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Empedocles' Cain

By Howard Jacobson, Urbana

Large numbers of parallels between ancient Near Eastern material and texts of the classical and archaic Greek world have been adduced in recent years, some striking, some apparently coincidental, but all in all forming an indisputable mass of evidence for the argument that the Greek world was seriously influenced by the Near East. I add here an important and interesting parallel to a well-known Greek passage.

In a lengthy fragment acknowledged to be of great importance but of extraordinary difficulty, Empedocles appears to speak of (the primordial?) homicide (D-K fr. 115)¹. If so, the description of the murderer and his fate bears uncanny resemblances to the portrait of Cain (Gen. 4.3–15), the Bible's original murderer. Empedocles' killer is described as a perjurer (4); Cain too lies (4.9). The murderer is exiled, which, to be sure, is a common punishment for murder in ancient societies, but there are impressive similarities in the language here. Emphasis in both is on "wandering". Indeed, Empedocles' "I am φυγάς ... καὶ ἀλήτης" seems an exact echo of Cain's, "I will be *na vanad*" ("a fugitive and a vagabond", in the King James Version: 4.14). On top of this is Empedocles' φυγάς θεόθεν, remarkably close to Cain's words to God, "I will be hidden from Your presence", and Empedocles' "all hate me" may remind us of Cain's "anyone who encounters me will kill me" (4.14). Finally, Empedocles' moral judgment, "I trusted in mad strife", with the virtual personification of νεῖκος, may be compared with God's moral assessment delivered to Cain at 4.7, with its personification of Sin.

Did Empedocles know the Biblical story of Cain's murder of Abel? Or some similar variant that circulated? Are the similarities no more than chance? It is at least worth noting that Martin West has recently pointed out that in Homer's tale of Bellerophon there is "a striking coincidence ..., if coincidence it be, with the story of Cain"².

1 Such is the view of nearly all editors, who read, with Stephanus and against the defective quotation in Plutarch, φόνῳ rather than φόβῳ (which scarcely makes any sense). But A. Martin/O. Primavesi, *L'Empédocle de Strasbourg* (Berlin 1999) 62 n. 3 keep φόβῳ.

2 *The East Face of Helicon* (Oxford 1997) 367.