

# Books in Review

## *The Curse of Cain*

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### ***Ambivalent Obsession***

***The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism.*** By Regina M. Schwartz. University of Chicago Press. 211 pp. \$22.95.

*Reviewed by* James Alison

A subtitle like "The Violent Legacy of Monotheism" suggests what Regina Schwartz does in fact at least partially deliver with *The Curse of Cain*: yet another piece of highly marketable radical academic *ressentiment*, to be welcomed by those who applaud such things and decried by those who revile them. But Schwartz's subtitle and the predictable reactions to it do not quite exhaust what is present in the author's ambivalent "critique of the system of thought broadly known as monotheism." Though the book has received some trashings (notably by Peter Berkowitz in *The New Republic*), *The Curse of Cain* may be—as Mark Twain said of Wagner's operas—better than it sounds.

The cleverest calumnies employ a technique that manages to give the lingering impression of something bad without ever quite formulating an accusation that might be rebutted, and it is true that Schwartz indulges that technique throughout her book—the stage villain of biblical monotheism sparing her the task of examining the ways in which actual monotheists live with the Bible. But she also gives clues of something else, a vision that—in the collapse of the obsession with which she began her book—shimmers just beyond her grasp.

The notion of writing *The Curse of Cain*, the author tells us, sprang in part from her own "obsessions about God" and in part from a student who punctured a class on the Exodus by asking, "What about the Canaanites?" With such starting points, Schwartz is simultaneously raising that most biblical of questions—What about the victim?—and acknowledging what a challenge it has been historically to bring monotheistic discourse to bear positively on that question.

These are real questions, and when she utters the postmodern cliché, "Conflict is only generated by the familiar commitment to One; Creativity is generated by the Many," I suspect that she doesn't really believe it: her own work tells her that univocal obsessives are much more likely to be creative than cocktail party flibbertigibbets who constantly espouse multiple positions. Univocal obsessions are very dangerous, but they can also issue in real creativity—obsession transformed into something quite different that would not have been born except through obsession.

Schwartz has two very proper insights. The first is that identity forged over against others is violent, because the "other" is always conceived as despicable. And the second is that sibling rivalry is in some way tied to the concept of a jealous monotheism with a scarcity of blessings for distribution. These insights are at work in each of her five chapters. She shows how the covenantal invention of identity can be violent, in both ancient Israel and modern states. Discerning the violence that links ownership of land to a jealous monotheism, she examines the idea of kinship, showing the violence in the biblical texts that tell of the development of family identity in Israel.

She then follows the biblical narrative into the complexities of Israel's coalescence into a "nation"—turning aside to critique the modern (and especially German) critics who often read the Bible as though ancient Israel had developed in the same way modern nation-states develop. Similarly, when she directs her analysis to the ways in which memory is used to construct identity, she gives a fine demonstration of how the Exodus narrative can be used as a weapon by former victims who use their victim status to bash others. Many of these readings are very much in line with the New Testament's take on the same aspects of monotheism—of which Schwartz is, in fact, often aware. Sometimes, indeed, it seems as though her critique is really directed at the false innocence of a crusading Protestant metanarrative present in Cromwellian England and in a panoply of ways in America since its founding: the nation as the new Israel, the newly chosen people.

Quite a bit of this is interesting and much of it true. In her last chapter, however, she argues something seriously dangerous. Describing the potential for violence in memory's construction of identity, she advocates forgetfulness and insists on the good to be gained by celebrating a proliferating multiplicity of stories. The evil of such a position can be shown by the simple test of applying it to the Nazi Holocaust. No, we must not forget six million dead. And No—a thousand times No—we cannot, must not celebrate delightfully diverse stories that read the mouth-stopping horror of the Holocaust as the playfulness of power or a symphony of creativeness through death. The multiplicity of stories runs aground on the rock of the victim.

Throughout the book, even while the author is correctly pointing out the violence monotheism can foster, there are hints of a biblical solution just beyond her grasp—a vision of God marked by a lack of rivalry and a plentiful generosity. It is a vision that (as she indicates on two occasions) "is difficult to sustain." But if it were sustained, it would undo much of what she has criticized. This is the most interesting feature of *The Curse of Cain*: Schwartz is swaying on a fence. Even while she almost (but not quite) says that biblical monotheism is the cause of violence, she almost (but not quite) realizes that biblical monotheism is the origin of her own ability to denounce violence—the Bible the unique text that *reveals* the structure of violence in sibling rivalry and victimization rather than covering it over with the powerful patinas of mythology. [On this point see René Girard, "Are the Gospels Mythical?" FT, April 1996 —Eds.]

This is linked to Schwartz's ambivalent relation to Freud. Realizing, for instance, that family rivalry is often provoked by jealous fathers rather than by sons with inescapable Oedipal Complexes—ontological parricides, as it were—she has almost managed to let go of a specifically paternal form of rivalry. She doesn't manage, however, to take the next step and see what Dostoyevsky knew and Freud missed: Such fathers are intergenerational sibling rivals, and not fathers at all. In biblical

terms this means: Call no man your father, for you are all brothers. In pop-psychology terms, it means: Give up blaming father-figures, using them as excuses.

For Schwartz, Cain is the victim of a capricious God. But it is only one step from this to the realization that Cain *needs* a capricious God in order to see himself as a victim. If Cain could abandon his false notion of a capricious God, he could see himself and God in truer ways: himself as a fratricide who, realizing his crime, may be able at last to learn responsibility; God as the generous fount that makes possible the perspective of Abel. (The resources are available in *The Curse of Cain* for this reading, were Schwartz willing to apply to the Cain story the same analysis she brings to bear in her fine treatment of Joseph as undoing the work of Cain.)

I suspect there is a name for the reason that Schwartz remains on the fence—for her near vision and her inability to bring herself quite to denounce biblical monotheism as the cause of violence and indulge the *ressentiment* her subtitle reasonably leads her readers to expect. And that name is "John Milbank." Acknowledged in the preface, the British theologian and author of the influential *Theology and Social Theory* (1993) is recognizable in such Milbankian phrasings as "non-identical repetitions" and in the author's mention of Soren Kierkegaard.

Milbank's intelligent and theologically informed analysis of what we mean by "the Other" gives us the resources to undo from within the work of the deconstructionists—those postmodern philosophers and critics who hunt down and denounce any construction of identity forged in opposition to others, and yet who depend on those wicked "other-using" others to forge their own identities. I rather think Schwartz has intuited this point, and is starting to leave the postmodern party. She promises her next work will treat collective identity and the Eucharist. It will be interesting to see how far her investigation enables her to move beyond Freud and towards a recognition that violence is fraternal and that God is fraternal violence's subversion.

I would not recommend *The Curse of Cain* easily: Those who enjoy being scandalized—who enjoy reacting against either "monotheism" or "liberal academic chic"—should not read this book, for it is too easy to do so in a way that panders to their titillation. There are readers, however, who are involved in a serious engagement with the living monotheistic traditions that wrestle to sustain the "difficult" vision of the God who is not the origin of but the solution to violence. And though such readers will find little in *The Curse of Cain* either new or surprising, it is they who will know how to make the book yield a helpful hint or two.

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