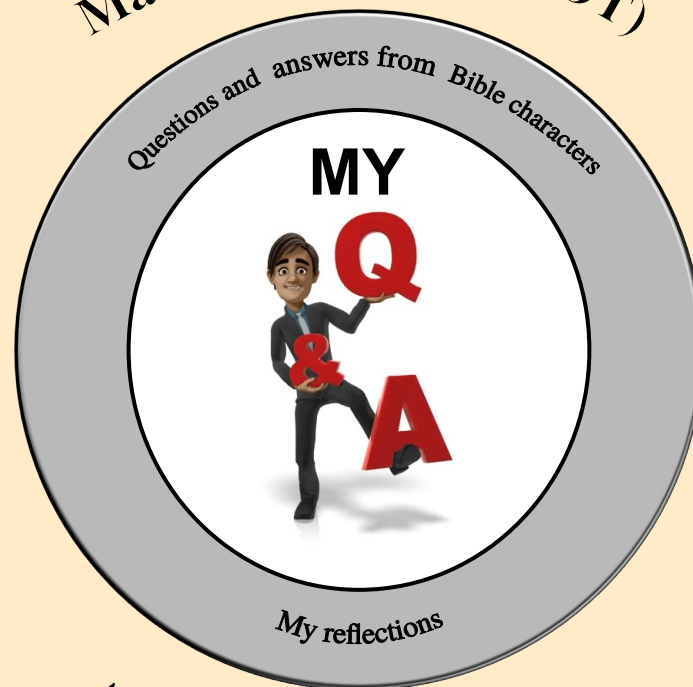




4



## Man's first question (OT)



Am I my brother's guardian?

## Man's first question

This fourth MyQ&A paper investigates the first question in the Bible that was asked by man, of God:

***And Cain replied, "I don't know! Am I my brother's guardian (shamar)?" (Genesis 4:9-10).***

Here is the text of the full episode.

*1 Now Adam and Eve discovered the pleasures of lovemaking, and soon Eve conceived and gave birth to a son whom they named Cain. Eve (excited): Look, I have created a new human, a male child, with the help of the Eternal.*

*2 Eve went on to give birth to Cain's brother, Abel. Abel grew up to become a shepherd, and Cain grew up to become a farmer. 3 After he had learned how to produce food from the fields, Cain gave the Eternal One an offering—some of the crops he had grown from the ground. 4 For his part of the offering, Abel gave God some tender lamb meat—the choicest cuts from the firstborn of his flock. The Eternal One accepted Abel and his gift of lamb, 5 while He had no regard for Cain and what he presented. Because of this, Cain became extremely angry and his face fell.*

*Eternal One (to Cain): 6 Why are you angry? And why do you look so despondent? 7 Don't you know that as long as you do what is right, then I accept you? But if you do not do what is right, watch out, because sin is crouching at the door, ready to pounce on you! You must master it before it masters you.*

*8 Cain spoke to his brother Abel. When they were in the field, Cain's envy of his brother got the better of him, and he attacked and killed Abel.*

*Eternal One (to Cain): 9 Where's your brother Abel?*

*Cain: "I don't know! Am I my brother's guardian (shamar)?"*

*Eternal One: 10 What have you done? Listen! I can hear the voice of your brother's blood crying out to Me from the ground! 11 And now you are cursed, cut off from the ground—the ground that opened up and received your brother's innocent blood, spilled by your own murderous hand! 12 From now on, when you till the ground, it will no longer yield for you its strength and nourishment. You will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.*

*Cain: 13 My punishment is more than I can bear! 14 Today You have banned me from the soil and hidden me from Your presence! I will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me will want to kill me!*

*Eternal One: 15 That's not the case! Whoever kills you will suffer My vengeance and pay the penalty seven times!*

*Then God put a special mark for Cain, so that no one who came in contact with him would try to kill him.*

*16 Then Cain went away from the Eternal's presence and settled in the land of Nod, a place for wanderers, to the east of Eden (Genesis 4:1-16).*

**Note: Headings in this menu are hyperlinks. Click on them and they will take you to the relevant page**

\*\*\*\*\*

[God's five questions](#)

[1 Why are you angry?](#)

[2 And why have you fallen on your face, downcast?](#)

[3 Don't you know that as long as you do what is right, then I accept you?](#)

[4 Where's your brother Abel?](#)

[5 What have you done?](#)

[Cain - the stamp of deterrence](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[References](#)



**Note: Headings in this menu are hyperlinks. Click on them and they will take you to the relevant page**

\*\*\*\*\*

[God's five questions](#)

[1 Why are you angry?](#)

[2 And why have you fallen on your face, downcast?](#)

[3 Don't you know that as long as you do what is right, then I accept you?](#)

[4 Where's your brother Abel?](#)

[5 What have you done?](#)

[Cain - the stamp of deterrence](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[References](#)

3/4



## God's five questions

God asked Cain five questions in this story, four of them before Cain asked his question of God.

### 1 Why are you angry?

God contemplated Abel's offering with careful consideration, focusing all of His attention on it and Abel, showing His pleasure, but ignored Cain and his offering. Why? Hebrews 1:4 has the answer:

*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as **righteous**, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And **through his faith**, though he died, he still speaks.*

Abel demonstrated that he was a righteous man because of his faith in God, while Cain had no faith and was not righteous before God, and God's displeasure showed. Cain saw it too and he blazed white hot with anger towards God for his rejection.

### 2 And why have you fallen on your face, downcast?

Cain was distressed and his was the fallen face of despair. Cain is face down in the dust when God gives him an opportunity to take stock and and repent.

### 3 Don't you know that as long as you do what is right, then I accept you?

Cain is given the opportunity to put his car in reverse gear, and do what Abel did. He "offered the firstborn of the flock with the fat" denoting a sacrificial blood atonement offering only used later to redeem firstborn sons and atone for sin (Leviticus 3:16). Therefore, Abel's offering brought in faith was an admission of guilt and a humble request for covering and remission of his sin. So, if Cain did what Abel did he would be pleasing to God Who would accept him, and God would uplift his countenance: "If you do good, will you not be lifted up?"

On the other hand, if he refuses to come God's way and in faith, then a doorway is open to sin, crouching to pounce and its desire, craving, and longing will be on you, and you must rule over it. That is, sin is lying in wait like a predator lurking for its prey, poised and spring-loaded, ready to pounce and overtake.

This is a warning to Cain who has opened the door of his heart to the evil inclination which is now ready to pounce on him at the nearest opportunity. He must choose life, making an intentional decision to do good, with God's help, or the consequences will devour him, and block the way to redemption. To rule over the evil inclination is to submit yourself to the rule of God ([Brown](#)).

Cain didn't heed God's warning. Rather, than comes God's way and let Him lift him up, Cain lifted up himself against Abel and killed him. Cain sought to redeem his circumstances in his own strength rather than humbly accepting the offer of God's grace. No one can save themselves from sin through their own efforts ([Brown](#)).

### 4 Where's your brother Abel?

This question is not just about location, for God knew that anyway. It was a challenge to Cain, like 'how did you get to this point?' or, 'which way did you come to get here?' God is probing Cain's 'how' and 'why' so that he might engage in some personal reflection on the journey that he's embarked on.

***And Cain replied, "I don't know! Am I my brother's guardian (shamar)?"***

Explicitly, Cain asked, 'Am I my brother's protector' (*shamar*)? Yes, as much as Adam was instructed to 'tend' (*shamar*) the garden (Genesis 2:15), and Abraham was instructed to "keep" God's covenant (Genesis 17:9). Yes, as much as "The Lord will keep (*shamar*) you from all harm. He will keep (*shamar*) your life" (Psalm 121:7), and "The Lord bless you and keep (*shamar*) you" (Numbers 6:24), and "Keep (*shamar*) me as the apple of Your eye; hide me under the shadow of Your wings" (Psalm 17:8). So, *shamar* means to guard, to watch over, to treasure.

Abel was a guardian, a protector of sheep, and Cain's question to God, "Am I my brother's guardian?" is a mocking insult of his younger brother. There's no way back for Cain from here.

**Note: Headings in this menu are hyperlinks. Click on them and they will take you to the relevant page**

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[God's five questions](#)

[1 Why are you angry?](#)

[2 And why have you fallen on your face, downcast?](#)

[3 Don't you know that as long as you do what is right, then I accept you?](#)

[4 Where's your brother Abel?](#)

[5 What have you done?](#)

[Cain - the stamp of deterrence](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[References](#)

4/4



## 5 What have you done?

The voice (singular) of Abel's bloods (plural) cries out, clamours loudly, intensely toward Me from the ground. The voice of the bloods plead with God to act against injustice, as the prayers of the martyred righteous ones do later (Revelation 6:10, compare with Deuteronomy 21:1-9). One interpretation of the 'bloods' (plural) is that any descendants that might flow from the victim are also being killed in the single act of murder. That is, murder has a generational impact; the intense impact of the injustice of Abel's murder is felt for generations to come ([Brown](#)).

### Cain - the stamp of deterrence

*"Therefore whoever murders Cain before seven generations, vengeance will be put on him ([Brown](#)).*

The seven generations are counted from Adam, the seventh generation being the generation of Lamech, who is said by tradition to be Cain's killer ([Brown](#)). God had driven Adam and now Cain to the east of Eden, known as a place of refuge for murderers. The cities of refuge which Moses later commanded were to be set in the east, "the place of sunrise" (Deuteronomy 4:41).

The Hebrew word translated "mark" is 'owth and refers to a "mark, sign, or token." The usual interpretation that God put a physical mark on Cain is not supported by the text, but it was obvious enough to convey deterrence. [Moberly](#) writes that if one wanted to speak of a mark on Cain himself, the natural Hebrew preposition would be "upon" (see Exodus 13:16, Deuteronomy 6:8, 11:18, and Ezekiel 9:4). The non-use of this preposition in the case of Cain suggests that the mark was not any kind of sign upon Cain's body. Rather the sign is "for" Cain. But, in what sense? The normal interpretation is that the sign was for Cain's protection. After all, there were probably many who would have liked to deliver justice to the first *murderer in the human race*. Moreover, this would have been consistent with God's post-flood law: 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image' (Genesis 9:6).

However, the text about the sign for Cain says that it was 'to warn anyone who met him not to kill him'. The fact that Cain could be killed indicates that the mark would not guarantee his protection. So, the sign was a warning sign to those wanting to take justice into their own hands, violence. God's mark was both an act of mercy, and of care for Cain the vagabond, but of judgment for would-be vigilantes, in a day when there was no law to govern human behaviour. God's stamp, in whatever form it took, was in itself a law against retributive, vigilante justice.

As the violence of mankind was a reason for Noah's flood (Genesis 6:11), the mark for Cain, which was designed to protect him indirectly, did not prevent the outcome of pre-flood violence that God foresaw. Cain disappears from the biblical record as he makes a fresh beginning in a new place and city apart from God. It is in his son Lamech that all of the violent DNA of Cain is found, a man making his world without God, boastful, self-sufficient, violent and dangerous ([Dod](#)), as Cain's family becomes the target of the violence God foresaw and wanted to avoid. It seems on that score, the symbolic mark failed.

### Conclusion

The first question that man asked God was: *Am I my brother's guardian?* It was designed deflect blame and responsibility for the first murder, and that of a man's 'brother', a word that occurs five times in the story. So, the answer to Cain's question is a resounding 'yes'.

### Reference

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