

# John Steinbeck's East of Eden - Religious References

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## Religious References in East of Eden

Religion constantly appears throughout Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. Among these religious appearances are the similarities between the Cain and Abel story and the characters, the Hebrew word *timshel*, and the presence of God/Fate in the novel.

First, *East of Eden* is a reenactment of the [Cain](#) and [Abel](#) tale. Many similarities are seen between the two. The title *East of Eden* comes from the biblical tale when " 'Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden' " ([Steinbeck](#) 352). The relationship between Abel and Cain, who killed Abel, is similar to those of Adam and Charles, who once tried to kill Adam, and Aron and Caleb, who informed Aron of their mother's profession, an act which led to Aron's death in World War I. Charles and Caleb fight for their fathers' affections in the same way in which Cain fought with Abel over the Lord's attention. Also in the novel, "the Cain characters ... are identified by names beginning with "C" (Cyrus, Charles, Cathy, Caleb) and the Abel characters ... with "A" (Alice, Adam, Aron, Abra)" (Lisca 269).

Next is the word *timshel*-- thou mayest-- a Hebrew word spoken to Cain by the Lord: " 'if

thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him' " (Steinbeck 351). Lee discovers that the verb in this passage has been translated as both thou shalt [rule over evil] and do thou [rule over evil]. With the help of his Chinese elders and a Jewish Rabbi, Lee determines that the original meaning is thou mayest--

"the word timshel ... gives a choice" (398) or free will to mankind to commit good or evil acts. This word appears often in the novel and is important at the very end where Adam's final timshel blesses and forgives Caleb and reminds him that even after his "murder of his brother ... he can still choose his course and fight it through and win", meaning Caleb still has the chance to overcome the tendency for evil which he believes he has inherited from his mother. (Gribben 96)

One of the novel's epiphanies is Lee's translation of timshel to thou mayest. This translation puts choice into man's destiny. According to this view, we are not condemned; we have a choice between good and evil.

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