

**Kin of Cain: Grendel's Lineage in *Beowulf***  
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**Author's Note:** A funny thing happened on my way to becoming a Biblical scholar -- I discovered that I'm not. Lineage in the Bible can be a tricky thing, and I have to admit that I may have gotten it wrong. Seth, Adam and Eve's third child, *also* had a son named Enoch. Or maybe it's Enosh. (You see what I was dealing with here? It doesn't help that many of the same names appear in both lineages, in the same order.) In the end, it seems to be Seth's line that leads to David and, ultimately, Jesus, rather than Cain's. Grendel's ancestry doesn't seem as rosy as I made it out to be. But, still, it was an interesting premise.

What motives might the *Beowulf* poet have had in tracing Grendel's ancestry back to the Biblical Cain and, more importantly, what is gained through this connection? By equating both Grendel and his mother to the first murderer of Christian scripture -- from whom, the text of *Beowulf* maintains, "sprang all bad breeds<sup>1</sup>" -- the poet certainly may have hoped to infuse a decidedly pagan epic with more orthodox elements, yet the inclusion of this particular element, the condemnation of Grendel and his mother as descendants of Cain, cannot be readily dismissed as the work of a mere missionary, hoping to convert medieval readers with a random sampling of Old and New Testament odds and ends. Grendel's relation to Cain (and, thus, to Cain's own misdeeds) is more than simply an act of Biblical name-dropping. We are, as readers, forced to judge Grendel previous to learning the extent of his actions, to condemn him ourselves as the monster progeny of a fugitive killer. However, when *Beowulf* is viewed in the context of the story of Cain related in Genesis, we find less reasons to condemn Grendel based solely on his lineage and we can better appreciate which elements of the story have been manipulated simply to make Grendel appear all the more grotesque.

The story of Cain and Abel, as told in the early chapters of Genesis<sup>2</sup>, is a familiar, although deceptively straightforward, tale of murder and divine retribution. In the text, Cain, elder son of Adam and Eve, grew jealous of his brother when Abel's sacrificial offering was accepted in preference of Cain's own. In his rage, Cain killed his brother and was subsequently punished by God, condemned to a life of wandering the earth a fugitive. It is this figure, the exiled criminal marked by a heavenly force, that the *Beowulf* poet links to the "hellish enemy,<sup>3</sup>" Grendel. This, however, is not all that we know Cain, and although the *Beowulf* poet acknowledges that "Cain had no pleasure in that feud, but He banished him far from mankind, the Ruler, for that misdeed,<sup>4</sup>" much of what follows in Genesis and beyond has been conveniently forgotten, leaving us to believe that, were he a descendant of Cain, Grendel would be worthy of our loathing and his fate would be inevitable.

What, then, does the author of *Beowulf* choose to ignore and how might these omissions alter our perception of both Grendel and his mother? Quite simply, whereas great pains are taken to enumerate Beowulf's achievements and boast of his ancestry among the Geats, the *genuine* descendants of Cain -- a genealogy that does not include the "trolls and elves and monsters<sup>5</sup>" described in the poem -- are never mentioned. When we delve deeper and realize that this pool of descendants includes a wide array of important Biblical figures -- such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and, ultimately, Jesus -- we are left puzzled, doubting whether the story of Cain truly has any relevance to Grendel's heinous actions in Heorot.

Cain was, indeed, guilty of murder and was justly punished, yet his crime is far removed from those committed by the "huge walkers in the wasteland<sup>6</sup>" Beowulf and the Danes are forced to combat. Cain's is a single act of violence, born of jealous rage -- not the "cruel injuries one after another<sup>7</sup>" Grendel visits upon Hrothgar's people. Despite the murder of Abel, there is little to suggest a link between Grendel and Cain, much less a direct descent.

Why, then, would the author of *Beowulf* claim such a direct connection between the two when almost all Biblical evidence points to the opposite conclusion? Were medieval scriptures so vastly different as to suggest a link where none can be found today? On the contrary, a link of sorts can be discovered within the pages of the New Testament, where Cain is recalled in the first epistle of John. "Not as Cain," John writes, "who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous."<sup>8</sup> Grendel's hatred of the Danes (and mankind as a whole) and his isolation from God do, in fact, bear resemblance to Cain's own estrangement when viewed in the context of John's words.

Yet this connection is tenuous at best. Grendel and his mother easily deserve condemnation for their actions alone. The poet, however, seems compelled to tie this monstrous pair to Cain's murder of Abel and, in so doing, cast their vicious deeds in a different light. "...In their spirits they thought of Hell," the poet writes, "they knew not the Ruler, the Judge of Deeds..."<sup>9</sup> Cain's wickedness, we are told, has damned these reprehensible creatures, obliged them to shun God as naturally as Beowulf does the opposite. Because their ties to both mankind and Christianity have been severed, the poet would seem to say, Grendel and his mother have little choice but to kill and so deserve the fate they are dealt.

The simple fact remains, however that *Beowulf* paints a much different picture of Cain than does Genesis itself. Though his actions are again denounced in the New Testament, and though he is justifiably punished for slaying his brother, Cain is a far cry from the depraved "hell-demons"<sup>10</sup> that are Grendel and his mother. Yet, despite these striking dissimilarities, Cain is perhaps the ideal character to serve as the fictional Grendel's ancestor. As Ruth Mellinkoff writes in *The Mark of Cain*: "...Cain's depraved humanity has served society especially well. His very 'humanness' made him an excellent vehicle and scapegoat to compare with and criticize those of the same ilk..."<sup>11</sup> By equating Grendel with Cain, the poet is thus able to portray a flawed version of mankind; notwithstanding his great size and strength, Grendel is very nearly human. It is his refusal to accept God -- the God of the Christian author, no less -- that sets him apart and eventually is his downfall.

What, therefore, can this tell us about the *Beowulf* text, its author, and the intended audience? From the delineation of descendants listed in the pages of the Bible, we see little reason to accept Grendel and his mother as genuine kin of Cain and so cannot judge them based solely on this connection. The *Beowulf* poet would not have been ignorant of the realities of Cain's story, nor is it likely that any literate medieval audience would have been unaware of Biblical texts. Yet for the masses, who might have heard this story read aloud, such details were inconsequential. In transcribing this epic from the oral tradition, the author is aware of the necessity to alter such Christian elements (e.g. the lineage of Cain) in order to fit the overall context of the poem. It is, therefore, the obligation of modern audiences to recognize this alteration and reasons behind it.

## Endnotes

1 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. 1*. Abrams, M. H., ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1993, pg. 28.

2 *The New American Standard Bible*. Genesis 4:2.

3 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. 1*. Abrams, M. H., ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1993, pg. 28.

4 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. 1*. Abrams, M. H., ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1993, pg. 28.

5 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. 1*. Abrams, M. H., ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1993, pg. 28.

6 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. 1.* Abrams, M. H., ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1993, pg. 44.

7 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. 1.* Abrams, M. H., ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1993, pg. 29.

8 *New American Standard Bible.* 1 John 3:12.

9 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. 1.* Abrams, M. H., ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1993, pg. 29.

10 *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Vol. 1.* Abrams, M. H., ed. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1993, pg. 29.

11 *The Mark of Cain.* Mellinkoff, Ruth. University of CA Press, Berkeley, 1981, pg. xi.