Am I My Brother’s “Keeper”?
Neal A. Maxwell,
*Wherefore, Ye Must Press Forward*, 87-88.

Perhaps a reason for not pressing forward in developing our capacity to love is that we have come to think of being responsible for our brothers and sisters in the wrong way.

Cain asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9.) Presumably he responded to the Lord's inquiry either in *sarcasm* or *defensiveness* (or both). Cain’s *rhetorical* question causes many of us to assume automatically that we *are* our brother’s keeper. Presumably this happens because we link up the assumed answer to the rhetorical question with the gospel view of mankind in which we are truly brothers and sisters, not, as some say, just stranded mutants on a planet that is a pointless point in space.

First, let us examine the circumstances. Cain was *not* Abel’s keeper, but he was his brother. Brother and keeper relationships are very different. The former emphasizes *concern*, the latter *control*.

Cain slew Abel and even “glorified in that which he had done,” saying, “I am free....” (Moses 5:33.) Cain also coveted Abel’s flocks. Thus, we should distinguish between our need for brotherly love and being our brother's keeper. Cain not only failed to love Abel, he didn’t even care enough about his relationship with Abel to want to improve their relationship.

Abel had found favor with the Lord and Cain had not. This was Cain’s fault, not Abel’s. This brief focus on that sad but illuminating event is necessary before moving not to the assumed issue, but to the real challenge: How, specifically, can we do better in keeping the second great commandment?

Jerry Bowyer, “Dear President Obama: I’m Only My Brother’s Keeper If My Brother Is My Sheep,” Townhall.com online, 2/10/2012

There are lots of things that people think are in the Bible, but really are not. For example, “God helps those who help themselves” is not there, nor is “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” There are some things, however, which are in the Bible, but so terribly mangled as to distort their meaning almost completely; for example, “Money is the root of all evil” is a misquote of the much more sensible, “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”

Sometimes quotes are mangled so badly as to be twisted into a complete opposite of their intentions. The *We Are the World* music video shows Bob Dylan singing that:

*As God has shown us, by turning stone to bread*

*and so we all must lend a helping hand*

Of course, God did not turn stones to bread, at least not in the Bible. The New Testament portrays God as pointedly refusing to turn stones into bread when tempted by Satan to do so.
President Obama’s frequent references to us being ‘our brother’s keeper’ are an example of the last kind of Bible misquote. Most recently he said it like this:

*But part of that belief comes from my faith in the idea that I am my brother’s keeper and I am my sister’s keeper; that as a country, we rise and fall together. I’m not an island.*

Although it has become one of his stump themes, the President’s use of this particular misquote in last week’s National Prayer Breakfast has brought his exegetical skills under greater scrutiny. It’s about time.

First, let’s get the story right: Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit and been expelled from the Garden of Eden. They conceive and bear two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain is a farmer of some sort, and Abel is a shepherd (remember this part, it will be important later). Cain and Abel offer the fruits of their labor, grain and sheep respectively, to God as some sort of religious observance. God is pleased with Abel’s offering, but not with Cain’s. Despite warnings, Cain fails to master his evil nature and murders his brother Abel, after which God asks him:

“Where [is] Abel thy brother?” And Cain replied: “I know not: [Am] I my brother’s keeper?”

That’s it, and it is a pretty slender read (Biblical allusion intended and undistorted) on which to rest the general moral principle that we are our brother’s keepers, let alone on which to build a social theory which compels a steeply progressive federal income tax. After all, Cain is history’s first homicide and, worse still, its first fratricide. His brother’s blood is still being swallowed by the earth (also intended) while lying to his Creator. Perhaps his is not the moral compass (not in the Bible) by which we should guide the ship of state. And quoting the father of murderers hardly seems like a good way to illustrate your vision for a compassionate society.

But this is only half the corrective: we’ve shown what being your brother’s keeper *doesn’t* mean, but that still leaves us to determine what it does mean, and why it’s found in that part of the Bible. The context suggests pretty strongly that there is a strong element of literary irony here. The story tells us very little about Abel, really his occupation and how it relates to his liturgical offerings. He was a shepherd.

In the book, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, Leon Kass observes that in effect Cain sarcastically asks where he is the shepherd’s keeper. The point is pretty clear in English if we stop and reflect for a moment, but it’s even clearer in the original Hebrew in which Cain asks whether he is the *shmr* of his brother. *Shomor.* The shepherd is missing and Cain is saying the shepherd is not one of his sheep. In other words, Cain being a smart ass.

But Cain, in his choice of wording, is also revealing a lot about his inferior life and his philosophy of human nature. He thinks of men as being shepherds of other men, who of necessity must therefore be sheep. The old Roman saying that Homo homini lupus est (“man is a wolf to man”) is prefigured in the sense that if the first group of men is a wolf to the second group of men, then the second group of men must be sheep to the first.

How so know that Cain thought of Abel as his sheep? Well, first of all, because he slaughtered him. Up until then in the story, animals were the only things that had been slaughtered. Men are closely related to animals, especially mammals, in the Torah: Both are created on the sixth day, and both are created from the earth (unlike other living creatures like birds and fish which are created without reference to preexisting material). The very fact that animals like sheep are
offered to God based on their analogous relationship to man. They could not substitute for man in a religious ritual if they were not somehow fitting representatives. The human-animal analogue is so strong in the Torah that it becomes the basis of the creation of Eve. Adam names the animals and notices their gender bifurcation and sees that he is incomplete. Again, the analogy only words based on some element of commonality.

Cain takes the analogy a step too far. If animals are like men, then he can slaughter men like animals, which he does. It doesn’t really matter whether you believe the story is true; texts have to be taken on their own terms if they are to be used to buttress out arguments. If the President wants to use a story from the Torah to support his progressive political agenda, then he must first understand what the Torah means. So must we.

Second of all, Cain continues to treat people like sheep after his expulsion. As his parents were driven from the Garden of Eden, Cain is driven from the land of Eden into the wilderness. And there he founds history’s first political dynasty, a city which he names after his son. I think Leon Kass is right that the Torah is presenting a Hebraic philosophy which shows us the ‘twisted roots’ of the polis, whose origin is in fratricide. The only major difference between this story and Rome’s founding myth about the death struggle between brothers Romulus and Remus is the moral disapproval; the Roman story was told with pride.

Is there some element of social theory in all this? I think there clearly is, though not the one the President is trying to build. The story of Cain provides a backdrop against which Israel is presented with two types of shepherds: immanent and transcendent. Every time Israel assembled before the temple, they were to be dismissed with the Bircat Cohenim, the ‘priestly blessing’:

May the Lord Bless you and KEEP YOU...

‘And keep you’, in Hebrew, v’yshmareka, is nearly identical to the word which Cain had used, shmr. In other words, every time that Israel approached their God and reenacted the primordial encounter of Cain and Abel with God, with the offering of grain and livestock, they were reminded that Cain and his spiritual descendants were not their keepers. The Lord is their Shepherd... they shall not want.

The political and economic theology of shepherds starts with the affirmation that the role of the provider, shepherd, and keeper of the people does not belong to any imminent human authority, but to the Lord. On this foundation, we see the Torah develop a social theory of equality before the law and of brotherhood among citizens, not keeperhood by the state.

Am I my brother’s keeper? No. According to the Torah, I am not my brother’s keeper, because I am my brother’s brother.