having a face, a mouth,
and strength. However, Earth's face refers to Earth as an independent living entity, which can turn
towards its creatures, including humans, in approval or disapproval, in blessing or curse. Earth's mouth
refers to Earth's opening, and its strength is the life-creating and life-enhancing energy which it is
charged to exercise by the Creator—charged both in the sense of being commanded to do so and in
the sense of being empowered to do so (Gen 1:20,24).
not from Earth but come down from heaven. Yet Earth will continue to serve another vital role, as the platform for the eternal salvation that extends and is offered to all families, all nations and all creatures on Earth, through Abraham and his ultimate seed, our Lord Jesus Christ (12:3; Gal 3:15–18; 2 Cor 5:17).

References


