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## Should I Be My Brother's Keeper? Yes and No

Author(s): Daniel C. Peterson

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# SHOULD I BE MY BROTHER'S KEEPER? YES AND NO

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Daniel C. Peterson

**Abstract:** *We typically teach and often even sing that we should be our brothers' (and sisters') keepers. And we do it with the very best and most holy of intentions. For many of us, indeed, loving and caring for our brothers and sisters is at the very heart of what it means to live a life of truly Christian discipleship. And rightly so. But there's another way to think about this matter. I've pondered it for decades, and now, maybe some others will also find it thought-provoking.*

In all the congregations of the Saints where I've participated, one of the most popular and oft-recurring hymns has been "Lord, I Would Follow Thee." With lyrics by Susan Evans McCloud that were set to music by K. Newell Dayley, two of the verses of the hymn read as follows:

I would be my brother's keeper;  
I would learn the healer's art.  
To the wounded and the weary  
I would show a gentle heart.  
I would be my brother's keeper —  
Lord, I would follow thee.

Savior, may I love my brother  
As I know thou lovest me,  
Find in thee my strength, my beacon,  
For thy servant I would be.  
Savior, may I love my brother —  
Lord, I would follow thee.<sup>1</sup>

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1. "Lord, I Would Follow Thee," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1985), 220.

The phrase *my brother's keeper* comes, of course, from the tragic story of Cain and Abel that is recounted in the fourth chapter of Genesis. Here are the two most salient verses of that story:

And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? (Genesis 4:8–9)<sup>2</sup>

Cain's insouciant, even insolent, answer to the Lord's question reflects his defiance of God. He is arrogant and unrepentant. And our typical response to him is that, yes, you *are* your brother's keeper. Or, at least, you *should* be.

We all know what it means to be “our brother's keeper” in this sense, and, if we're serious Christians, we aspire to be precisely that and, in fact, to become *better* at being that than we now are. Cain, as we commonly read the story in Genesis 4, is flippantly telling the Lord that he doesn't care where Abel is, that Abel is no concern of his. Certainly, we don't want to emulate Cain — and not only because we would prefer not to incur God's displeasure. Instinctively, we feel that we ought indeed to care about our brothers and sisters and, in so doing, to emulate God, whose “work” and whose “glory,” we are told, is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). “Wisdom,” according to the Book of Mormon's wise king Benjamin, consists, at least in part, of learning “that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17). Having related to an inquiring lawyer the story of “the Good Samaritan,” who ministered kindly to an injured Israelite — a stranger, and no relation — the mortal Jesus admonished the lawyer to “go, and do thou likewise.”<sup>3</sup>

The apostle Paul implies, by his famous linking of it with faith and hope, that love, or “charity” (as the King James Bible renders the Greek term ἀγάπη [*agape*]), is a divine gift; the prophet Mormon, in a letter shared with us by his son, explicitly counsels us to pray to God to be *granted* that divine gift.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, clearly, we should love and serve our brothers and sisters. In this sense, without question, we should ideally be our brother's keeper.

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2. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations here are from the King James Version.

3. Luke 10:37; for the story, see Luke 10:30–37.

4. See 1 Corinthians 12–13 and Moroni 7:46–48.

But there is another perspective on the matter that is perhaps worth considering and learning from.

More than five decades ago, having just arrived from California as a student at Brigham Young University, I attended a lecture by Chauncey C. Riddle, a professor of philosophy at BYU who was, I think, the dean of the University's graduate school at the time. Unfortunately, I don't recall the overall title or theme of the lecture nor, frankly, much else about it. But one thing I do recall and have pondered ever since, because it was so unanticipated.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" asked Professor Riddle, echoing Cain's sneering response to the Lord's question.

"No," he answered — very much to my surprise. Cain was *not* his brother's "keeper." Nor are we the "keepers" of our brothers and sisters.

This was not the answer that I was expecting. Still, the logic of his answer was intriguing to me.

To explain what he intended, Professor Riddle appealed to the patriarchal order of things and to the concept of stewardships.<sup>5</sup> Fathers and mothers, he observed, bear specific responsibility for the care and teaching of their children. They are bound to answer or to respond in the event that a wrong (whether of commission or omission) has occurred. They are answerable to God or to some other higher authority — and in very particular ways that do not apply to other people.

In every nation or jurisdiction of which I'm aware, the law recognizes the special responsibility of fathers and mothers. They are expected to feed and clothe their children, and to care for them when those children are incapable of caring for themselves. And, of course, the scriptures also recognize this special responsibility. For instance, the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, declaring that "if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Timothy 5:8).

Likewise, the Lord had this to say to his Church in a revelation that was given through the Prophet Joseph Smith at Hiram, Ohio, on 1 November 1831 and then expanded under his direction when it was published in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants:

And again, inasmuch as parents have children in Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized, that teach them not

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5. For what follows, I'll be reconstructing what Professor Riddle said based not so much upon actual memory but upon how I would conceive and make his argument today. The details of his lecture and of his specific argument are, sadly, gone from my remembrance.

to understand the doctrine of repentance, faith in Christ the Son of the living God, and of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of the hands, when eight years old, the sin be upon the heads of the parents. For this shall be a law unto the inhabitants of Zion, or in any of her stakes which are organized. . . . And they shall also teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly before the Lord. (D&C 68:25–26, 28)

Indeed, when they are young, we can tell our children what to do and how to behave, and we can expect them (however messy and inexact and difficult it may turn out in actual practice!) to obey. In an analogous way, people who have been assigned various stewardships — whether in the military or in other organizations (very much including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) — bear the authority, to one degree or another, to direct those within their area of jurisdiction or stewardship and bear responsibility to do so wisely and well. (In some specific areas, certain people are actually legally designated as acting *in loco parentis*, “in the place of a parent.”)

But I have no authority, as a father, to discipline or direct the children of another father. If I’m serving as a bishop, I have the authority to lead the ward over which I’ve been assigned to preside, but no authority whatever to lead the adjacent ward. This simple principle is relevant to many areas of our lives: one of the many reasons that gossip is wrong is that, unless I’m a trial judge or a juror or someone else specifically tasked with considering such things, the personal or family matters of another individual are, flatly, none of my business. To borrow a phrase from Voltaire’s *Candide*,<sup>6</sup> I should cultivate my own garden and not meddle in the gardens of others.

This, Professor Riddle contended, was at the root of Cain’s error: he had no authority over his brother Abel, who was at the same level in the patriarchal order that he was. He surely had no authority to terminate Abel’s life. He was not, in that sense, Abel’s “keeper.”

We can perhaps shed some light on this by examining what the word *keeper* means, in the phrase *my brother’s keeper*. The King James rendering of the Hebrew word שֹׁמֵר (*šōmêr*) as “keeper” has, it seems, been retained by most English translations across the board. And what, exactly, does this imply? In English, a “keeper” is a person who takes care of animals or who is in charge of a building or of inanimate objects.

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6. Voltaire, *Candide* (New York: Boni & Liveright, Inc., 1918), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19942/19942-h/19942-h.htm>.

Thus, we speak of zookeepers, beekeepers, the keeper of a lighthouse, or the keeper of antiquities in a major museum or of paintings and sculptures in an art gallery. We also use the term *custodian* in many such cases, so it is significant to note that Jerome's ancient Latin Vulgate<sup>7</sup> rendition of *šōmêr* is *custos*, from which the English word *custodian* derives. The Greek Septuagint<sup>8</sup> uses φύλαξ (*phúlax* or *phylax*) to translate *šōmêr*. The English equivalent of *phúlax* is *guard* or *sentry*. (Compare our word *prophylactic*, which refers to something that protects, guards, against disease or some other condition.) At Genesis 4:9, the *Common English Bible*<sup>9</sup> and the *Complete Jewish Bible*<sup>10</sup> have "Am I my brother's guardian?" while the 1979 *Nouvelle Edition de Genève*<sup>11</sup> has "*suis-je le gardien de mon frère?*"

These renderings are instructive. Was Cain's question a mocking and demeaning allusion to the fact that Abel, the brother he had just murdered, had been a keeper of sheep? (Sheep aren't exactly well known — and likely never have been — for their rational choices or their intellectual acumen. They aren't fully free.) We commonly use the term *custodian* to refer to responsibility for inanimate or non-sentient things, and the term *guardian* to denote stewardship over children or over adults who have been ruled incapable of governing themselves. If we place a sentry over someone, that person is a prisoner.

But Abel was neither a child nor incompetent. He wasn't Cain's captive. He was a fully functioning and free adult, entirely capable of governing himself, and Cain had no right over his life. In fact — and we need look no further than the 1991 Disney animated film *Beauty and the Beast*<sup>12</sup> or its 2017 remake<sup>13</sup> with live actors to see an illustration of this — we regard the false declaration of a person's incompetence to gain

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7. The Latin Vulgate Old Testament Bible (website), [https://vulgate.org/ot/genesis\\_4.htm](https://vulgate.org/ot/genesis_4.htm).

8. The Septuagint: LXX (website), <https://www.septuagint.bible/-/genesis-4#>.

9. Common English Bible (website), <https://www.commonenglishbible.com/explore/passage-lookup/?query=genesis+4>.

10. Common Jewish Bible (1998), <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+4&version=CJB>.

11. Nouvelle Edition de Genève (1979), <https://www.bible.com/bible/106/GEN.4.NEG79>.

12. *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Gary Trousdale & Kirk Wise (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures, 1991).

13. *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Bill Condon (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures, 2017).



control over him or his property as a particularly flagrant and horrifying injustice.

Once a child has reached maturity, though, or if a person gains or regains the ability to make her own responsible decisions, our answerability regarding such a free person substantially changes. Consider, for example, the case of the apostle Paul, as he took leave of the saints at Ephesus. Addressing them, he said:

And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. (Acts 20:25–27)

In other words, he had conveyed to them everything that he was divinely commanded to convey. Now, since he had done his duty toward them, the responsibility for what they would do with his teaching was theirs. A passage from the prophet Ezekiel is directly relevant in this context:

Again the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,

Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman:

If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people;

Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.

He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him. But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul.

But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand.

So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me.

When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. . . .

Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:1–9, 11)

But who has been set by the Lord as a watchman? Surely, we might say, the apostles and the prophets have been. And perhaps local leaders, too, for those within their stewardship. And parents, for their children. In a specific way, though, *all* of us have been so appointed. In the spring of 1959, President David O. McKay addressed members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who were gathered in the Salt Lake Tabernacle for the Church's 129th Annual General Conference. "Every member a missionary!" he told them. "Somebody will hear the good message of the truth through you."<sup>14</sup> And that divine assignment, given through a prophet, has never been revoked: "It becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor" (D&C 88:81).

Thereafter, once we have adequately conveyed the message of the Restoration — and please note my use of the word *adequately* — our principal responsibility toward our brothers and sisters has been discharged *in that respect*. We still have the responsibility, of course, to care for the poor and the needy in the Lord's way. We are still under an obligation, if we can, to do no harm.<sup>15</sup> We are still to love and take

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14. David O. McKay, *Conference Report* (April 1959), 122, <https://archive.org/details/conferencereport1959a/page/n123/mode/2up>.

15. This is more difficult than it sounds, and perhaps more so in our time — when some seem overeager to claim harm or victimhood. But it's still an aspiration. I think, in this regard, of Paul's concern (in 1 Corinthians 8) about eating meat that had been offered to idols. He felt that it was, in and of itself, a matter of moral and theological indifference. But it might mislead a fellow Christian. "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest

an interest in the welfare of our children and our siblings and our neighbors. Apart from specific ecclesiastical or legal assignments or personal transactions, though, we have no calling to judge them or to issue directives to them. That is God's role. ("Who am I to judge another," Susan Evans McCloud's lyric asks, "when I walk imperfectly?"<sup>16</sup> "For," Eliza R. Snow's familiar hymn points out, "'tis high to be a judge."<sup>17</sup>) And, in the end, we are not responsible for their choices.

Likewise, missionaries are expected to work hard and to take their message as well as they can to as many people as they can. Thereafter, the people to whom they take their message are free to receive it or to reject it. The farmer prepares the soil and plants his seed, but a successful harvest isn't entirely within his power. To make a similar point, the ancient Stoic philosophers of Greece and Rome were fond of an analogy involving a bowman or archer. The archer is responsible for which bow he decides to use, which arrow he selects from his quiver, how strongly he pulls the bowstring back, how still he stands, what target he chooses, and how well he aims. Once he releases his arrow, though, his responsibility comes to an end; his influence has reached its limit. A puff of wind might change the course of his arrow. Perhaps the arrow will break or fall apart in mid-air. It may be that someone or something will come between his arrow and his chosen target. Perhaps the target will move.<sup>18</sup>

While we cannot dictate how others will receive our message, we have considerable control over whether and how we will commend and defend and teach the doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ over. Some of us have chosen the Interpreter Foundation as an important means of advocating the claims of the Restoration and, thus, fulfilling our divine obligation. We hope that you'll consider joining us.

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I make my brother to offend" (8:13). And a further note: Although it's often thought that the famous medical dictum "First do no harm" comes from the Hippocratic Oath, it actually doesn't. It comes, instead, from another treatise attributed to Hippocrates (ca. 470–360 BC), *On the Epidemics* or *De morbis popularibus*. See *Hippocrates*, trans. W. H. S. Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 1:165, <https://archive.org/details/hippocrates0001unse/page/164/mode/2up>.

16. "Lord, I Would Follow Thee."

17. "Truth Reflects Upon Our Senses," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1985), 273.

18. It goes back to Antipater (d. ca. 130 BCE) and was picked up by, among others, Cicero (d. 7 December 43 BCE). But I was reminded of it by a much less remote and exotic author, and I draw upon his summary of it: Rolf Dobelli, *Die Kunst des digitalen Lebens: Wie Sie auf News verzichten und die Informationsflut meistern* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 2019), 175.

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*Daniel C. Peterson* (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor emeritus of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University, where he founded the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).

