Dec-2012

Imagining what Eve would have said after Cain’s murder of Abel: rhetorical practice and Biblical interpretation in an early Byzantine homily

Kevin Kalish

Bridgewater State University, kevin.kalish@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol31/iss2/4

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Imagining what Eve would have said after Cain’s murder of Abel: rhetorical practice and Biblical interpretation in an early Byzantine homily

Kevin Kalish

Stories from the Bible— and especially the stories from Genesis— often have lives of their own beyond the pages of the text. The stories about the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve permeate our historical memory. But when you get down to it, these stories are very short and leave out the kind of details we moderns like. The lack of detail in Genesis invites readers, interpreters and artists to fill in the gaps; we tend to like details, and Genesis stubbornly refuses to give us precise details. When I teach Genesis I emphasize this point: the narrative style is sparse, and this is not a bad thing but one of its greatest literary contributions. It is a model of using the fewest words possible, but the lack of detail also raises many questions as we try to fill in all of those gaps.

Take for instance the story of Cain and Abel. The story of the first two children of Adam and Eve takes a mere 15 verses to recount in chapter 4 of Genesis (fewer than 400 words in the King James Version). As we read the story many questions come to mind. How did Adam and Eve react? All we are told is that they bore another son and Eve says that he is in place of Abel. Did they go out looking for Abel when he didn’t return from the sacrifice? And what would his mother, Eve, have said? Questions of this sort drive not only my research but my teaching as well. When I teach the Bible in literature courses I ask students to think about what is not there. Why does the story of Cain and Abel leave out what we would consider essential details? Is there a reason for this silence? In similar fashion, I encourage them to look for things that do not at first make sense, gaps of the story of Cain and Abel. In this text, the author imagines what Cain and Abel would have said to each other leading up to the murder. Then the text moves to imagining what Eve would have said when she came

Why does the story of Cain and Abel leave out what we would consider essential details? Is there a reason for this silence?
out into the field and discovered her sons—one slain, the other trembling. The homily is attributed to Ephrem the Syrian, who lived at the edge of the Roman Empire in the fourth century and composed a great number of hymns in the Syriac language. He inaugurated a new tradition of Christian poetry; even St. Jerome (347–420) attests to how popular his poetry was. Within his lifetime (or at least soon thereafter) Ephrem’s poetry was being translated into Greek and Latin. But this particular homily exists only in Greek, and is part of a large collection of Greek texts attributed to the Syriac-speaking Ephrem. The dating of these texts is uncertain; they cannot be earlier than the fourth century and more likely come from the fifth century. At some point these texts, which contain features common in Syriac literature of the time, were collected together as texts of Ephrem the Syrian. Modern scholarship now refers to this collection as the work of Ephrem Graecus, or the Greek Ephrem. Historically, these texts are of major importance for the literary and religious history of Byzantium and those nations influenced by Byzantine culture. But these texts of the Greek Ephrem are not well known in English.

I am working to correct that by translating selected works—especially those engaged in imagining what Biblical characters might have said. To date I have presented these translations along with broader discussions of these works at a number of conferences, and I am in the process of working towards a collection of translations of Ephrem’s homilies on Biblical themes. This homily on Cain and Abel gives us an example of how this rhetorical device, when applied to a Biblical text, opens new avenues for interpretation while also producing a fine piece of imaginative literature.

Toward the end of the homily, Eve comes out into the plain, wondering what has taken them so long, and she tries to make sense of what is before her eyes. She came running to the plain and saw Abel lying on the plain like a sheep that has been slain and Cain groaning and trembling like a leaf blown about by the wind. Standing there, Eve did not know how to make sense of this new sight. For the child lay dead, but Eve did not know the ways of death.

Eve is perplexed. This was, after all, the very first instance of death. Rather than just stopping here and saying she didn’t understand death, the homily gives voice to her perplexity. Then we hear an imagined speech as the author imagines what Eve might have said.

What is this strange and unendurable sight?

Abel, you are silent and you don’t speak to your mother [...]

Cain Killing Abel (Byzantine mosaic in the Duomo of Monreale, Italy). Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, New York.
Works of fiction that imagine a historical event from an untold perspective are as popular as ever, and recent years have seen an influx of fiction that gives voice to silent characters in older works of fiction.

I will weep and lament, my child, 
because you are carried off from my arms
suddenly, like a little sparrow.

Eve is the mother not just of Abel the slain but of Cain the slayer as well. After lamenting the fallen she turns to the other child, Cain:

Why do you groan and tremble 
and why are you agitated, 
like a leaf blown about by the wind? [. . .]

Why are your clothes stained red?
Why does your right hand trickle with blood?

God, what is this new sight?

All of this emphasis on her perplexity is to force us to imagine what it must have been like for Eve to encounter this situation. Here we see the author noticing a silence in the text—what Eve might have said—and this gap in the text then allows for this imaginative exploration and this chance to give Eve a voice.

For obvious reasons, Cain, the first to commit murder, does not come across well in commentaries on Genesis 4. But in this homily, Eve noticeably refrains from cursing her son. First, she assumes the devil must have tricked him, and later she takes the blame upon herself instead.

And she spoke to Cain:
“Did the Devil beguile you and lead you to fratricide,
Just like he beguiled me?
Do I see the Devil made you the murderer and slayer of Abel?”

Early in the homily, she warns Cain to beware of the devil, but there is no moment when the devil approaches and talks to Cain. Her refusal to condemn Cain reflects back on her own transgression. By suggesting that the devil must have tricked Cain, as he tricked her, she implies that she was not at fault but was deceived. She then wonders how she can tell Adam. She finds herself in a dilemma. Often in Greek tragedy we encounter characters facing such ethical dilemma; each course of action has its own consequences. Eve finds herself in such a situation, where each course of action has its drawbacks:

If I say what has happened, I will be of no help for Abel
And I will accuse Cain.

How can I become the accuser of my offspring?
I pity the life of this one, and I lament the death of that one.

This one stands there groaning and trembling:
The other lies there silent, and his blood rushes out.
The mother is no longer a mother,
She, who once rejoiced in her children, now grieves.

What shall I do or what shall I say?

She unfolds her dilemma by spelling out how, no matter what happens, both are her children. Telling Adam what Cain did would mean condemning him. But if she doesn’t tell Adam, then she leaves Abel uncared for on the ground. Genesis is a text greatly concerned with life; in the first few chapters living forms are created and the first created man and woman are told to be fruitful and multiply. Thus it comes as no surprise that this homily makes ample use of imagery of reaping and harvesting. Eve, whose own partaking of fruit brought about death, uses agricultural imagery as a means of theological reflection.

Verily I shall lament my own situation,

This imagery of the lost child as an unripe fruit is a common motif in the long tradition of Greek funeral laments, and this homily draws upon those traditions. But Eve then goes on to talk about partaking of the forbidden fruit. She discusses how this murder is the “fruit” of what she has sown; this new sight of death causes her to reflect on what the expulsion from Eden means.

But just as we partook from the tree of deception,
So too from the tree of deception he has gone astray,
Because he slays this one and deprives himself of life.

He makes known the first death and he is become
The first interpreter of the promise of God.

This notion of Cain as interpreter is very intriguing. Cain is not despised; rather, he plays an important role. He explains what God meant by “on the day you eat of the fruit you shall die” (Genesis 2:17). For someone unfamiliar with death, this curse would not have much force—what does it mean that you will die, when you don’t know yet what death is? But now Eve understands what God meant, thanks to Cain interpreting the meaning. He performs a necessary, although unpleasant, function. He is the interpreter who makes clear God’s curse. As readers of Genesis, we have to pause and ponder what it means that Adam and Eve are told that they will die on the day they partake of the fruit, when in fact they do not die right away. Cain’s murder, however, bridges this gap and offers an explanation: his murder drives home for Eve what it means that death is now part of the world.

The agricultural images continue as she ponders why this terrible event came about:

For I reaped hostility and I reaped death.
I lament my child, since I have destroyed my son [...] I have destroyed paradise and found death.
When I took the fruit from paradise I ate it; and I gained the travail of death.
Paradise was taken from me, and Death received me.
Because I ate the fruit of the tree, I reaped death.

Eve perceives that this murder is the fruit; indeed, it is what she reaps for transgressing the commandment not to eat the fruit. She cannot bear to blame her son, so she takes the blame upon herself. Her maternal bonds are so strong that she cannot condemn her own child; instead, she prefers to take the blame upon herself.

And here the homily ends, after a brief and formulaic doxology common to homilies. Indeed, as we see, we have here a fully fleshed out speech that gives us insight into the character of Eve. She is not simply a stock character; rather, we see her trying to make sense of this. She goes from blaming the devil to blaming herself. And we see her in this motherly role of being unable to condemn Cain since he is still, no matter what he has done, her offspring.

The urge to imagine what otherwise silent characters might have said is still with us. Works of fiction that imagine a historical event from an untold perspective are as popular as ever, and recent years have seen an influx of fiction that gives voice to silent characters in older works of fiction. As readers we like to imagine the other voices and the other possibilities. By imagining what other characters might have said, we also come to a deeper understanding of the text. I also have students do their own form of imagining a moment in a text from a silent character’s perspective as a writing assignment. What students discover is what educators in antiquity realized as well—there is perhaps no better way to learn to analyze a text and delve into how words are used than to try to write an imitation of a text and give voice to a silent character.

Kevin Kalish is Assistant Professor in the Department of English.