

The Crown of Cain

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing
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הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת
המחלקה לאנגלית
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1. Aims and General Description

For my thesis, I will be submitting the entirety of a novel, written in a somewhat pulpy style akin to that of Robert E. Howard or Zeev Jabotinsky in his novel *Samson*. My novel, titled *The Crown of Cain*, is difficult to classify by genre—while it does incorporate elements of science fiction, the limited first person perspective of the narrative and the placement of said elements far in the past before the narrative begins means that there will be very little 'on-screen' which does not fit in the 'real world'. However, since the story takes place in the late neolithic era -- some 8000 years ago -- it is probably not realistic fiction as the term is commonly understood. *The Crown of Cain* deals with some intense themes: the difficulty of imposing laws and ethics on a fundamentally pagan society; the relations between men and women who use each other, want different things from each other, and who hurt each other; the way people are shaped and damaged by their past experiences. That being said, I want to make very clear that it's a light read. There's a lot of action, a lot of sex, snappy dialogue, and scenery porn. It is a fun read, just one where the characters do not end up very happy. But who wants to read something where the characters are happy?

2. Conceptual Background

Although *The Crown of Cain* obviously incorporates the character of Cain from Genesis, it draws less on Cain as seen in Genesis and more on various Midrashim, particularly Second-Temple apocrypha, such as the Book of Jubilees and “Genesis Rabbah” (or the 'Little Genesis'). In the Jewish Arts Seminar we explored a Midrash about Cain (I believe it was from Rashi) which detailed how Abel’s body was so mutilated by the murder that it was not only as if his blood was on the ground, but his *bloods*. While this Midrash provided inspiration, I have more so drawn my characterization of Cain from various parts of Jewish Apocrypha, especially the Enochic literature.

The Enochic literature is arguably as old as much of the material in the Chumash. If it is younger, it is not younger by much. In the Enochic literature, we find a world strikingly different from the world of Genesis. The Enochic world is one of angels and demons, heavenly hosts, predestination, and wise men with covenants preceding Sinai. Most people who have read Genesis are familiar with the Nefilim, at least on some level. However, the Enochic literature has

a much greater emphasis on the Nefilim or “watchers,” detailing their interbreeding with human women and their introduction of civilization to humanity. It was the watchers who introduced humanity to metallurgy, music, and even cosmetics. Although there is not a one-to-one correspondence between *The Crown of Cain*’s “backstory” and the Nefilim material in Jubilees and 1 Enoch, nevertheless this material serves as a primary influence.

I have also drawn from apocalyptic Jewish texts of the 2nd Temple and post-70 period. One such text -- 4 Ezra, a lost Jewish text extant only in a Greek version *cum* Christian additions -- has proven particularly useful to me. While we do not now have access to the original text of 4 Ezra, the Christian interpolations are easy enough to identify that we can work around them. These Christian intrusions constitute only a few passages in the text. The most notable such intrusion takes up the first two chapters of 4 Ezra. Violently supersessionist and patently anti-Judaic, these chapters bear little resemblance to the rest of the text, and as such are easily identified as Christian and discarded. Other references to Jesus in the text are short and obvious.

When we strip away these interpolations, we are left with a remarkably poetic text. An apocalyptic, apocryphal pseudepigrapha, the text in part details the process in which Ezra dictates the Torah. The language of 4 Ezra -- quite dissimilar to anything we see in the Torah -- has especially inspired me. The image of Ezra drinking a cup full of fire is particularly striking. Immediately upon finishing the cup, Ezra is compelled to spend 40 sleepless days writing 24 books (i.e., the Torah) 'for the worthy and unworthy' and 70 books of obscure wisdom. I have

gone so far as to re-write specific passages from 4 Ezra word-by-word in order to retain its mystical, poetic, language. One such passage which I have rewritten is as follows:

And the shadow of his chariot was burned on the earth and the sound was like the stampede of a hundred thousand beasts. And I fell to the ground and the wind was like daggers in my face. And a voice spoke with the force of a hundred seas and called "Son of man, rise." And in that instant the wanton youth who had fallen to the ground was dead and in his place was a man of God. The voice of the Lord echoed in my head, it came from all sides and from the inner corners of my being, and the voice spoke of strange and wondrous things. All that it spoke of I beheld with my eyes. [My own rewrite]

The Crown of Cain is written in a classic pulp style, heavily influenced by Robert E. Howard (*Conan the Barbarian, Solomon and Kane*). Howard was well-known for his imagination world-building and scenery, his deeply poetic descriptions and prose, his intense and frequently-violent action scenes, and his almost gratuitous use of sex. In some ways he is the inventor of what is commonly known as "low-fantasy." But just because a text features a lot of action and sex does not preclude it from making a profound statement. Another -- and perhaps the main -- influence on *The Crown of Cain* is Ze'ev Jabotinsky's forgotten classic *Samson* or

Samson the Nazarene, acclaimed by Ruth Wisse as crucial part of the modern Jewish canon¹..

Samson is written in a hyper-modern pulpy style that lent itself well to a Cecil B. De Mille adaptation on the Silver Screen. To quote the late literary critic D. G. Myers on Jabotinsky's style, "If the Jewish writer, as Isaac Babel wrote at about the same time in his *Odessa Tales*, is a man with 'glasses on his nose and autumn in his heart,' then Jabotinsky wanted to give Jewish writing a good shake, although he too wore glasses."²

Jabotinsky wrote something that was superficially a fast-paced, sexy story. But it was also a vehicle for his Zionist ideology. Jabotinsky drew a masterful parallel between Jews in 1920s Europe and the Israelites of the 13th century. I am inspired by the success of Jabotinsky's comparison to tell a (less politicized) story that likewise draws parallels between two groups of people living at radically different times -- the neolithic people of 8000 years ago and modern man. Just as now, some of these people were good, some were bad. Most were more complicated than that. They loved and they fought. I want to place a modern story, told in a very modern way, in this pre-historical context.

1

<http://www.aapjstudies.org/index.php?id=172>

2

ibid

3. Shape of Project

The Crown of Cain will be divided into five parts, each approximately 15,000 words.

Part 1 has already been drafted. It has a similar purpose and function as the first act of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America*, which acts as both a prologue and a microcosm of the entire movie. The first act of Leone's film features the characters played by James Woods and Robert De Niro as street kids. The subtle dynamics at play in their relationship as children are echoed in latter parts of the story, when they are adults. Similarly, the first part of *The Crown of Cain* depicts the main characters (excepting Cain himself) as young adolescents. There is Alwynn: observant and yet passive, and already in possession of a certain selfish streak. There is Heledd: ambitious and keenly aware of the effect she has on men (including her cousin Alwynn). During Part 1, the two cousins are still close.

Part 1 also presents Alwynn and Heledd's world as it existed prior to Cain's introduction of modernity, for at this point Cain has only lived with the People of the Island for only two years. They still live in mud huts. They are still far from an empire.

Part 1 begins after the events of the novel have taken place. We are transported to the time of the story through the worlds of an older Alwynn:

Now we know King Cain's flesh-- in my mind he will always be the high king, even after everything—now we know Cain's flesh is like men's flesh and his skin is not stronger than bronze or stone, but in those days, he seemed very much like a god and very unlike a mere man. We had nothing before he came to the island. I was too young to remember much but my mother told me how before he

came we had nothing to wear but scraps of animal hides and nothing to eat but nuts and roots and a little meat if we were lucky, and how cold it was when it rained and the fires went out.

That was one of his first gifts to us, he showed us how to brace mud and dust with sticks and build walls and make a roof over our heads with dry grass and how to build a fire so it would burn slow and last most of a night. I was not yet a man then, too small to throw a spear and hunt and fight. Instead I watched my mother weave baskets and carve spearheads and other women's work. Heledd watched too, although she was supposed to be learning and she didn't. Her mother was dead and her father was gone so my mother raised her too. We were too young to understand how much things were changing.

Strange how clear those days are in my memory. That was my gift, that I remembered everything I ever saw. A gift because it assured me a place in Cain's world. Yet there are days now I would drink the wine of forgetfulness. There are stories I will not tell the next generation, secrets and stories that lead men down crooked paths, secrets that were told to me in confidence. Perhaps also things I need not have witnessed: in my mind, he will always be the king. I see him in the early years of his reign, the flames casting shadows across his scarred face.

By Part II, Cain's technologies of bronze and agriculture turn what was once a small village into a kingdom some 50 square miles. This Part takes place 6 to 8 years after Part I. By Part II, the main characters are young adults, rather than 14-year-olds. Alwynn -- in Part I a virgin -- now has several children. Heledd is now Cain's mistress.

Over the course of the rest of the novel, the kingdom expands. Cain tries to eradicate paganism, Alwynn gets his hands dirty, and Heledd discovers she wants things that the king cannot -- or will not -- give her.

I do not yet have the entirety of the novel plotted out, but I do know certain key moments and scenes, as well as how the novel will conclude. I have planned out the significant moments in the characters' lives, as well as where they end up. At a certain point, Cain is no longer able to escape the remnants of his antediluvian world, and some of his enemies prove as long-lived as he is. In the end the kingdom -- now empire -- falls. The small village we saw in the first chapter is nothing but ashes. The relationship between Alwynn and Heledd is also irrevocably damaged. People age. Kings fall. Only the memories remain.

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