

As It Is Written



As it is written, Cain and his brother Abel argue and then go into a field where Cain kills Abel. The text is unclear as to the course of events leading to Abel's death, but the context suggests that the two brothers became angry with one another and in the struggle Cain killed Abel¹. At this point, God steps in and says to Cain, *"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground."*

As traditionally translated (above), many Christian commentaries understand the reference to blood as testifying to the guilt of Cain. But, when read in the Hebrew, its meaning is much different and theologically more profound than whether Cain is guilty or innocent. A biblical-era episode of NCIS this is not.

A translation more faithful to the text leads to a curious observation and a fascinating question:

And He said, "What did you do? The voice of the bloods of your brother [is] crying to me from the ground?"

Why does blood appear in its plural form, *bloods*?

A little investigation reveals why. Blood, as a singular noun, occurs 218 times and usually refers, well, to the literal *blood* – the stuff flowing in our veins. In its plural form, by contrast, '*bloods*' is found to occur only 55 times and usually connotes kinship of a variety of kinds of which the most common is descendants yet unborn (19 times). For example, in 2 Samuel 3:28 the Bible speaks of the bloods of Abner killed by Joab whose motive was to avenge the death of his brother, Asehel. In 1 Kings the phrase "bloods of war" is used twice and refers to those who would never be born as a result of conflict. Another example, but by no means the last, Isaiah writes of the future glory of Zion that will descend from the righteous who remain after "purging the bloods of Jerusalem" through the spirit of judgment (Isaiah 4:4).

Interpreted this way, the divine author means to tell us that God is hearing Abel's unborn descendants crying to Him. What does this teach us? Insofar as God is concerned,

¹ This was not, as is often portrayed, a murder; but a homicide nevertheless.

the death of one person is as the death of a multitude³. The value of a single human life is viewed, by God anyway, as the loss of generations.

Now, go and study

³ This understanding has been around for centuries, going back at least as far as Matthew-Henry's Commentary on Genesis 4. Here's what he says: "In the original the word is plural, thy brother's *bloods*, not only his blood, but the blood of all those that might have descended from him."