



Sin of Cain

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*The Frazer Lecture in Social Anthropology, 1954**

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THE THIRD CHAPTER of Frazer's *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (1918, I, pp. 78-103) is entitled 'The Mark of Cain'. It will be remembered that, after Cain had killed his younger brother Abel, God drove him away and condemned him to be a 'fugitive and a wanderer'. And when Cain protested at the greatness of his punishment, saying that whoever found him would slay him, God replied: 'Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.' 'And', the narrative continues, 'the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him' (Gen. iv. 8-15).

Like many an earlier commentator, Frazer was particularly interested in the nature of the 'mark' by which Cain was protected. He reviews briefly, and discards, the varying explanations of such men as Robertson Smith and Stade, and then, ignoring Driver's (1926, p. 67) opinion that in this connexion 'it is idle to speculate', since what the mark was 'is not stated', he draws upon comparative ethnography for an explanation of his own. 'The mark of Cain', he concludes after a survey of analogous instances, 'may have been a mode of protecting a homicide against his victim's ghost, either by disguising him or by rendering him formidable and repulsive' (Frazer 1918, p. 99).

This explanation... he continues (*ibid.*, pp. 100-1)... has the advantage of relieving the Biblical narrative from a manifest absurdity. For on the usual interpretation God affixed the mark to Cain in order to save him from human assailants, apparently forgetting that there was nobody to assail him, since the earth was as yet inhabited only by the murderer himself and his parents. Hence by assuming that the foe of whom the first murderer went in fear was a ghost instead of a living man, we avoid the irreverence of imputing to the deity a grave lapse of memory little in keeping with the divine omniscience. Here again, therefore, the comparative method approves itself a powerful *adversus Dei*.

It is pleasantly ironic to find Frazer rallying to the support of a deity whom his own writings, notably *The Golden Bough*, are sometimes said to have done much to discredit. But in his zeal he seems to have overlooked one possible implication of his theory: if we accept it, we must assume also that God's protection of Cain went so far as to include the threat of retaliation against the ghost of Abel should the latter seek vengeance.

Nor do I see the same difficulty as he and others in determining who there was to avenge the death of Abel. In early Biblical times, a father had power of life and death over his children;² and in the scene where Reuben offers his two sons to Jacob as a pledge for the safe return of Benjamin from Egypt, the patriarch is explicitly invited to slay the youths should his favourite not be brought back to him (Gen. xlii. 37). We are told also that when Athaliah, mother of Ahaziah, learned of her son's assassination, 'she arose and destroyed all the royal family of the house of Judah', i.e. all the other sons of her husband (II Chron. xxii. 10; II Kings xi. 1). Presumably, therefore, it would have been both possible and justifiable for Adam, or even Eve, to avenge Abel's murder had either been so inclined.

* Delivered in the Examination Schools, Oxford, 28 October 1954.
¹ Cf. Gen. xxii. 1-19 (Abraham and Isaac); xlii. 37 (Reuben and his sons); Judges xi. 29-40 (Jephthah and his daughter); I Sam. xiv. 35-41 (David and Jonathan).

In the face of new beginnings it is always useful to look back at how things got started in the first place. With these words we want to introduce to you a text that was single-handedly responsible for awakening the legal anthropological imagination of one of your devoted moderators, namely Miia Halme-Tuomisaari.

[Isaac Schapera](#): The Sin of Cain. The Frazer Lecture. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. Vol. 85, No. 1/2 (1955), pp. 33-43



Admittedly the article may appear hopelessly old-fashioned in the midst of current discussions - which is perhaps appropriate given that it was first published almost seven decades ago - but maybe this tenor also confirms its status as a 'classic'.

First held as a [Frazer lecture](#) in [Examination Schools at Oxford](#) in 1954, the article discusses [James Frazer's Folk-Lore in the Old Testament](#) published in 1918, and more specifically still, its third chapter titled 'The Mark of Cain'. The Chapter is based on the tale of Cain killing his younger brother Abel, only to be driven away by God and condemned to be a 'fugitive and wanderer'.

The article then continues by linking this isolated instance of homicide into societal structures more generally, recalling how in "early Biblical times, a father had power of life and death over his children". The article ends up in an almost 'Agambeniesque' [bare life](#) type feeling as it asks: when is the killing of a person *just* a homicide, when is it something much more?

To offer a brief [biography of Isaac Schapera](#), he was born on June 23, 1905 in South Africa, and he is known for his detailed ethnographic and typological work on the indigenous peoples of South Africa and colonial Botswana in particular. His work was influenced by his instructors [A.R. Radcliffe-Brown](#) and [Bronisław Malinowski](#), and his best known publications include [A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom](#). He obtained his PhD from the [Anthropology in London School of Economics](#), where he also became professor of Social Anthropology. Schapera died June 26, 2003 in London and the [obituary](#) written for [the Guardian](#) by professor Simon Roberts from LSI to offers a warm glimpse into Schapera's life and persona. Roberts' text also illustrates how his scholarship, ironically, both forwarded a stark criticism of the colonial rule, and was being used as a source of guidelines for governance by the same administration.

Departing from our usual devotion to make life easy and comfortable for Allegra readers, this post contains no link to the full article. Whereas this is admittedly



due to our inability to crack the particular licenses protecting the text, we decided that this was actually just as well: what better way to accompany a classic text than by pairing it with an ACTUAL visit to a library?! (Remember those places with stacks of things called 'books' as well as all the tools for 'prehistoric googling' also known as 'archives'.) Yet we promise to redress this gap as soon as possible with a fast and easy 'click-click' straight to the original text.

Isaac Schapera: The Sin of Cain. The Frazer Lecture. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. Vol. 85, No. 1/2 (1955), pp. 33-43. Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](#)