

The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism

By Regina M. Schwartz

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The Curse of Cain confronts the inherent ambiguities of biblical stories on many levels and, in the end, offers an alternative, inspiring reading of the Bible that is attentive to visions of plenitude rather than scarcity, and to an ethics based on generosity rather than violence.

"[A] provocative and timely examination of the interrelationship of monotheism and violence. . . . This is a refreshing alternative to criticism-biblical and otherwise-that so often confuses interpretation with closure; it is an invitation to an ethic of possibility, plenitude, and generosity, a welcome antidote to violence, as important for its insights into memory, identity, and place as for its criticism of monotheism's violent legacy."—*Booklist*

"Brilliant and provocative, this is a work demanding close attention from critics, theologians, and all those interested in the imaginative roots of common life."—Rowan Williams, Bishop of Monmouth

"A stunningly important book."—Walter Brueggemann, *Theology Today*

"Artfully rendered, endlessly provocative."—Lawrence Weschler, *New Yorker*

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Editorial Review

From Booklist
This provocative and timely examination of the interrelationship of monotheism and violence was precipitated by a question posed to Schwartz when she was teaching the Bible to undergraduates, "What about the Canaanites?" Biblical narrative has been a singularly powerful form of social memory, and Schwartz's reflection on its often violent political impact is an eloquent call not so much to close as to open an "old monotheistic" book to the possibility of multiplicity so that, as she puts it, "new books may be fruitful and multiply." This is a refreshing alternative to criticism--biblical and otherwise--that so often confuses interpretation with closure; it is an invitation to an ethic of possibility, plenitude, and generosity, a welcome antidote to violence, as important for its insights into memory, identity, and place as for its criticism of monotheism's violent legacy. *Steve Schroeder*

From Kirkus Reviews
Schwartz (English/Northwestern Univ.; Remembering and Repeating, not reviewed) has written a strange, discomfiting book on the Bible's legacy of violence. The author uses the Bible as a lens to explore Western culture's heritage of violence, but defines violence in such a broad way--as ``acts of identity formation'' and ``the very construction of the Other''--that the reader is left wondering what isn't violent behavior. Indeed, the book is far more deconstructive than constructive; it is only in the last chapter that Schwartz rather generically envisions a Bible that embraces generosity and pluralism, not scarcity and a totalizing monotheism, as ethics to cultivate. The book also suffers from a certain eco-preachiness (as in such first-person assertions as ``we cannot really own anything''), which systematically undermines what is truly prophetic here. Yet there is also a coldly brilliant realism at work. Schwartz writes with style and verve, gracefully teasing out new meanings from the Bible's elusive Hebrew text. Her chapters on land and kinship are as insightful as they are disturbing. Particularly significant is her connection between monotheism, land, and female sexuality: Hosea's denunciations of the adulterous wife, for example, can be understood as more than an embrace of a strict moral code. The wife (who represents faithless Israel) has also violated Yahweh's property rights, because unlike a self-respecting whore, she doesn't even receive money for her favors, but pays her lovers. The story, Schwartz argues, is a metaphor for Israel's transgression of the boundaries of monotheism, which is basically ``a doctrine of possession.'' Ultimately, both monogamy and monotheism function to set a people apart in a covenant relationship--but, Schwartz reminds us, this otherness is always inherently dangerous, potentially violent. The construction of boundaries, Schwartz asserts, leads to nations, and then to bloodshed. Unfortunately, the few alternatives she offers are vague and touchy-feely. --
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From the Back Cover
A murderer, an outcast, a man cursed by God and exiled from his people - Cain, the biblical killer of Abel, is a figure of utter disdain. But that disdain is curiously in evidence well before his brother's death, as God inexplicably refuses Cain's sacrifice while accepting Abel's. Cain kills in a rage of exclusion, yet it is God himself who has set the brothers apart. For Regina Schwartz, we ignore the dark side of the Bible to our peril. The perplexing story of Cain and Abel is emblematic of the tenacious influence of the Bible on secular notions of identity - notions that are all too often violently exclusionary, negatively defining "us" against "them" in ethnic, religious, racial, gender, and nationalistic terms. In this compelling work of cultural and biblical criticism, Schwartz contends that it is the very concept of monotheism and its jealous demand for exclusive allegiance - to one God, one Land, one Nation or one People - that informs the model of collective identity forged in violence, against the other. The Hebrew Bible is filled with narratives of division and

exclusion, scarcity and competition, that erupt in violence. Once these narratives were appropriated and disseminated by western religious traditions, they came to pervade deep cultural assumptions about how collectives are imagined - with collective hatred, with collective degradation, and with collective abuse. Recovering the Bible's often misguided role as a handbook for politics and social thought, Schwartz demonstrates just how dangerous it can be.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Floyd Wyatt:

In this period globalization it is important to someone to receive information. The information will make you to definitely understand the condition of the world. The health of the world makes the information easier to share. You can find a lot of references to get information example: internet, newspaper, book, and soon. You will observe that now, a lot of publisher in which print many kinds of book. The particular book that recommended for you is The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism this guide consist a lot of the information in the condition of this world now. That book was represented just how can the world has grown up. The vocabulary styles that writer use for explain it is easy to understand. Typically the writer made some study when he makes this book. Here is why this book ideal all of you.

Virginia Cherry:

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Samual Larkin:

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