

East of Eden explores the nature of good and evil

And the Lord put a mark upon Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him.

Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

The *Genesis* story of Cain and Abel has always left me with a troubling question: why does God find Abel's offering acceptable but has no regard for Cain's?

Commentary from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* suggests, "The story reflects the tensions between farmers and semi-nomads, two different ways of life that are symbolized in the two types of offerings."

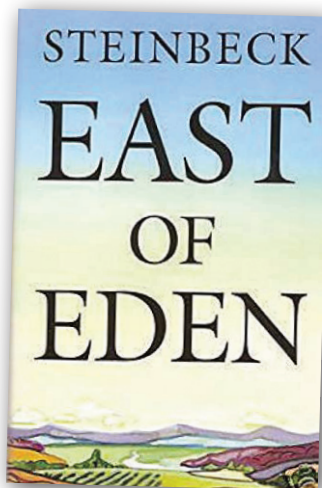
Scripture gives no reason for this difference, does not ascribe different motives to

the brothers, does not state that one offering or suppliant is unworthy or impure. One might be inclined to think Cain has been treated unfairly.

Lately, however, I have realized that I've been asking the wrong question. Instead, I should have been wondering why Cain responds the way he does — in anger that leads to violence, even though God warns against it and assures Cain that all will be well.

The Lord asks Cain, "*If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.*"

Thus, God does not reject Cain's offering because Cain is sinful. Rather, Cain sins because God rejects his offering. Cain makes a choice



that he is entirely free not to make.

Evil is a slippery thing — easily disguised, always seeking to justify itself by shifting blame, sowing doubt and mistrust that erodes our judgment and peace of mind.

It seems to be all around us and within us; any thinking person cannot witness or experience it without contemplating its nature. Is evil innate, inherited, imposed by circumstance, perhaps a response to external forces?

Steinbeck's *East of Eden* tackles this question head-on through a modern retelling of the story of Cain and Abel, and with a cast of characters who embody various theories of the nature of evil. At the center of the novel lies the story of twin brothers, Aron and Caleb (Cal) Trask, one mild-mannered and dutiful, the other prone to anger and underhandedness.

Aron and Caleb's parents, Adam and Cathy, predictably display characteristics visible in their sons. Adam is loving, trusting, industrious and

protective. He tries to make a stable home for his family, despite the fact that his wife Cathy is an almost entirely destructive force.

She engages in infidelity, blackmail, prostitution, sexual deviance, assault and murder — although she has numerous opportunities for a prosperous life within a sound moral framework.

She feels no love for her husband or children, drugging Adam on their wedding night in order to sleep with his brother Charles and trying to terminate her own pregnancy.

Although the novel suggests that traumatic events in Cathy's past may have given rise to her behavior, we might also easily conclude that Cathy's actions simply stem from her nature, that she has no conscience or moral compass and that she sees no distinction between good and evil.

Because Cathy abandons the twins to return to her previous life, Adam becomes their only role model. When Aron and Caleb measure themselves against their father, Caleb continually comes up short.

He feels deeply that his father favors Aron, but although he sometimes gives in to his darker impulses, he also prays to God to make him more like Aron.

When Adam falls on hard times, Caleb uses his business acumen (in a somewhat underhanded way) to help restore his father's fortune and to help pay for Aron's education.

His methods may be questionable, but his goals are good. So even within himself, Caleb encapsulates the



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struggle between good and evil and the desire to please and honor the father — all hallmarks of the Cain and Abel narrative.

Once Caleb learns that his mother is alive and discovers her circumstances, Caleb's inner struggle worsens; he begins to question whether he has control over his own destiny.

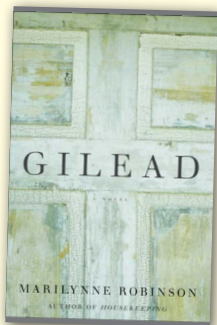
Does he have any chance at controlling his sinful behavior, or has he inherited his mother's nature? Is he simply doomed to failure, inherently inferior to Aron and unredeemable?

How often do we also ask ourselves this question in our darkest times or in the face of the violence and perversity that seem to have overtaken the world?

In an effort to comfort Caleb, Adam's housekeeper Lee teaches him the Hebrew word *timshel*, a concept we would all do well to remember. Meaning "thou mayest," *timshel* embodies the idea that each person can choose his or her own actions and attitudes as extensions of free will.

Some natures may be predisposed to positive or negative behavior, but never forced into it.

Although we are all flawed, we are also all empowered; no human being is exempt from life's battle against sin and evil, but we are all equipped to fight it. Caleb ultimately embraces this concept, as should we. When we feel anger, when our efforts are thwarted, before we respond, we should remember God's words to Cain, "*Sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.*" ■



FOR NEXT TIME

Gilead
by Marilynne Robinson

If you were a father facing death and leaving a young son, what would you try to teach him? Would you offer him practical advice about life? Tell him about yourself so he could remember you? Encourage him to seek intangibles such as love, beauty and faith?

Robinson explores the varied elements that give life meaning in this work of eloquent, lyrical prose. I hope you will choose to read along!



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