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Katharina von Kellenbach, professor of religious studies at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, has written an earnest and important book. In *The Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Post-War Lives of Nazi Perpetrators*, she uses her theological expertise in scriptural exegesis as a point of departure to analyze both fundamental and concrete questions of guilt and redemption after genocide. By integrating the theologian’s normative discourse with the historian’s evaluation of primary documents, Kellenbach presents a troubling portrait of early postwar German attitudes toward the *Shoah*.

In the compelling first chapter, Kellenbach interprets the biblical tale of the first murder in human history, the story of Cain and Abel, as a parable of genocide. She argues that universal lessons from this archetypal text on fratricide can guide our understanding of ethical questions related to individual and collective guilt, denial, and redemption that arise inevitably after genocidal violence is committed. Kellenbach then expands on her theological reading by examining German perpetrators’ attitudes toward their crimes, thus placing her understanding of the Bible into the concrete historical context of the Holocaust.

Kellenbach’s lucid close reading of the narrative of Cain and Abel offers a fresh, utterly convincing, perspective on a familiar story. She begins her examination of the emblematic first murder by looking at how the text sets the stage for the fratricide: Cain is outraged that God has rejected his offering in favor of that of his younger brother Abel, and regards himself as the victim of injustice. Instead of blaming God, Cain projects his anger at Abel, whom he now perceives as an existential threat to his status as the patriarch of his clan. Therefore, Abel must be eliminated. Kellenbach points out that the Hebrew version of the name Abel, *hevel*, implies “nothingness,” signifying Abel’s status as the quintessential victim and a paradigmatic target of dehumanization. He is the “other” the “lesser,” the diminished creature that can be and deserves to be extinguished. Abel’s marginalization at the hands of his dominant brother is...
reinforced during an interaction between God and Cain immediately after the murder, when Cain answers the Lord’s inquiry about Abel’s whereabouts with the famous haughty retort: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Here, Kellenbach cites biblical exegesis and explains that in ancient Hebrew the verb “to keep” is never used to describe a person’s responsibilities toward another human being. Instead, the term is reserved for animal husbandry; thus Cain’s arrogant quip constitutes an act—the first act—of dehumanization. As a parable, the fratricide of Abel by Cain denotes not just the murder of an individual but becomes a metaphor for genocide: humans dehumanizing other humans and strategically targeting selected members of their own species—their “brothers”—for eradication, thereby gaining political advantage from the purge.

In her reading of Genesis 4:8 (NIV) Kellenbach explains that the mark God places on Cain’s forehead after the murder signifies Cain’s status as a perpetrator, yet it is not meant to be punitive. While God punishes Cain with cultural, social, and spiritual displacement—he is cut off from the soil he farmed, he must leave his community, and he is distanced from God—the mark actually protects him from retributive violence. It is also an icon of radical transparency, ensuring that the memory of Cain’s crime cannot be erased. Always visible both to himself and to everyone who encounters him, Cain’s stigma forces him to integrate his transgression into his identity. As he continues his life after the murder, founds a city, marries, and raises a son, he must continually work toward redemption by acknowledging the fact that he killed his brother. Redemption is a slow process in this biblical parable; there is no quick solution, no easy forgiveness, and no simple path to “closure.” But the mark ultimately becomes a sign of grace, as Cain practices continued contrition and is thereby morally transformed.

Kellenbach uses the biblical text as an ethical guide to dealing with issues that arise in the aftermath of genocide. In the book’s subsequent chapters, she embarks on several case studies of German perpetrators and presents concrete evidence indicating that during the early postwar period Germans conveniently called for forgiveness and reconciliation out of self-interest, which fostered a culture of denial. This climate prevented an honest and open discourse about the recent past, hindering much-needed ideological and moral transformation in Germany. The majority of perpetrators, according to Kellenbach, did not act in accordance with the call for active contrition that the story of Cain and Abel models. Like her uncle, Alfred Ebner, many German génocidaires never accepted responsibility, and many were also never formally punished. In a section of the book that addresses individual and collective guilt, Kellenbach points to a fundamental problem that arose when war tribunals tried to assign responsibility for genocidal violence: genocide, as a form of collective evil, is committed on behalf of a group, a fact that enabled German perpetrators to supplant their personal moral agency by redirecting blame toward the group, thus avoiding personal accountability and, consequently, earnest contrition. The Holocaust, after all, was not a violation of law, it was carried out in accordance with the law, as perpetrators were quick to point out in their defense; they rationalized their actions as just having done their duty.

In chapter 2, titled “Guilt Confessions and Amnesty Campaigns,” Kellenbach examines German attitudes toward collective and individual guilt in the context of the Protestant Church’s “Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt.” Early postwar trials showed that the masterminds of the Holocaust sought to direct blame to those who had carried out the killings, while those henchmen claimed that they had just followed orders and had been stripped of personal agency. Despite the International Military Tribunal’s stance on this question, which disallowed exonerating on the basis of “following orders,” and the court’s tenet that “conspiracy to kill” was culpable, most génocidaires did not perceive themselves as guilty. The less-than-concrete language of the Stuttgart Declaration obfuscated instead of generating open discourse. Furthermore, Catholic and Protestant clergy alike rushed to minister to war criminals in internment camps in the hope of “rescuing fallen souls” and claiming them for their denominations. The Christian focus on forgiveness enabled the perpetrators to avoid active contrition as the churches waffled in their positions toward guilt. In this chapter, Kellenbach succeeds in drawing a vivid portrait of the political postwar climate in Germany with its scant discourse on German responsibility. Perhaps it would have been fruitful to extend the analysis beyond the Stuttgart Declaration and incorporate a discussion of Karl Jaspers’s seminal essay “On German Guilt” in the second chapter.

Chapter 3 of The Mark of Cain is dedicated to the documented last words of convicted perpetrators shortly before they were executed. From a painstaking review of archival records, Kellenbach gleaned multiple chilling statements that show quite clearly that most génocidaires saw themselves as misunderstood and unjustly punished martyrs.

Further chapters of The Mark of Cain engage in indi-
vidual case studies of perpetrators and the reactions of their families. The disturbing section “Naturally I Will Stand by My Husband” traces the complicity of perpetrators’ wives as they focused on their husbands’ good qualities as caring fathers and marital partners while turning a blind eye to their murderous pasts. In this section of the book Kellenbach demonstrates convincingly that, while Germany as a nation may have faced its guilt, assuming personal responsibility was not the norm. This point is made evident, for example, in chapter [number], which deals with a perpetrator’s trivializing and obfuscating letter to his son. When evil hits close to home, denial and rationalization are rampant and, if ever confronted, the fallout can be devastating for the family—we know this from studies such as Harald Welzer’s eye-opening book Opa war kein Nazi (2002) or Dan Bar-On’s seminal tome on the children of perpetrators, The Legacy of Silence (1989).

Kellenbach has written an engaging book that reveals new case studies based on previously unpublished archival sources. Her lucid close reading of the biblical parable of Cain and Abel is an important essay on personal and collective ethics in the wake of genocide. As accessible as it is scholarly, The Mark of Cain is a captivating, highly readable academic work.

One small criticism remains: it is puzzling to see that Oxford University Press appears to be skimping on the editorial support scholars need and deserve. The Mark of Cain contains typing and copy-editing errors; some individuals referenced in the text are missing from the index, and the names of two major historical figures are wrong: the first name of Hitler’s security chief, Kaltenbrunner, is Ernst, not Emil, and Joseph Goebbels’s name is not spelled with an umlaut. However, these quibbles are small distractions, and The Mark of Cain remains an important, well-executed interdisciplinary study.

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