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Falling Far from the Tree? God's Rejection of Cain outside the Garden of Eden (Genesis 4:1-16)

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FALLING FAR FROM THE TREE?
GOD'S REJECTION OF CAIN OUTSIDE THE GARDEN OF EDEN (GENESIS 4:1–16)

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PREFACE

It would be difficult to point to what anyone might call the 'beginning' of my love and enjoyment for Biblical theology. I was blessed to begin attending Saint John Lutheran School in Fraser, MI my second grade year, where I was taught the accounts of Scripture, most importantly the good news of Jesus Christ. There, I was mentored by faithful men and women who had dedicated their lives to Christian education. Pastors John Merrill and Eric Majeski, and later, Pastor Brad Smith, all fanned the flame of my love for the Bible and for theology. This only continued at Lutheran High School North in Macomb, MI. There, I learned how to put theology into practice from men like Steve Garrabrant and Brian Horvath. Without them, I may not have found myself entering the seminary four years later. In addition, it was John Brandt who sharpened my skills with pen and paper. I attribute my writing abilities to his tutelage (and I apologize for any stray use of the word "thing" in this thesis paper).

Naturally, it was upon entering higher education that my love for Biblical theology blossomed. At Concordia University River Forest, I began studying the Biblical languages, learning Hebrew and Greek from Rev. Drs. Andrew Steinmann, Michael Eschelbach, and Charles Froehlich. Once I entered Concordia Seminary, my Biblical interests only grew deeper, as I was fortunate to study with many faithful pastors and doctors of theology, including Rev. Drs. Andrew Bartelt, Reed Lessing, Jeffrey Kloha, Paul Raabe, Robert Kolb, Timothy Saleska, David Schmitt, Joel Okamoto, Joel Biermann, and others, including Rev. Thomas Egger, my fourth year faculty advisor. I thank him for his time, patience, and wise counsel imparted to me during our meetings in his office. During my vicarage year, my supervisor, Rev. Dr. Mark Hoehner, always encouraged me to "read my Bible." In particular, I thank Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs for instructing me on the vital importance of the text of Scripture. Indeed, "grammar saves lives."

It is much easier, though, to identify the beginning of my interest in the account of Genesis 4. In 2011, I came across Frank Anthony Spina's article on the subject of Cain's disregard in the context of Gen 1–11. As I dug deeper into the question, I was amazed at how wide-ranging various historical interpretations were regarding the question of God's disregard for Cain. It was clear that, despite the vast number of interpretations, that there appeared to be only three broad categories of interpretation. With this newfound understanding, the question at hand served as a natural place to dig deeper into the text of Scripture, as well as its historical interpretation.

Having a full-time call as a pastor makes researching and writing a paper like this quite difficult. Adding to it the call away from the seminary for my original advisor, Reed Lessing, my path was much longer and full of more twists and turns than I had ever imagined. However, as I have found myself at the end of one journey and the beginning of another, I am very thankful for my advisor, Rev. Dr. David Adams. Though I was never fortunate to have a class with him at Concordia Seminary, he has labored to make my thesis better through his feedback and support. I thank him for sharpening my focus, helping me in my research, and providing support in any number of other ways. I would also be remiss not to thank Rev. Dr. Joel Elowsky and Rev. Thomas Egger for serving as readers for my thesis. Their time and effort will not be overlooked, and I thank them for their feedback and contributions to the final paper.

Most of all, I am so greatly indebted to my wife, Emma. She has been a rock for our family and in our marriage, giving me opportunity to write and research, sacrificing her own time, and helping to hold everything together over these several years. I cannot imagine finishing this without her love, support, and encouragement. I dedicate this paper to you, my beloved.

ABBREVIATIONS

Ant	Josephus, Flavius. *Antiquities*. In *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Translated by William Whiston. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987.
AJPS	Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies
BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004.
BurB	The Burning Bush
CBW	Conversations with the Biblical World
EcuRev	The Ecumenical Review
ESV	English Standard Version of the Bible
Joüon	Joüon, Paul. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Translated and revised by T. Muroka. 2 vols. Subsidia biblica 14/1–2. Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2005.
KJV	King James Version of the Bible
LW	*Luther's Works*. American Edition, 55 vols. Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. St. Louis; Concordia, 1955–1986.
LXX	*Septuaginta: Id est Vetus Testamentum graece iuxta LXX interpretes*. Edited by Alfred Rahlfs. 2 vols. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1971.
MT	Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible
NAS	New American Standard Version of the Bible
NIV	New International Version of the Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version of the Bible
Tg. Ps.-J	Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. Translated by J. W. Etheridge. *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel: On the Pentateuch With The Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum From the Chaldee*. London:

Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1862. Cited 30 December 2017. Online: http://targum.info/pj/pjgen1–6.htm.

ABSTRACT

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This thesis offers a review of the history of interpretation of the account of Gen 4:1–16. Specifically, this focus of this thesis regards the question of why God favored Abel and his sacrifice and not Cain and his sacrifice. The paper provides an original translation of Gen 4:1–16, as well as translation notes. The historical interpretations of the answer to the question of why God favored Abel over Cain are grouped into three broad categories: Cain’s sacrifice, Cain himself, and Yahweh. The evidence offered in this thesis shows that, despite the fact that the text of Gen 4:1–16 itself does not give an answer to the question, nor does it seem interested in the question itself, scholars have debated the reason behind God’s favoring of Abel for over two millennia, arriving at any number of possible interpretations. Using the text of Gen 4:1–16, as well as the surrounding context of Gen 1–11, the whole of Genesis, the entire Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, this paper offers commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of each interpretive category.

INTRODUCTION

In his *magnum opus*, *The City of God*, Augustine wrote, "Our time is not so large as to permit us to argue scrupulously upon every question that may be asked by busy heads that are more curious of inquiry than capable of understanding."[1] There is much wisdom in this sentiment, of course. Yet, the quote itself turns out to be highly ironic, not the least because Augustine himself spends such a large amount of time arguing for a particular interpretation of a question for which the text of Scripture gives no explicit answer.

Since well before Augustine, scholars have debated the many questions surrounding the text of Gen 4.[2] In it, the author gives an account of two brothers, Cain and Abel, one of whom is regarded favorably by Yahweh and the other who is disregarded. In a rapid sequence of events spanning only eight verses, and with little definitive detail,[3] readers are told of the brothers' births, their occupations, their sacrificial offerings, and finally, the murder of the younger brother. Afterwards, Abel's blood cries out for justice from the ground, Cain apparently shows a lack of remorse, and an even greater curse is put on Cain than was spoken to his father, Adam.

How did the joy of verse 1 so quickly devolve into the dreadful anger and sadness involved with the first recorded murder? The answer lies in Cain's feelings of sadness, anger, and

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[1] Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. John Healey, 2 vol. (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden, & Walsh, 1890), 54.

[2] John Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L Petersen (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 349, writes, "The Cain and Abel story provided ancient interpreters with a seemingly unending source of exegetical expansions. Missing details, unusual syntax, and unexplained aspects led to developments that transformed the two brothers into archetypical figures for Jewish and Christian readers."

[3] Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 135, argues, "[The language of Gen 4] is more suggestive than explanatory, pointing more to possibilities than to definitive answers. Readers gain little knowledge about Cain and Abel's upbringing, their character traits, or their religion life. The audience receives no certainty about why God gives more attention to Abel's sacrifice than to Cain's. Even the murder itself is retold with exceptional brevity, revealing nothing about whether Abel put up a struggle, how Cain committed the murder, what happened to the body, or when and how Adam and Eve learned of the death."

frustration at being overlooked by Yahweh, despite the fact that he had brought the Lord a sacrifice of the fruits of his labor.[4] But, what led to Yahweh regarding Abel and disregarding his older brother, Cain? For over two millennia, scholars have debated the question of why Cain and his sacrifice were not accepted. Yet, because the text itself offers no explicit reason, there remains no consensus concerning the answer to the question.[5]

The purpose of the text is not to answer the question of why Cain was rejected, but to describe the rapid intensification of sin after the Fall.[6] It only takes one generation to move from disobeying Yahweh's command by eating a fruit, to fratricide.[7] Indeed, following the account of Cain and Abel, the reader continues to see only escalating violence and the monstrous results of sin in the world.[8] Similarly, from Adam in Gen 2 to Noah in Gen 6–9, mankind's separation from the ground itself, from which it was created, intensifies with each story.[9]

Despite the fact that the text of Gen 4 is terse, difficult, and light on explanation, and despite the apparent intention of the text to explicate the effects of sin after the Fall, scholars continue to debate the question of why God looked with favor on Abel and not Cain. This, then, will be the focus of the following thesis paper, namely to examine the history of interpretation

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[4] Terrence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), 78, wonders how Cain and Abel knew to bring sacrifices in the first place, concluding, "The focus on worship is remarkable in that it represents it as integral to God's good *creation* quite apart from specific divine revelation."

[5] Frank Anthony Spina, "The 'Ground' for Cain's Rejection (Genesis 4): '*ᵃdāmāh* in the Context of Genesis 1–11," *ZAW* 104 (1992): 321, writes, "Consequently, to search the Cain and Abel story for a reason which will provide a solid rationale for Yahweh's stance is to look for something which is not there."

[6] Fretheim, *God and World*, 66, writes, "This story of violence portrays how the effects of sin cross generations, afflict even families (a basic order of creation), and lead to intensified levels of violence (4:23–24; 6:11–13)." See also John Rogerson, *Genesis 1–11* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 66.

[7] Sidney Greidanus, "Preaching Christ from the Cain and Abel Narrative," *BSac* 161 (2004): 393.

[8] Ricardo J. Quinones, *The Changes of Cain: Violence and the Lost Brother in Cain and Abel Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 14.

[9] Mari Jørstad, "The Ground That Opened Its Mouth: The Ground's Response to Human Violence in Genesis 4," *JBL* 135 (2016): 707.

surrounding the question of God's favor to Abel and his sacrifice and disregard for Cain and his sacrifice.

In the first chapter, this paper will offer an original translation of Gen 4:1–16, followed by notes on the text based on grammar, syntax, difficult questions, and thematic connections throughout the chapter. Relevant grammars, commentaries, and other sources of information, most notably the Septuagint, will be referenced, in an effort to lay the groundwork for the chapters to come. Any careful argument attempting to answer the question of why God showed disregard for Cain will pay close attention to the details of the text, making chapter one the important foundation for the discussion that comes after.

But, in order to study fully the question at hand, the limits of the text itself must first be established. The beginning of the account is quite clearly Gen 4:1. The first word of the chapter is וְהָאָדָם. Normally, as a particular account carries on, the word order in Hebrew prose is verb-subject-object. Since the word order has been altered (subject-verb-object), it becomes apparent that, though the first man and woman are involved at the beginning of chapter four, the focus has changed.[10] Much more obviously, the account of the Fall of the first man and woman has already concluded with them being driven out of the Garden of Eden, as a cherubim and flaming sword were placed at the entrance, so as to keep them from gaining access to the Tree of Life, lest they eat from it and live forever. The first verse of chapter four, then, when Cain himself is born, is the appropriate place to begin the text in question.

Setting the end limit of the text is also straightforward. Grammatically, the phrase that begins the chapter, וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת־חַוָּה אִשְׁתּוֹ, is almost word-for-word the same phrase that begins

[10] C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 150. See also Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984). In addition, the *waw* that begins the account is disjunctive. See discussion in chapter one.

4:17, which is the beginning of the subsequent account of Cain's descendants. Thematically, the focus has shifted from the story of Cain's terrible sin and its consequences to the account of Cain's descendants. Though Cain is mentioned three times in 4:17–4:26, this thesis paper will remain focused on the story of Cain himself, found in 4:1–16.[11]

None of this, however, subtracts from the importance of the text's place in the surrounding context. In fact, as this paper will show, the themes of Gen 1–11 play a vital role in understanding the events of Gen 4:1–16. There is no more clear or important connection than is found in relation to chapter 3. Grammatically and thematically, the two chapters reflect one another, creating the perfect movement from the origin of sin to its natural consequences.[12] While Adam and Eve sought the ability to know good and evil apart from the Word of Yahweh, their newfound 'knowledge' after the Fall actually resulted in trouble for Cain.[13] Thomas Brodie summarizes:

> Here also, in the two sin accounts, there is continuity and complementarity. Alienation, begun in panel one, becomes intensified in panel two. Both panels depict an initial temptation, then sin and punishment, and then an aftermath. There are numerous connecting details. The complementarity includes the *dramtis personae*: there are two primordial pairings: man-and-woman; sibling-and-sibling.[14]

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[11] Eric Peels, "The World's First Murder: Violence and Justice in Genesis," in *Animosity, the Bible, and Us*, GPBS 12 ed. John T. Fitzgerald et al (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009): 23, states, "The pericope of verses 1–16 makes one neat unit with its own plot, starting with the mention of Cain's rise "with Yahweh" (v. 1) and ending with his downfall "out of Yahweh's presence" (v. 16)."

[12] Gordon J. Wenahm, *Genesis* (Waco: Word, 1987), 100, writes, "Clearly, then, though the writer of Genesis wants to highlight the parallels between the two stories, he does not regard the murder of Abel simply as a rerun of the fall. There is development: sin is more firmly entrenched and humanity is further alienated from God." For his part, Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 57, disagrees, as he rejects the idea of original sin, as well as viewing the world post-Fall as a place where humans choose and act for good. Thus, he argues, Gen 3 and 4 should not be so closely read together. Ultimately, his view will be shown to be mistaken.

[13] Ben C. Ollenburger, "Creation and Peacce: Creator and Creature in Genesis 1–11," in *The Old Testament in the Life of God's People: Essays in Honor of Elmer A. Martens* ed. Jon Isaak (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009): 153, points out, "Human godlike power to discriminate between good and evil did not carry with it the will to choose the good."

[14] Thomas Brodie, "Genesis as Dialogue: Genesis' Twenty-Six Diptychs as a Key to Narrative Unity and Meaning," in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction, and History* ed. André Wénin (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 301.

Terrence Fretheim further outlines eight points of similarity between chapters 3 and 4, including an initial temptation, a subsequent sinful act, a divine interrogation, successive excuses or denials, resulting sentences or curses, an affirmation or complaint, the Lord's mercy or mitigation, and finally expulsion.[15] In each case, the account of Gen 4:1–16 clearly shows an escalation from chapter 3.[16] Ultimately, Gen 4 cannot be understood apart from Gen 1–3,[17] nor apart from what follows in Gen 5–11.[18]

Following the translation of and notes for 4:1–16, the history of interpretation will be considered. Chapters 2–4 of this thesis paper are organized in order to group the historical interpretations into the three broad categories. Throughout history, scholars have all answered the question of Yahweh's disregard of Cain by focusing either on Cain's sacrifice, Cain himself, or on God in heaven. This, then, will serve as the natural organization of the examination of interpretations that cover over 2,000 years of history. Of course, some interpretations bleed from

[15] Fretheim, *Creation, Fall, and Flood*, 93–94. See also Joze Krasovec, "Punishment and Mercy in the Primeval History (Gen 1–11)," *ETL* 70 (1994): 10.

[16] For example, Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 74, points out, "While Eve had been talked into her sin, Cain will not have even God talk him out of it; nor will he confess it, nor yet accept his punishment." See also Alan J. Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links between Genesis 4:1–16 and Genesis 2–3," *JETS* 23 (1980): 298.

[17] Peels, "World's First Murder," 21, summarizes, "Down to the smallest detail, Gen 3 and 4 are geared to one another: structurally, thematically, literally, and idiomatically. Westermann, on the basis of this parallelism, has correctly pointed out that these two chapters should not only be read *after* one another but also *alongside* one another. Genesis 4, however, is more than just the social reverse of the religious fall of Gen 3, since a clear progression in sin and alienation (from God) becomes manifest."

[18] Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh: An Introduction to the Origin, Purpose, and Meaning of the Old Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1979), 65–66, argues, "It is possibly correct in a technical sense that chap. 3 (the Fall) is never alluded to elsewhere in the Old Testament. But, if so, it is plainly only a technicality, because the subject matter is assumed all over the place, beginning with chap. 4. The point is well made also that we too easily leapfrog over chaps. 4–11 to chap. 12 (and sometimes virtually over the whole Old Testament directly to the 'new creation'). The Flood and Tower of Babel stories are important sequels to and confirmations of chap. 3, all of them confirming the 'necessity' of the election of Abraham." See also Jørstad, "Ground That Opened Its Mouth," 706, who argues that the stories of Adam, Cain, and Noah are three attempts to address one set of problems, not three different stories with three different sets of problems, writing, "Gen 1–11 ruminates on the nature of the relationship between humanity and the ground and the extent to which the ground is available to human choice and control...Adam, Cain, and Noah are connected to the ground via names and vocational titles [and curses (cf. 5:29; 8:19)]."

one category into another, though they are generally concentrated in one category.

Beginning in chapter two, then, this paper will examine how some scholars have argued that Cain's sacrifice is somehow deficient. First, the LXX will serve as the basis for the question of whether Cain simply brought the wrong kind of offering. Though the Hebrew word used to describe both Cain and Abel's offering is the same (מִנְחָה), LXX uses two Greek words (θυσία and δῶρον) to describe Cain and Abel's respective sacrifices. Arguments based on LXX will also consider the timing of Cain's sacrifice. Next, chapter two will explore whether Cain was rejected because he brought something lifeless, unlike Abel, who brought the fatty portions of his flock. Following this, the focus of interpretations will shift to whether Cain was disregarded because he offered something produced from the ground by force. Subsequently, the paper will examine Frank Spina's hypothesis, that Cain was rejected because he brought fruit from the ground, which had been cursed in Gen 3. Finally, the argument that Abel brought the best of his flock, as opposed to Cain, who brought only some of his produce instead of the firstfruits, will be explored.

In chapter three, the category identifying Cain himself as the cause of rejection will be surveyed. First, the paper will recognize an ancient Jewish tradition, portrayed in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and other *targumim*, that Cain was an evil son of the devil. Next, the paper will examine Herman Gunkel's hypothesis that Yahweh rejected Cain because he was a farmer, while Abel was accepted because he was a shepherd. Subsequently, attention will switch to an exploration of the allegorical interpretations that saw Cain as greedy and Abel virtuous. This section will make use of Philo, Ambrose, and others as guides. Finally, the paper will address the typological interpretations of Augustine, Luther, and others, who argue that Abel had faith and Cain was faithless, thus making them types for Christ/Church and Jewish leaders/pagans. In this

section especially, consideration will be given to the references to Cain and Abel found in the New Testament, particularly Hebrews 11–12.

In chapter four, this paper will examine Claus Westermann's argument that Yahweh's will is simply unknowable, as well as Walter Brueggemann's contention that Yahweh is capricious in his decision to favor Abel over Cain. Next, the focus will shift to the question of whether Yahweh simply prefers the younger brother over the older, an argument which points to other such apparent instances throughout Genesis. Finally, the paper will explore Joseph Klein's hypothesis that God was testing Cain, despite the fact that Cain's offering was fine and Cain himself lacked nothing in his heart or mind.

Following chapters 2–4, there will be a brief conclusion summarizing the history of interpretation. There, the idea that the text never fully answers the question of why Yahweh rejected Cain will be solidified, as will the argument that the purpose of the text of Gen 4 is to expose how quickly and how viciously sin takes hold after the Fall. Even more, the point will be made that the text of Gen 4, as well as the greater context of Gen 1–11 (and the rest of Scripture), shows Yahweh not to be capricious, but merciful and gracious.

CHAPTER ONE

TRANSLATION AND NOTES (GENESIS 4:1–16)

Translation of Genesis 4:1–16

1 Now Adam lay with Eve, his wife, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain. And she said, "I have gained a man with the help of Yahweh. **2** And she gave birth again, to his brother Abel. Now Abel was a herdsman of flocks, and Cain was a worker of the ground. **3** Now in the course of time Cain brought from the fruit of the ground an offering to Yahweh. **4** But Abel, he also brought [an offering] from the firstborn of his flock, specifically some of their fatty parts. And Yahweh regarded Abel and his offering, **5** but Cain and his offering he did not regard. So Cain was furious, and his face fell. **6** Then Yahweh said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why is your face fallen? **7** If you would do well, will there not [be] a lifting up? But, if you would not do well, sin is lying down at the door. Its longing is for you, but you yourself must rule over it."

8 Then Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And it happened that, while they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and he killed him. **9** Then Yahweh said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And [Cain] said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" **10** And [Yahweh] said, "What have you done? The voice of the blood of your brother is crying out to me from the ground. **11** So now cursed are you from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive the blood of your brother from your hand. **12** When you work the ground, it will no longer give its strength to you. You will be a vagabond and a wanderer on the earth." **13** Then Cain said to Yahweh, "My punishment is too great for me to bear. **14** Behold, today you are driving me out from upon the face of the ground, and from your face I will be hidden. I will be a vagabond and a wanderer on the earth, and it will be that anyone who finds me will kill me." **15** Then Yahweh said to him, "This being so, anyone who would kill Cain will receive vengeance sevenfold." And Yahweh

placed a mark on Cain, so that anyone who found him would not strike him down. **16** Then Cain went out from before the face of Yahweh, and he settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Translation Notes for Genesis 4:1–16

1.וְהָאָדָם – וְ offers several possible choices in English beyond "and." The translations here will be made based on context.

Scarlata points out that commentators generally agree that the lack of the *waw consecutive* demonstrates the introduction to a new story,[1] or, at least, a change in focus. However, it is apparent that, thematically, the story continues from chapter three, even if the focus now changes.[2] Thus, "now."

There remains the question also of how to translate הָאָדָם, whether as "the man" or "Adam." This translation uses the proper name "Adam" for two reasons. First, הָאָדָם is juxtaposed with חַוָּה, "Eve," the name given by him to his wife. Second, the word אִישׁ, "man," appears later in verse one and is used more generically to mean "a man."

יָדַע – This simple *qal* form implies that, though the same people are involved (i.e. Adam and Eve), the story has changed focus (see above). The initial verbs that follow will be found in the *wayyiqtol* form, indicating a continuous account.

The literal meaning of the word is "know." But the idiomatic meaning in Hebrew is to have sexual intercourse.[3] It is a bit awkward in English to translate the word woodenly (i.e. "know"),

[1] M. W. Scarlata, *Outside of Eden: Cain in the Ancient Versions of Genesis 4.1–16* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 28. See also Seow, *Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, 150.

[2] See further discussion in the Introduction above.

[3] BDB, s.v. ידע, qal, 3.

so a clear English idiom, "lay," is used here.

קַיִן – While there is apparent aural connection between Cain's name and the verb קנה, "acquire" (see below), there might also be wordplay also with קנא, "be jealous,"[4] which, as the reader quickly perceives, becomes an inseparable part of Cain's character in this short account of two brothers.

The range of interpretations tracing the etymology of Cain's name, though, is quite wide. Robert Alter argues that the name means "smith,"[5] which he argues is confirmed by his descendants, specifically Tubal Cain.[6] Umberto Cassuto posits that the name simply refers to Cain being formed as a creature.[7] Richard Hess combines the two respective ideas.[8] The wife of Adam herself seems to give the specific reason for the name, however. (see more below).

קָנִיתִי – Translations differ on the exact wording, though most use "I have gotten" (KJV, ESV, RSV, et al.), with the NIV translating "I have brought forth," a clear departure from the literal meaning of קנה in favor of a more contextual understanding. This translation uses "I have

[4] Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness*, 136.

[5] Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 16.

[6] However, E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987), 30, writes, "If the name is cognate with Ar. qayin "metalworker," the indicated derivation would be more in order in v. 22. But this is plainly yet another case of sound symbolism (cf. 2:5)." Wenham, *Genesis*, 101, agrees that the aural connection is simply poetic.

[7] Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), 197.

[8] Richard Hess, *Studies in the Personal Names of Genesis 1–11* (Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon & Bercker, 1993), 112, writes, "[The text] associates Cain with the root qnh 'to create,' 'to acquire.'… [and associates] his line as involved in the creation of cities, music, tools, and weapons. The line acquires property, wives, and the fruits of vengeance."

gained" both to retain the core meaning of the word (and its connection to Cain's name and meaning) and because the sound in English closely mirrors the name "Cain."[9]

Scholars argue over the implication of Eve's words, debating whether she was joyful in cooperation[10] or prideful in her power to create.[11]

אִישׁ – The obvious question regards why Eve calls her son *ish* instead of *ben* ("son"). Luther argues that Eve believed Cain to be the fulfillment of the promise of 3:15[12], even that Cain might be *the Lord himself* (see more below).

אֶת־יְהוָה – Most commonly, את is used as the direct object marker, but with different pointing can also be a preposition meaning "with."[13] Williams marks its use here as a "אֶת of assistance" (cf. Job 26:4; Judg 8:7),[14] resulting in "with the help of." However, this use is extremely rare in the Old Testament, and it is debatable whether it occurs at all.[15] The sense might lead some to go so far as to infer a sexual relationship with God, which is most certainly neither meant here nor

[9] See also Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 101.

[10] E.g. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-Creation, Recreation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 84: "The wording of Eve's exclamation, expressing pride and joy at the birth of her firstborn, is someway mysterious. Her speaking of *creating* a child (with the Hebrew verb *qanah*) is clearly intended as a play on the name of Cain (*qayin*), but it also reinforces, and is reinforced by, the affirmation that the birth came about with the co-operation of Yahweh, the deity who created the first male as she has now been instrumental in creating the second."

[11] Cassuto, *Genesis*, 201, writes, "It is possible to understand the verse with complete clarity: the first woman, in her joy at giving birth to her first son, boasts of her generative power, which approximates in her estimation to the Divine creative power. The Lord formed the first *man* (ii 7), and I have formed the second *man*…literally, 'I have created a man with the Lord': *I stand together* [i.e. *equally*] WITH HIM *in the rank of creators*."

[12] Martin Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 91.

[13] BDB, s.v. את, II.

[14] Ronald J. Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax,* rev. and exp. John C. Beckman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 129.

[15] BDB, s.v. את, II, lists "with the help of" as a possible translation in 4:1, but labels it as "exceptional." The few additional examples given (Gen 49:25; Mi 3:8) are dubious.

possible.[16] Thus, this phrase has stirred debate over the centuries, from the time of Ambrose.[17] Luther translated את as marking an appositive, resulting in, "Ich habe den Mann, des Herrn" ("I have [gotten] the man, the Lord"). Whether Eve considered this firstborn son of hers to be *the Lord* may be unlikely, but it is certainly beyond the purview of this paper. Most likely, the sense is simply that God provided Eve with Cain.[18] Thus, major translations use "with the help of the LORD." LXX agrees, translating, διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, "through [the agency] of God."[19] This seems the only acceptable choice if the text is to be read as is.

2. יסף plus the infinitive construct takes the meaning "to continue to ____."[20] – וַתֹּסֶף לָלֶדֶת

Some scholars[21] postulate that Cain and Abel were twins, pointing out that there is no second description of Eve conceiving, only that she gave birth again. Byron also points to other warring twin brothers as possible evidence (cf. Gen 25, 38; Num 26).[22] However, certainty either way cannot be possible based on the text.

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[16] Ambrose, *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1961), 360, points out, rightly so, that God is the author of life, but not the instrument, so to speak, by which Cain was conceived.

[17] See Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 360.

[18] For one opinion in German contrary to Luther, see Bernd Janowski, "Jenseits von Eden: Gen 4,1–16 und die nichtpriesterliche Urgeschichte," in *Textarbeit: Studien zu Texten und ihrer Rezeption aus dem Alten Testament under Umwelt Israels: Festschrift für Peter Weimar*, ed. Klaus Kiesow and Thomas Meurer, Alter Orient und Alter Testament 294 (Münster: Ugarit, 2003), 269, who adds "der Hilfe von" before "Jahwe."

[19] Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 32, notes the rare usage of this prepositional phrase, citing Gen 40:8, Exod 22:8, and 1 Sam 22:10, 13, 15.

[20] BDB, s.v. יסף, 2a.

[21] E.g. Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-Creation, Recreation*, 83: "It is not stated explicitly that they were twins, as is the case with Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:24), but it may be intimated by the fact that with the second child we are not told of Eve conceiving. In traditional societies, moreover, the birth of twins is generally taken to be ominous."

[22] John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry,* Themes in Biblical Narrative 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 23.

אֶת־אָחִיו אֶת־הָבֶל – When a proper noun of person is in apposition to a noun of kinship, then the particle את is generally repeated.[23]

While Abel receives no proclamation from his mother, and thus no specific or apparent etymology, it has not been lost on scholars that his name probably references הֶבֶל, "vanity," "breath," or "nothingness."[24] While it is true that, unlike with his brother Cain, no etymological pun is included, the narrative seems to be making a point that Abel is, in some manner of speaking, irrelevant to the account at hand[25] (see more discussion below). At the very least, Abel's presence, even his life, are but a passing breath.

רֹעֵה צֹאן – Some translations (ESV, KJV, RSV, et al.) specify that Abel was a "keeper of sheep" (i.e. a shepherd), though the phrase itself can be used more generally, i.e. "keeper of flocks" (cf. NIV, NAS). This translation avoids using "keeper" (to distinguish from שׁמר, for example) in favor of the more specific "herdsman," though the meaning is scarcely changed.

וְקַיִן הָיָה – The usual verb-subject order is reversed, bringing the focus clearly on Cain.

3. וַיְהִי – Literally "and it was" (or something similar), this is a common Hebrew introduction to an account. Its translation is flexible, from the familiar KJV "And it came to pass," to "And it happened that," to being omitted altogether.

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[23] Joüon, §131i; Williams, *Syntax*, 28.

[24] See, e.g., Hess, *Studies*, 113.

[25] However, Karolien Vermeulen, "Mind the Gap: Ambiguity in the Story of Cain and Abel" *JBL* 133 (2014): 30, writes, "I argue the opposite, considering Abel—"nothing"—the necessary catalyst to develop a story that thrives on ambiguity. Without הבל and the gaps created by him, there would be no story."

מִקֵּץ יָמִים – Literally "at the end of days," this phrase simply seems to indicate an unknown amount of time.[26] The phrase וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ יָמִים is used twice elsewhere in the Old Testament (1 Ki 17:7; Jer 13:6), each respectively indicating an unknown amount of time. However, citing Lev 25:9 and 1 Sam 1:21, Wenham argues that a more natural understanding might be "a year," especially when understood in the cycle of agricultural seasons.[27] This makes sense, though it cannot be proven, which is why this translation holds to a more generic, yet slightly more precise, phrase, "In the course of time."

מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה – The use of the preposition מִן־ here is "partitive."[28] In other words, Cain brought *some of* the fruit of the ground, not all of it.

The use of the term פְּרִי may call to mind the events of chapter 3.[29] See discussion in chapter two.

מִנְחָה – LXX uses two different words for what Cain and Abel bring: θυσία, "sacrifice," and δῶρον, "gift," respectively,[30] though in the MT the same word is used of what Cain and Abel both

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[26] See Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 105.

[27] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 103. See also Janowski, "Jenseits von Eden," 270, who lists "nach Ablauf" as a possibility, which, while less specific than Wenham's "after a year," still implies the ending of a specific timeframe.

[28] Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 124.

[29] Dominic Rudman, "A Little Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing: Crossing Forbidden Boundaries in Genesis 3–4," in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction, and History* (ed. André Wénin; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001): 464, writes, "The use of the term פרי, which by now carries strongly negative associations (cf. 3,2–3.6) should alert the reader that no good can come of Cain's offering. In other words, one could imagine a God still chafing at the theft of his produce by Cain's parents being rather vexed by the tactlessness of their son offering him fruit. Alternatively, one cold imagine the offering of fruit simply as a literary motif signaling doom."

[30] Robert Hayward, "What Did Cain Do Wrong? Jewish and Christian Interpretation of Genesis 4:3–6," in *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series 18 (ed. Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling; Leiden: Brill, 2009): 104, points out, "The inference [of the LXX] is clear: Cain has seemingly made a proper offering but, given that it was brought as a *thysia*, he has apportioned it incorrectly, thereby depriving God of something due to Him, and in the process being guilty of a sin."

bring. BDB includes "gift," "tribute," "offering," and related specific offerings (e.g. "grain offering") in the semantic domain of the word מִנְחָה, which again is used for what Cain and Abel both bring. Thus, one could argue that LXX probably reads into the story more than was intended, as it uses θυσίαν, "sacrifice," in verse three, but δῶρον, "gift," in verse four. To be sure, there are times when the same Hebrew word can and should be translated using different words, based on any given context. However, the LXX makes an interpretative move that seems unwarranted by the text of verses 3–4 (see more in the discussion in chapter 3).[31]

4. גַּם־הֵוּא – This correlative draws attention to Cain over against his brother Abel[32] (thus the "but" to begin the verse), while also noting their similar actions in bringing a מִנְחָה to Yahweh.[33] Whereas Cain brought *some of the fruit* of the ground, Abel brought *some of the firstborn of his flock, specifically the fatty portions* (see below). Though it is not necessarily explicit, the author may be making a distinction between the two offerings.[34]

וּמֵחֶלְבֵהֶן – Williams calls this an "explicative *waw*."[35] Cain did not bring from the flock *and* from the fatty portions, but specifically *from the fatty portions of the firstborn*.

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[31] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 42, writes, "In Greek Genesis δῶρον is used as a translation for מִנְחָה only ten times, one of which is to describe Abel's offering (Gen 4:5). In the other nine cases when מִנְחָה is translated by δῶρον the occasion is not one of sacrifice, but of gifts made in offers of peace like that of Jacob to Esau and to Joseph by his brothers in Egypt. θυσία, on the other hand, only translates מנחה twice in Greek Genesis, both of which refer to Cain's offering (4:3, 5)."

[32] Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 139.

[33] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 94, writes, "גַּם emphasizes the similarity between Cain and Abel's acts. Both brought gifts."

[34] It seems that, if anything in the text would give an answer to the question as to why one sacrifice is favored over the other, this phrase gives the best evidence. This point will be discussed at length in chapter 2.

[35] Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 154. See also Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 94.

וַיִּשַׁע יְהוָה אֶל־הֶבֶל וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ – Literally, Yahweh "gazed upon Abel and his offering." The word means more than simply to look at, just as the English word "regard" can mean to look *with favor* or *with respect* (e.g. "I have a high regard for this person."). With the preposition אֶל, the word takes a positive connotation, literally "to look toward/upon"; figuratively "to regard" or "to look with favor."[36] If מִן is used, the connotation is the opposite, literally "to look away from"; figuratively "not to regard."[37] The verb of looking fits in well with the coming theme of looking up or down, and the falling and rising of one's own countenance (see below).

5. וְאֶל־קַיִן וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ – The prepositional phrases precede the verb, contrasting Cain and Abel and bringing attention to both.[38] The phrases together may reveal that Yahweh's favor/disfavor is given on account of more than just the offering itself (see discussion in chapter 2).[39]

וַיִּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד – LXX translates this phrase not with the word for anger, but the word for grieving or mourning (ἐλύπησεν).[40] See discussion below.

וַיִּפְּלוּ פָּנָיו – Literally, "and his face fell." This verb, when used in reference to the face or "countenance," takes a stative meaning.[41] Whether Cain was full of anger[42] or sadness[43] is

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[36] BDB, s.v. שׁעה, qal.

[37] BDB, s.v. שׁעה, qal.

[38] Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 205.

[39] Regardless, as Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 51, points out, "Whatever the exact nature of the problem with Cain's sacrifice, it did not even warrant God's consideration let alone God's acceptance."

[40] Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 577. Scarlata notes that the only later use in Genesis is in 45:5, though the verb was used twice in 3:16–17.

[41] Joüon, §112a.

[42] See, e.g., Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 39.

[43] Mayer Gruber, "The Tragedy of Cain and Abel: A Case of Depression," *JQR* 69 (1979), 90. See also Hayward, "What Did Cain Do Wrong?" 104.

debated. Regardless, his emotion could be physically seen in his expression. Kahl takes a more literal approach, arguing that the phrase indicates that Cain refuses to look at his brother any longer.[44] This translation retains the literal phrase, because English can also use "fallen face" to mean sadness and disappointment. More importantly, it helps to illuminate the later remarks (e.g. "lifting up").

6. לָמָּה חָרָה לָךְ – Literally, "Why is it kindled for you," meaning, "Why are you angry?"[45]

נָפְלוּ פָנֶיךָ – The result of the verb is assumed to continue from the time of his initial disappointment until the time when Yahweh is speaking to Cain.[46] Thus, "is fallen."

7. תֵּיטִיב – Joüon argues for a "frequentative" or "durative" sense (in other words, "If you *continue* to do well").[47] The sense would be not that Cain has already done well, but that Cain would need to begin doing and *and continue to do well*. However, it can also be understood modally, implying a contrast with what comes next. Thus, "If you would do well."

From here through the remainder of the verse, LXX takes an interpretive turn: οὐκ ἐὰν ὀρθῶς προσενέγκῃς ὀρθῶς δὲ μὴ διέλῃς ἥμαρτες ἡσύχασον πρὸς σὲ ἡ ἀποστροφὴ αὐτοῦ καὶ σὺ ἄρξεις αὐτοῦ ("Have you not sinned by rightly offering but not rightly dividing? His turning will be to you, and you will rule over him."). It clearly describes the 'sin' of Cain in not 'rightly dividing'

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[44] Brigitte Kahl, "Human Culture and the Integrity of Creation," *EcuRev* 39 (1987): 134, writes, "The counterpart has become the adversary. The "I" no longer recognizes itself in the mirror of "you", "you" has become the rival, the one against me. "I" is something without "you". This is made evident in the expression "his face fell" (4:6). Cain stops looking at his brother, he breaks communication with him. The result: "Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him" (4:8)." On the contrary, it seems clear that Cain's disposition toward the Lord, and not toward Abel, is in view here.

[45] However, Gruber, "Tragedy of Cain and Abel," 91–2, argues that it implies sadness by referring to laments found in Akkadian writings, as well as to Jonah 4:8–9. Ultimately, the proper translation makes little difference for the question at hand.

[46] Joüon, §112e.

[47] Joüon, §167h.

his sacrifice, though the meaning of 'rightly dividing' is not clear (see discussion in chapter 2).

LXX translates, προσενέγκης ὀρθῶς, "offer well," which again infers something from the text that may or may not be present.

הֲלוֹא – The expected answer to the question is, "Yes."[48]

שְׂאֵת – The form certainly comes from נשׂא, though there is much uncertainty with how to understand it. BDB lists the form both as an infinitive construct,[49] but also as possibly a feminine noun, calling the form "dubious."[50] Not even BDB knows what to do with this (!!), but does offer three possible translations: 1) "Is there not acceptance? (focus on God's face being lifted up favorably toward Cain); 2) "Is there not forgiveness?" (metaphorical sense – the 'lifting'/removal of sin); 3) "Is there not an uplifting [of your countenance]?" (focus on Cain's face being lifted up, because it had fallen).[51] Since the word literally means "lift," and because of the themes of "up and down," "rising and falling," this translation retains the more literal, "Will there not be a lifting up?" with the assumed inclusion of a form of היה, which is omitted.

לַפֶּתַח – This prepositional phrase, activing adverbially, is fronted for emphasis,[52] perhaps to stress the closeness of sin, as well as the intensity of its desire for Cain.

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[48] BDB, s.v. לא, 4 b.

[49] BDB, s.v. נשׂא, qal.

[50] BDB, s.v. שְׂאֵת, 4.

[51] BDB, s.v. שְׂאֵת, 4. See also Wenham, *Genesis*, 105.

[52] Joüon, §154h.

חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ – This is the first mention of "sin" in the Scriptures. The phrase itself is quite difficult[53], for multiple reasons. First, if these two words indeed belong together, there is not agreement of person (חַטָּאת is a feminine noun, while רֹבֵץ is a masculine participle). Is there a copying error? Is the referent of רֹבֵץ something besides חַטָּאת? The highly technical discussions found in commentaries lie outside the purview of this paper.[54] Regardless, the third person masculine singular suffix on תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ would agree in person and number with רֹבֵץ, leaving readers to wonder what the antecedent of "it"/"he" is, and thus to what the "crouching" refers. For the sake of simplicity, this translation will simply follow the vast majority of translations that connect רֹבֵץ with חַטָּאת.

Most translations use the word "crouching" for רֹבֵץ. With the ongoing themes of "up and down," "falling and rising," this translations uses "lie down." The sense is probably not "crouching," as in waiting to pounce, but that חַטָּאת will make its home or lair at Cain's doorstep.[55]

[53] David Max Eichhorn, *Cain: Son of the Serpent*, (Chappaqua: Rossel, 1985), 47, writes, "The Talmud says that this verse, Genesis 4:7, is one of five verses in the Bible whose grammatical construction is so unusual that they are very difficult to translate."

[54] One example of a thoughtful, but probably incorrect, theory is that רֹבֵץ refers to the serpent (cf. 3:14), based on similar words in other local languages. See Don C. Benjamin, "Stories of Adam and Eve," in *Problems in Biblical Theology* ed. Henry T. C. Sun and Keith L. Eades (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 56; and Janowski, "Jenseits von Eden," 273–75.

[55] Cf. BDB, s.v. רבץ, qal. Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 80, points out that the word is almost always used of animals lying down to rest, or metaphorically of individuals (Ps. 23:2) or Israel (Is 65:10; Jer 50:6; Ezek 34:14, 15; Zeph 2:7; 3:13) lying in God's rest. So, it's a curious word to use in connection with sin..

וְאַתָּה – Though technically unnecessary, the pronoun's use contrasts the action of sin (which longs for Cain) and also puts emphasis on Cain himself.[56] Thus, "you yourself."

תִּמְשָׁל־בּוֹ – The use of a modal verb is appropriate in translation, especially in light of the fact that the "ruling over it" never comes to pass (as a simple "future" sense would indicate).[57] The verb could also be taken with the force of an imperative ("You *shall* master").[58] Kidner sees a connection between the choice of words here and in Gen 3:16.[59]

There is some debate on the antecedent of the pronominal suffix. Does it refer to Abel, as in "You shall rule over him"? Or, does it refer to sin, as in "You shall master it"?[60]

ב is used in connection with the verb מׁשל to indicate the object of the verb.[61]

8. וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן – There is much debate about this phrase, since no content of what was spoken is included. Many manuscripts in various languages add what could be translated as, "Let us go out to the field."[62] However, this seems an unnecessary, later addition. וַיֹּאמֶר does not necessarily

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[56] Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 46.

[57] Cf. Joüon, §113m.

[58] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 94, argues for "you *must* rule."

[59] Kidner, *Genesis*, 75.

[60] See Augustine, *City of God*, 60. T. A. Perry, "Cain's Sin in Gen. 4:1–17: Oracular Ambiguity and How to Avoid It," *Proof* 25 (2005), 266, writes, "Irenaeus, for instance, interpreted the ambiguous pronouns as referring to Abel being made subject to Cain's murderous intentions in order to demonstrate who was righteous and who was not." Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 56. Perry adds, "The important ambiguity comes when we wonder whether the pronoun modifying desire should be heard/translated at "its" and "it" (i.e. sin's desire/must master sin) or "his" (i.e. Abel's desire/must master him)…" The masculine pronouns referring to "sin" are most unusual, as is the masculine verb "is couching," since in the Hebrew Bible, *ḥatat,* "sin," always occurs in the feminine gender. And even if the sin is seen as personified, as "lying at the door" like an animal of prey, this is what Cain thinks he hears, in four cryptic and aphoristic pronouncements: If you act correctly, you will benefit from the preeminence of birth. If you do not, sin, [= he, Abel] lies at the door and his desire is towards you; but you must rule over him. It has frequently been pointed out that these last two clauses repeat God's curse to Eve (3:16)."

[61] BDB, s.v. ב, IV, b.

[62] As do some Targummim. See Florentio Garcia Martinez, "Eve's Children in the Targumim," in *Eve's*

require the content of what was said (cf. Gen 22:7, Ex 19:25, 2 Sam 21:2).[63] Wenham points out the possibility that "Let us go into the field" may have been omitted because of the homoeoteleuton with "in the field."[64] It may well be intentional and meaningful that there is no conversation recorded, as it perhaps "point[s] to a connection with the "emptiness" or the lack of recognition of equality with Abel."[65] Regardless, Wenham summarizes,

> Some commentators accept the originality of SamPent, "let us go out into the field"; others have emended or reinterpreted ויאמר "and (Cain) said," to eliminate the need for any words to follow. Gunkel proposes the emendation וימר, and Golka (C. Westermann FS, 63) proposes ויתמרמר "and (Cain) was angry." Cassuto cites a cognate Arabic root to show ויאמר here means "and (Cain) made a rendezvous" with Abel. Dahood (Bib 61 [1981] 90–91) compares Ugaritic ʾamr and Akkadian amāru "to see" and translates "Cain was watching for his brother Abel." It is as easy to suppose that Cain's words were never included: the terseness conveys the feel of the story hastening to its climax; cf. 3:22–23.[66]

בְּהְיוֹתָם – ב + infinitive creates a temporal phrase ("when they were …").[67]

הֶבֶל אָחִיו – In verses 8–9, the author fronts the proper noun, Abel, putting the noun of kinship, (*his*) *brother*, in apposition, though this order is far less common[68] (cf. 4:2).

אֶל־הֶבֶל – This use of אֶל is clearly adversative.[69] Cain rises *against* Abel.

Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions (ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 40. Speiser, *Genesis*, 30, argues, "The original must have contained Cain's statement, but the text was accidentally omitted in the MT."

[63] See, for example, the discussion found in Janowski, "Jenseits von Eden," 279.

[64] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 106. See also Speiser, *Genesis*, 30–31.

[65] Ellen van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study," *JSOT* 52 (1991): 35.

[66] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 106.

[67] Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 179.

[68] Joüon, §131j.

[69] Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 117.

9. הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ – The fourth and final occurrence of these two words together (see above for more discussion). The consistent use of the proper name with the noun of kinship may add to the gross nature of Cain's crime. As if it were not bad enough that Cain rose up against another man to kill him, he rose up to kill *his brother*.[70]

לֹא יָדַעְתִּי – A coldhearted answer in response to Yahweh's question. Cain shows how disconnected from his brother he has truly become. This is in direct opposition to the intimate relationship shared between Adam and Eve in verse 1 where ידע is also used (the sense of the word in verse 9 is, of course, not in any way sexual).

הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי – Cain's question is ironic, in that Yahweh has implied that the answer should be "Yes!" while Cain seems to imply the answer is "No!". If the man, Adam, had been placed in the Garden to "keep" it, how much more should his son, also a worker of the ground, "keep" his brother?![71] Furthermore, the question is often seen as a sarcastic joke referencing Abel's profession of keeping sheep,[72] despite the lack of an explicit use of שמר earlier.

10. מֶה עָשִׂיתָ – Yahweh asks the same question of Eve in 3:13.[73]

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[70] Alter, *Genesis*, 17, makes special note of the use (twice) of the phrases "his brother" and "your brother," uses he labels as the "biblical practice of using thematically fraught relational epithets." See also Vermuelen, "Mind the Gap," 41.

[71] Jørstad, "Ground That Opened Its Mouth," 709, sees a connection to Gen 2:15 in Cain's question, writing, "From the beginning, humans receive a dual responsibility from God, to keep and to work." According to him, keeping the Garden, as well as the ground, is inseparable from 'keeping' one's brother.

[72] E.g. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 44.

[73] Alter, *Genesis*, 18, sees verbal echoes between the 'interrogations' of chapters 3 and 4, which function as "setting up a general biblical pattern in which history is seen as a cycle of approximate and significant recurrences." One example, which may support this claim, comes from Jer 8:6: אֵין אִישׁ נִחָם עַל־רָעָתוֹ לֵאמֹר מֶה עָשִׂיתִי ("No man relents of his evil, saying, "What have I done?" [ESV]).

קוֹל – Joüon argues that the use here is exclamatory, i.e. "Listen!"[74] (reflected in the NIV translation, for example). Since the noun is masculine and singular, there is no way to tell for certain if the noun is absolute (and thus a possible exclamation) or a part of the construct chain. Regardless, whether the focus is on Cain listening or on the 'voice' of Abel's blood, the sound of the cry for justice still comes from Abel's blood, a striking image indeed!

דְּמֵי – This noun, in construct form, while technically plural, has a singular meaning, "blood." However, the plural form often signifies a state of dispersion,[75] as here with the spilled blood. The blood is not in its usual place in the body, and thus is seen in a "plural of result."[76] The Targummim, however, interpret the plural in the sense that Abel's potential descendants are crying out for justice, because they will never be born![77]

אָחִיךָ – Abel's name has now disappeared from the account (as his name has suggested all along). Only his kinship connection to Cain remains.

מִן־הָאֲדָמָה – This phrase has occurred three times already in Genesis, always referring to God forming of drawing life out of the ground.[78] Now, however, the blood of Cain's dead brother is crying out "from the ground." In 4:3, Cain brings his offering "from the fruit of the ground" (מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה), which Yahweh does not regard. Now, Abel's blood cries "from the ground" (מִן־

[74] Joüon, §154fc.

[75] Joüon, §136b.

[76] Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 3.

[77] Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 147.

[78] Jørstad, "Ground That Opened Its Mouth," 711.

הָאֲדָמָה), and Yahweh hears. Alter describes the implied imagery of the ground's 'mouth' taking in the blood as a strongly physical, visceral image which adds to the intensity of the scene.[79]

11. אָרוּר אָתָּה מִן־הָאֲדָמָה – The participle is fronted for emphasis. Though the ground itself had been cursed earlier (3:17), now Cain is cursed *from the ground*.[80] But, what does it mean to be cursed *from the ground?* Scarlata gives three options: 1) More than (comparative with *mem*); 2) Out from (as in the earth is the source of the curse); 3) Separated from.[81] It would seem obvious that the third option makes the most sense, as the first two options make little sense in the context. First, what would it mean for Cain to be cursed 'more than' the ground? Second, curses never come from the ground, but rather from Yahweh or from people.

12. לֹא תֹסֵף תֵּת־כֹּחָהּ – See the first note for verse two. Here, the negative particle is added to the תסף + verb formula. Colloquially, one can translate, "It will no longer give its strength."

נָע וָנָד תִּהְיֶה – These two qal participles with the imperfect form of היה give a durative sense and are usually translated as substantives.[82] The two hollow roots are not equally clear in meaning. The latter (נוד) is much clearer, meaning "wander."[83] The former (נוע) is much less clear, meaning literally "quiver" or "shake," even like in a drunken stupor, but figuratively probably

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[79] Alter, *Genesis*, 18.

[80] Jørstad, "Ground That Opened Its Mouth," 713, writes, "The curse on Cain is not primarily a punishment of the ground; it is, rather, an expression and description of the ground's loyalty to God's will. If humans attempt to use the ground for destructive and noncreative ends, the ground will resist. It will sprout that which humans cannot eat and will refuse to lend its strength to human injustice." Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 33, further points out, "By working the soil and then being cursed from it later, Cain gives the impression of perpetuating the curse on humanity that was delivered to Adam in 3:17–19."

[81] Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 134.

[82] Joüon, §121f.

[83] BDB, s.v. נוד, 1 a.

means unsettled as a vagabond,[84] especially given the context. However, Scarlata points out the likely possibility that these two words form a hendiadys, with a meaning to the effect of "ceaseless wanderer."[85]

בָּאָרֶץ – The first time ארץ is used in chapter four (though not the last), as opposed to אדמה, though it would probably be a stretch to read too much into the word change. If there is a new sense introduced, it may be that Cain's wandering is being pictured with reference to vastness.

13. גָּדוֹל עֲוֹנִי מִנְּשֹׂא – Grammatically and linguistically, this phrase can be, and has been, translated as either "My sin is too great to be forgiven," or, "My punishment is too great to bear" (though, see below for more discussion and possibilities). The meaning of נשׂא can range from 'lift up,' to 'carry,' to 'forgive.'[86] עון can refer either to a sin itself, the guilt of sin, or to the punishment connected with the sin.[87] Luther opts for the former translation,[88] as does LXX (μείζων ἡ αἰτία μου τοῦ ἀφεθῆναί με), while most modern translations (ESV, NIV, RSV, NAS, et al.) opt for the latter, which makes more sense, given the context. [89]

Joüon calls this an "elliptical comparative," with the comparison between an object and

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[84] BDB, s.v. נוּע, 2. Cf. Num 32:13.

[85] Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 137.

[86] BDB, נשׂא, 1, 2, 3.

[87] BDB, עון, 1, 2, 3.

[88] Though, Luther, *Genesis*, 107, notes, "Cain thus acknowledged his sin, though it did not hurt him as much as did the punishment inflicted upon him."

[89] Peels, "World's First Murder, 28, explains, "[The phrase] can mean both "my iniquity is too great to be forgiven" and "my punishment is too great to bear." The former translation could lead to the conclusion that Cain finally confesses his guilt, thus implicitly displaying regret. Although in Hebrew the notions of guilt and punishment are hardly separated, most exegetes rightly think that the latter translation is the better one: nowhere in the story can a suggestion of confession, repentance, or forgiveness be found. In verse 14 Cain laments only the weight of his punishment."

what someone/something else can do.[90] Here, the punishment is "greater than" what Cain is able to bear, thus, "My punishment is too great for me to bear."

14. גֵּרַשְׁתָּ – This *qal* perfect takes on a present sense here ("Today you *are driving* me out…").[91]

Hauser sees a connection to 3:24, where this verb was used earlier, thus giving a parallel between Adam, who was "driven" from his earlier abode to his offense, and Cain, whose crime caused him to be "driven" from the ground. [92]

הַיּוֹם – The article ה retains a weak demonstrative force, which gives הַיּוֹם the sense not of "the day," but "this day," or better, "today."[93]

פְּנֵי – The third and fourth occurrences of פנה (out of five in this section) occur in this verse.

There seems to be an intensification throughout this account, beginning with Cain's face falling (4:5), to Yahweh's question (4:6), to now being driven *from the face of the ground*, and even worse, *from before the face of Yahweh*. If chapter 4 is meant to show the effects of sin as an intensification of chapter 3, then the escalation reaches its climax here, with Cain realizing what it means to be driven away from Yahweh's presence. The echoes of the curses of chapter 3 in chapter 4 are much louder, in a sense, than the original curses themselves.

15. לָכֵן – Though this word most commonly means "therefore," sticking strictly to that meaning makes little sense to begin the sentence. Most modern translations[94] opt for the alternate reading לֹא כֵן, "not so," following LXX (οὐχ οὕτως) and the Vulgate (nequaquam ita fiet). Wenham,

[90] Joüon, §141i.

[91] Joüon, §112f.

[92] Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links," 303.

[93] Joüon, §137f.

[94] See also Speiser, *Genesis*, 31.

following BDB, translates as "This being so,"[95] which retains the *ketiv* while also recognizing the possible nuance of the context. This translation reflects that understanding.

שִׁבְעָתַיִם – The יִם- ending appears dual, but is adverbial here, marking the word as a multiplicative.[96] Thus, "sevenfold."

יֻקָּם – This is apparently a *hophal* form, and the only one related to this verb in the entire Old Testament. The sense is obviously that vengeance will be enacted on whomever would kill Cain.

אוֹת – This is some kind of sign or mark, but no one knows exactly what was placed on Cain.[97] Hauser sees a connection between Cain's mark and the clothing put on Adam and Eve in 3:21.[98] Westermann gives a discussion on the history of interpretation, but concludes, "I agree with those scholars who refuse to give any answer to this question."[99] He is correct to refuse a precise answer, as the text is not clear as to what the mark was.

לְבִלְתִּי – This form gives the sense of negative purpose.[100]

16. נוֹד – The name is clearly connected with the "wandering" (נָד) of Cain in verses 12 and 14.

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[95] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 95.

[96] Joüon, §100o.

[97] Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 180, explains, "In the MT a 'sign' ([*'wth*]) is typically given as an assurance of God's beneficent grace toward humankind or specific individuals (e.g. Gen 9:12; 17:11; Exod 10:1; 12:13; 31:13; Josh 4:6; Isa 38:7). Another common use is within the context of Israel's salvation-history where [*'wth*] and [*mwpth*] ('wonder') are often used as synonyms to denote the almighty power of YHWH to save his people (e.g. Exod 7:3; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; Jer 32:20; Pss 78:43; 135:9; Neh 9:10)."

[98] Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links," 303.

[99] Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 314.

[100] Joüon, §168c; Williams, *Syntax*, 186.

CHAPTER TWO

BAD APPLES: WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH CAIN'S SACRIFICE?

Once again, the interpretations of scholars relating to the question of God's favor of Abel over Cain fit into three broad categories: Cain's sacrifice, Cain's person, and God himself. Of the three categories of interpretation, the former two categories enjoy the bulk of historical interpretative conclusions. As has already been made clear, the text itself, when read especially in the context of Gen 1–11 (and the greater context of Genesis and beyond), is unconcerned with the question posed by readers: Why did God favor Abel and his sacrifice and neglect to regard Cain and his sacrifice? Yet, if the text offers any clues, no matter how small or subtle, towards answering this ancient question, they can be found and an argument made based on how the text describes the sacrifices themselves.

The earliest interpretation, understood as a result of the translation of LXX, points the reader in the direction of a deficient sacrifice. While the issues with some of the interpretive moves will be discussed in detail (and have already been indicated, in some cases, in chapter 1), the argument that Cain brought a deficient sacrifice and Abel a better sacrifice seems to have the most textual support. Whether the deficient sacrifice is itself the problem, or merely a symptom of the deeper problem (more on this in chapter 3), the wording of the text of Gen 4:1–16, especially vv. 3–7, offers a possible solution to the problem: the content of the sacrifices as the key to understanding the answer to the question at hand.

In this chapter, various aspects of the sacrifice itself will be considered. Issues of type, content, timing, quality, and source will be analyzed. However, it is appropriate to begin with the earliest known commentary, which sets the stage for centuries of interpretation.

Was It That Cain Brought A 'Sacrifice' and Not A 'Gift'?

While the text of LXX is itself not technically a commentary *per se*, the fact that it is a translation of the Hebrew Bible make it a *de facto* commentary on the text. As it is with any translation, decisions are made which affect a reader's interpretation. Perhaps nowhere is this made clearer than in the fourth chapter of Genesis. Genesis 4:3–5a reads as follows in the MT:

וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ יָמִים וַיָּבֵא קַיִן מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה מִנְחָה לַיהוָה: וְהֶבֶל הֵבִיא גַם־הוּא מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאנוֹ וּמֵחֶלְבֵהֶן
וַיִּשַׁע יְהוָה אֶל־הֶבֶל וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ: וְאֶל־קַיִן וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה

"Now in the course of time Cain brought from the fruit of the ground an offering to Yahweh. But Abel, he also brought [an offering] from the firstborn of his flock, specifically some of their fatty parts. And Yahweh regarded Abel and his offering, but Cain and his offering he did not regard."

In comparison, Gen 4:3–5a of LXX reads as such:

καὶ ἐγένετο μεθ᾽ ἡμέρας ἤνεγκεν Καιν ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν τῆς γῆς θυσίαν τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ Αβελ ἤνεγκεν καὶ αὐτὸς ἀπὸ τῶν πρωτοτόκων τῶν προβάτων αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν στεάτων αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπεῖδεν ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ Αβελ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς δώροις αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ δὲ Καιν καὶ ἐπὶ ταῖς θυσίαις αὐτοῦ οὐ προσέσχεν.

"And it happened after days [that] Cain brought from the fruits of the earth a ***sacrifice*** to the Lord, and Abel, also he himself, brought from the firstborn of his flocks and from the their fatty portions. And God *regarded* Abel and his ***gifts*** but he *did not pay attention* to Cain or his ***sacrifices***."

By and large, LXX translates the text of the MT in Gen 4 quite literally. However, there are a couple changes of note. First, whereas the text of the MT uses שׁעה in verses 4 and 5, LXX translates with εφοραω in verse 4 and προσεχω in verse 5 (these changes are marked by the italics). Much more relevant to the question at hand, though, is the translation of the word מנחה. The word is used three times in vv. 3–5 to describe what *both* Cain and Abel brought to the Lord. Despite this, LXX again uses two different words (marked by bolded italics). In translating what

Cain brought to the Lord, LXX uses θυσια ("sacrifice"), but in relation to what Abel brought, the word is δωρον ("gift"). It is likely that LXX is attempting to make a clear distinction between the type of gifts brought by each brother.[1]

Why is this the case? A brief glance at the uses of the words in the MT and LXX is appropriate. Throughout the Old Testament, the word מנחה can be translated with either θυσια or δωρον. In Genesis specifically,

> δῶρον is used as a translation for מנחה only ten times, one of which is to describe Abel's offering (Gen 4:5). In the other nine cases when מנחה is translated by δῶρον the occasion is not one of sacrifice, but of gifts made in offers of peace like that of Jacob to Esau and to Joseph by his brothers in Egypt. θυσία, on the other hand, only translates מנחה twice in Greek Genesis, both of which refer to Cain's offering (4:3, 5).[2]

Genesis itself offers little assistance, then, in understanding the discrepancy in interpretation. However, looking at the Old Testament as a whole offers at least some insight into possible explanations. When glancing at all the instances of מנחה throughout the entire Old Testament, LXX rarely translates the word with anything but θυσιαν. In a sacrificial setting, δωρον is usually the word of choice for the translation of קרבן. Based solely on these facts, it seems odd why LXX would use two words to translate מנחה in the same context, unless there was specific commentary being made on the difference between sacrifices, namely that one was somehow more acceptable than another.

Yet, verses 6 and 7 of Gen 4 might shed more light on the matter.

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[1] There is the possibility, of course, that the translators of LXX preferred to use two words in an effort to offer stylistic variation, while the author of the MT of Gen 4 preferred the same word. Given the context, however, this possibility seems less likely, and the likelihood of intentional distinction more likely.

[2] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition,* 41–42.

> A much clearer case occurs in verses 6 and 7. God is talking to Cain, and in the Masoretic version seems to leave undecided whether Cain actually offered a wrong sacrifice. 'Why are you angry', it reads, 'and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door.' The Septuagint, however, replaces these options by a twofold formula which makes it clear that Cain's fault is not in the offering itself but in its division: 'Why have you become very sorrowful and why has your countenance fallen? Have you not sinned if you have brought it rightly, but not rightly divided it?' It is hard to know exactly what 'divided' means here, but it seems clear that, whether or not it was of a ritual manner, Cain did indeed made [sic] a serious mistake.[3]

The argument of LXX can be understood, then, as an argument not of quality, but one of ritual misstep. If the inference from the text of LXX is correct, the interpretation becomes one focused on rightly *dividing* a θυσια ("sacrifice")[4] and not about failing to offer a δωρον ("gift").[5]

This is important for at least two reasons. First, if the inference were simply that a δωρον were preferred over a θυσία, then there would be a confounding lack of evidence to the point. For starters, the text describes no command for a sacrifice, no ritual direction, nor any other details. Cain simply brings a sacrifice after a set time, while Abel also brings an offering to the Lord. Furthermore, if the MT wanted to make a distinction between the two gifts, there are other words available (e.g. קרבן). Second, the later sacrificial system provides for all kinds of sacrifices as being acceptable, even commanded. For example, consider the beginning of Leviticus:

> Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering (קרבן/δωρον) to the LORD, you shall bring your offering (קרבן/δωρον) of livestock from the herd or from the flock. If his offering (קרבן/δωρον) is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the

[3] Tom Hilhorst, "Abel's Speaking in Hebrews 11:4 and 12:24," in *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions* ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 120.

[4] Joel N. Lohr, "Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain: Genesis 4:1–16 in the Masoretic Text, The Septuagint, and the New Testament," *CBQ* 71 (2009): 487, offers an understanding from Philo, who says that a "sacrifice" is divided, while a "gift" is offered whole.

[5] Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 56, writes, "Maybe in that [*thusia*] was used mainly for cultic rituals, and thus God rejected it because it was not 'rightly divided' or given (4:7)." Philo writes similarly, but his interpretation will be discussed in chapter 3, due to his conclusion being based on Cain's virtue (or lack thereof) and not simply on the dividing of the sacrifice itself.

> entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. (Lev 1:2–4 ESV)

As the reader can see, the animal sacrifice is called a gift/offering (קרבן/δωρον) and said to be an acceptable sacrifice. However, in the next chapter, the text reads:

> When anyone brings a grain offering (קרבן/δωρον) as an offering (מנחה/θυσια) to the LORD, his offering (קרבן/δωρον) shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn his as its memorial portion on the altar, a food offering (אשׁה/θυσια) with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. But the rest of the grain offering (מנחה/θυσια) shall be for Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the LORD's food offerings (אשׁה/θυσια). When you bring a grain offering (קרבן/δωρον) baked in the oven as an offering (מנחה/θυσια), it shall be unleavened loaves of fine flour mixed with oil or unleavened wafers smeared with oil. And if your offering (מנחה/θυσια) is a grain offering (קרבן/δωρον) baked on a griddle, it shall be of fine flour unleavened, mixed with oil. You shall break it in pieces and pour oil on it; it is a grain offering (Lev 2:1–6 ESV).

What does all of this mean? First, these chapters show that in later sacrificial law, both meat offerings and grain offerings are commanded and regulated. To make a distinction between a 'sacrifice' and a 'gift' based on the content of the sacrifices would be irresponsible. Second, both 'sacrifices' and 'gifts' are commanded and acceptable to the Lord. Third, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, or at least in the same context.[6] Therefore, LXX almost certainly goes too far by attempting to distinguish the gifts as much as they do (if, indeed, that is the intention), based on the MT.

[6] Bruce K. Waltke, "Cain and His Offering" *WTJ* 48 (1986), 371, states, "Elsewhere Yahweh rejected the *gifts* (emphasis added) of Korah (Num 16:15), Saul's men (1 Sam 26:19), and apostate Israel (Isa 1:13), not because of some blemish in their offering, but because of their deformed characters."

Was It That Cain's Timing Was Wrong and Abel's Right?

However, the Lord still has regard for one and not the other. Perhaps there is another option. The sacrifices themselves are, obviously, different. Cain brings from the fruit of the ground, while Abel brings from his flocks. One is a grain or vegetable offering the other is of animals. Why might this matter? One option has to do with timing.[7] Targum Pseudo-Jonathan translates Cain's sacrifice as "seed of flax" and sets in on the fourteenth of Nisan.[8] This would connect the offering with the time of the Passover, during which the people of Israel were told to bring lambs without blemish (cf. Exod 12:5–6). Thus, though Cain's sacrifice would normally have been acceptable, it was the right sacrifice at the wrong time. In other words, Cain didn't bring a substandard sacrifice, but simply the wrong sacrifice for the occasion.

The problems with such a view are obvious. First, the Passover is never in view, as it will first be occurring far into the future. Second, the law of Moses has, again, not yet been given. None of the commands or regulations have been spelled out for Cain and Abel. Finally, there is again no explicit command to bring one type of sacrifice or another. Indeed, when the Lord speaks to Cain after disregarding him and his sacrifice, he only asks that Cain "do well."

Was It That Cain Brought Something Lifeless and Abel Something Living?

Another possibility has to do not with timing, but with the offering of a living being. With his understanding of the text as a reflection of early Israelite religion, Skinner writes, "This myth indicates that God loves the shepherd and the offering of flesh, but as far as the farmer and the

[7] A. C. Geljon, "Philonic Elements in Didymus the Blind's Exegesis of the Story of Cain and Abel," *VC* 61 (2007): 293, points out that both Philo and Didymus argue that part of the problem for Cain is that he delayed in bringing the proper offering to Yahweh, based on the initial words of verse 3. Jack Lewis, "The Offering of Abel (Gen 4:4): A History of Interpretation" *JETS* 37 (1994): 488, adds that Ambrose also argues this, though it is one of Cain's many problems, which run much deeper (more on this in chapter 3).

[8] Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 72.

fruits of the field are concerned, He will have none of them."[9] In other words, Yahweh preferred sacrifices of blood. LaCocque refined this point when he wrote:

> Strikingly, Cain's offering is soulless – in the biblical sense that understands the soul as in the blood (see Lev 17:11; Deut 12:23), while Abel offers a living animal. This difference is not what makes one sacrifice agreeable and the other not, but the discrete ingredients are reflections of the distinct worlds in which the two brothers are actually living (see Matt 12:35). In the sight of God, one is preferred to the other.[10]

LaCocque's Old Testament references both describe life as being in the blood. However, his reference to Matt 12:35 is intriguing. Jesus says, "The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil" (ESV). The context of Jesus' words have nothing to do with sacrifice or offering, and everything to do with speaking words of truth. The reference itself seems out of context. But, to the point being made, it is impossible to argue from Gen 4, or from the greater context of the entirety of the Torah, that an animal sacrifice is somehow preferred over a grain sacrifice. As Waltke argues,

> Shackled by his presuppositions of source criticism and lacking the modern tools of literary criticism (sometimes called "rhetorical criticism"), [Skinner] interpreted the story in the light of hypothetical "first hearers" instead of the readers of the Pentateuch to whom the text in hand was addressed.[11]

The only instance when blood might be relevant would be sacrifices of atonement[12] (see Exod 29:36–37, for example). Waltke furthers his argument against this idea by offering a concise study on the vocabulary of sacrifice, writing, "By using *minha*, Moses virtually excludes the

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[9] John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 106.

[10] André LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocence: Cain, Abel, and the Yahwist* (Eugene: Cascade, 2008), 25.

[11] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 364.

[12] Quinones, *Changes of Cain*, 11, writes, "The brothers are suited to represent not only individuals in contention but individuals with basically different attitudes toward the very conditions of existence. For instance, when confronted with the facts of existence that blood sacrifice seems to typify, Abel and his followers and heirs separate themselves and seek out purification in atonement."

possibility that God did not look on Cain's offering because it was bloodless."[13] Even more, "Of the many expressions for presentations to God which were available to Moses, he could not have used a more misleading term if this were his intended meaning."[14] Bruce points out, "A more recent variation on these accounts sees the distinction in that Abel's offering involved the shedding of blood, apart from which, as [the author of Hebrews] has said above, the law knows no forgiveness (Heb. 9:22)."[15] However, there is again no indication in the Genesis text for the occasion being one of a sacrifice of atonement specifically.[16] Furthermore, "the material of the offering was suitable to the offerer's vocation."[17] Cain is offering what he produces, and Abel what he produces.

Was It That Cain Brought Something Produced by Force and Abel Something That Grew of Itself According to the Natural, God-made Processes?

Another interpretation relates to the work done by Cain and Abel respectively, though not to their professions *per se*.[18] Instead, the focus of Cain's rejection has to do with how he does the work of a farmer. Byron, in summarizing commentary from Philo, explains that Cain is not a famer (γεωργός) in the best sense. Rather, he is described as "one who works the ground" (ἐργαζόμενος τὴν γῆν), perhaps implying that Cain forces produce from the earth instead of nurturing it.[19] Josephus agrees, arguing that Cain turned farming into something evil by plowing

[13] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 366.

[14] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 368.

[15] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 282.

[16] Bruce, *Hebrews*, 282, correctly points out, "There is nowhere suggested in Genesis that this was a sin offering."

[17] Bruce, *Hebrews*, 281.

[18] See discussion under the subtitle, "Was It because Cain Was a Farmer and Abel a Shepherd?" in chapter three.

[19] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 34.

and thus violating the natural order.[20] Joel Litke takes it even farther, comparing the lifestyles of Abel and Cain, as well as how they approach their professions:

> As shepherd, Abel was likely a tranquil and peaceful man, passive and embracing the environment as it was, with no special incentive to impose his will and skill on the earth, but accepting it as a given. He left the condition of the soil largely untouched, drawing from it only what it yielded on its own. His flock, however, he attended to solicitously, and cared for it with tenderness. Relieved of physical toil, he had the time and will to meditate upon the greatness of God, to Whom he brought his choicest sheep for an offering. In harmony with God and nature, he was emulated, at least in their maturing years, by Jacob, Moses and David. In striking contrast was Cain's character. As farmer, he was of necessity active and intrusive and non-accepting of the natural given state of the earth. He deliberately imposed his will and strength upon a reluctant soil, cultivating and nurturing it to give more. He challenged the land to yield its potential, so that he could eat his bread in comfort, variety and abundance. In the process, he learned which land is arable, which crop plantable and in which season to sow and reap. He would note the weather patterns and their effect on the soil, and so acquired the rudimentary principles of meteorology. Bent under back-breaking labor, he or his successors would come to invent tools and instruments to ease their work, and thus initiate the progress of civilization. Of greatest impact on his psychological makeup is the image he had of himself. Bringing forth new and varied crops and forms, he saw himself as creator and producer, vying with God Himself. The risk, however, is that in this mood he would become arrogant and intolerant, expressing his insolence to God and murdering his brother, committing thereby the two cardinal sins.[21]

This, then, is less an argument about profession or virtue[22] *per se* as it is an argument about how one goes about bringing forth produce, whether living or not, from the earth. As the argument goes, tilling or plowing the soil is an act that violates the natural order[23] by forcing the earth to

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[20] *Ant. 1.53*: "Now, the two brethren were pleased with different courses of life, for Abel, the younger, was a lover of righteousness, and, believing that God was present at all his actions, he excelled in virtue; and his employment was that of a shepherd. But Cain was not only very wicked in other respects, but was wholly intent upon getting; and he first contrived to plough the ground." *Ant. 1.54–55*: "Now Cain brought the fruits of the earth, and of his husbandry; but Abel brought milk, and the firstfruits of his flocks; but God was more delighted with the latter oblation, when he was honored with what grew naturally of its own accord, than he was with what was the invention of a covetous man, and gotten by forcing the ground; whence it was that Cain was very angry that Abel was preferred by God before him; and he slew his brother, and hid his dead body, thinking to escape discovery." See also Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 34.

[21] Joel Litke, "The Messages of Chapter 4 of Genesis," *JBQ* 31 (2003): 198–99.

[22] See discussion under the subtitle, "Was It because Cain Was Greedy and Abel Generous?" in chapter three.

[23] Rogerson, *Genesis 1–11*, 67, writes, "The created order is not a machine that functions regardless of the

bend to one's will, instead of letting the natural processes set up by God take their course. Instead of relying on God to bring forth rain at the proper time and growth in its due course, man, beginning with Cain, began to force its will and desire upon the earth and upon the natural order by tilling and plowing.

The problem with this interpretation is twofold. First, to make an argument based on the word for farmer (γεωργος) itself is weak, at best. The word is used only eight times in LXX, while its corresponding word in Hebrew (אכר) is used only seven.[24] Even more, γεωργος itself can have a negative context, meaning something like forced labor (cf. Gen 49:15). To make a good-bad distinction between γεωργος and εργαζομενος την γην is simply not tenable. Second, Cain, who is described as a "worker of the ground" (עבר אדמה/εργαζομενος την γην), is not thus painted in a negative light because of it. The phrase itself can be neutral, or even positive, throughout the Scriptures. For example, in Gen 2:5, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work (עבר/εργαζομαι) it and keep it" (ESV). The same words are used in 2:15.[25] Cain, then, is simply described as his father Adam, whom Yahweh himself put in the Garden to work the ground. Arguing that Cain's sacrifice was rejected because it was somehow forced from the ground apart from either the natural order or the clear will and command of the Lord cannot stand up in light of clear evidence from the immediate context of Gen 1–11 and the greater context of the Old Testament.

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behaviour of human beings...[Gen 3–4] expresses the conviction of Old Testament faith that to believe in creation is to believe in an order in which human relationships play their part."

[24] Not every instance matches up. אכר is not always translated as γεωργος. Only in Jer 14:4, 31:24, 51:23; Joel 1:11; Amos 5:16 are the two words connected.

[25] See also Gen 9:20, where Noah is described as a "man of the ground" (איש האדמה/γεωρος γης).

That does not mean that the ground is not important in this discussion, however. In recent years, some scholars have begun favoring a more unified textual approach to interpreting the accounts found in the first eleven chapters in Genesis. One such thread involves the ground. The word for ground, אדמה, occurs twenty-seven times in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Six of those occurrences come in chapter four alone. Only the word 'brother,' occurs more in chapter four.[26] The importance of the ground cannot be overstated. In chapter two, Yahweh creates the first man from the dust of the ground (2:7), which he had made appear from the primordial and chaotic waters on day three of creation (1:9–10). Man will eat the fruits of plants and green leafy plans for food (1:29–30), plants which all grow from the ground from which man was created. God then placed the man in the Garden to work the ground and keep it (2:15).[27] So it was, when the first man and woman fell into sin, it was the ground that was cursed to bring forth thorns and thistles (3:17–18). It should come as no surprise, then, that the ground will continue to play a role in chapter four.

Noting the prevalence of the ground's role[28] from creation, through the Fall, into the Flood and beyond, some scholars, like Frank Spina, have argued that understanding Yahweh's favor and disfavor in Gen 4 requires interpreting in light of what is going on with the ground. Spina writes,

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[26] Peter F. Lockwood, "Reading the Cain and Abel Story from the Angle of the Earth," *LTJ* 46 (2012): 106.

[27] Spina, "'Ground' for Cain's Rejection," 325, points out, "A human worker was as necessary to the sustaining of vegetation as something which was solely the result of divine action: rain. Adam the tiller did not strictly speaking produce the vegetation or even plant it initially. God did that (Gen 2,8). But clearly Adam the tiller was indispensable for *maintaining* the garden. And presumably he would plant future gardens. One could hardly imagine a more strategic role for a human actor to play."

[28] Lockwood, "Reading the Cain and Abel Story," 106, writes, "It is said that traditional scholarship has not paid enough attention to the role that the Earth plays in the biblical text in general and in this story in particular."

> The contention of this essay is that God's rejection of Cain and acceptance of Abel is not related to the brothers' religious deportment, the quality of their offerings, liturgical performance, occupational preference, or mere arbitrariness. Rather, Cain had a special relationship to the *adamah*, one which he shared with his father Adam. But because the *adamah* was cursed, God refused Cain's offering. Cain was unable to cope with God's action, even though it did not constitute condemnation per se, and in anger murdered his brother. As a result, he was cursed »from the ground« and condemned to a life of wandering.[29]

To make his contention, Spina points out that "Yahweh initially rejected but did not condemn Cain, a substantial difference."[30] Even more, "At this point in the episode, Cain has not yet sinned and Yahweh has not condemned him as a sinner."[31] Because Cain has done nothing particularly wrong, and because the Lord offers Cain an opportunity to do well (2:7), Spina concludes that the focus of the issue is, in fact, Cain's offering after all.[32] However, it cannot be because of any of the reasons otherwise put forth. Instead, he argues that, because of the reoccurring and central theme of the *adamah*, Yahweh must have initially rejected Cain's offering because it was brought from the ground,[33] which had just been cursed one chapter before.[34] Furthermore, as references to the ground encapsulate the story, Cain's separation from

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[29] Spina, "'Ground' for Cain's Rejection," 332. See also Gary A. Herion, "Why God Rejected Cain's Offering: The Obvious Answer," in *Fortunate the Eyes That See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman* ed. Astrid B. Beck et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 52–65.

[30] Spina, "'Ground' for Cain's Rejection," 321.

[31] Spina, "'Ground' for Cain's Rejection," 322.

[32] Spina, "'Ground' for Cain's Rejection," 323.

[33] Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links," 300, agrees, furthering the argument by connecting another theme: Cain brings from the "fruit" of the ground, the same word used of what Eve takes from the serpent before the Fall.

[34] William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 165, concurs, writing, "On the one hand, Yahweh is in part the culprit, playing a decisive role in preserving the ethos of the curse, rather than of blessing, by rejecting Cain's gift. On the other hand, the seemingly arbitrary nature of Cain's rejection and Abel's approval is illusory. As conflict is built into the very morphology of kinship relationships, so the rejection of the ground's firstfruits is featured in the moral topography of the Yahwist's landscape. Outside the garden, Cain presented an offering from the fruit of the *cursed* ground that was, as a result, deemed unworthy. The cursed ground is the bane of Cain's vocation in more ways than one. In a land of lack, enmity and competition find fertile opportunity to reign."

the ground becomes all the more severe,[35] tying the story together in chapter 4, as well as connecting it with chapter 3.

Unfortunately, Spina's hypothesis is hardly convincing and, in the end, lacks strong evidence. In fourteen pages, Spina really offers no substantiation for his claim, other than the prevalence of the *adamah* thread. While it is true that the theme permeates chapters 1–11, that fact in itself does not explain Yahweh's favor and disfavor for the sacrifices brought. When paying close attention to the grammar and syntax of the text, the reader will note that, in verse four, the inclusion of גַּם could be understood to emphasize the similarity between what Abel did/brought and what Cain did/brought.[36] One of the most obvious arguments against Spina's hypothesis, though, is that, while Abel brought animals and was favored, the animals themselves eat from the fruit of the ground, which would seem to taint them if it were true that God wanted to have nothing to do with offerings from the fruit of the ground.[37] Miller adds, "In the Cain and Abel story the *adamah* motif has its most intense expression. The whole narrative can be seen as revolving around the relation between the *adam* and *adamah*. It is that theme that makes it difficult to read the story as an endorsement of one mode of life and culture over another."[38] Breitbart, going even farther, writes,

> "Each of the brothers brought a product of the occupation in which he was engaged. They could not do otherwise. On this basis, one could reason that Cain's offering was much more important in that it was the fruit of his hard labor, since God had cursed

[35] Jørstad, "Ground That Opened Its Mouth," 709.

[36] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 94. See further discussion below.

[37] See, for example, Fretheim, *Creation, Fall, and Flood*, 78.

[38] Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Genesis 1–11: Studies in Structure and Theme*, (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1978), 39.

> the ground when He punished Adam. Abel's tending the sheep required no such hard labor. One might then expect that God would prefer Cain's offering."[39]

LaCocque summarizes the main arguments against Spina in this way:

> "The [thesis that the rejection of Cain is based on his offering being from the cursed ground] must be rejected on three grounds. Cain's offering is not refused but only less favored. The vegetable sacrifices in the Bible are never problematic. And the soil is cursed *for Cain* only *after* the fratricide. In fact, Cain himself becomes cursed *from* the ground; and the soil that had already lost much of its fertility (3:17), now refuses to the slayer in a second degree what remains of its fecundity."[40]

Was It That Cain Brought 'Some' and Abel The 'Best'?

Perhaps the easiest interpretation to argue from the text, though, is also one of the simplest. When reading the text of Gen 4:3–4a closely, any reader may come to the conclusion that there is, in fact, a distinction made between the two sacrifices. The distinction is not so much that one is living and one not, nor is it an issue of the source (ground or otherwise). Rather, the reader is quick to notice the difference in the detail used to describe the two sacrifices. Cain is said to have brought an offering "from the fruit of the ground" (מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה), while Abel brought "from the firstborn of his flock, specifically some of their fatty parts" (מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאנוֹ וּמֵחֶלְבֵהֶן). Though the difference is only two words compared to three in the MT, one can argue fairly easily that the text is implying a qualitative difference.[41] In fact, this is what some later Rabbis inferred.[42]

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[39] Sidney Breitbart, "The Cain and Abel Narratives: Problems and Lessons," *JBQ* 32 (2003), 122–3. However, Herion, "Why God Rejected Cain's Offering," 64, bizarrely argues that the reason agricultural offerings are accepted later in Israel is because the curse has been lifted after the Flood of Noah. But, there is nothing in Gen 9 to indicate that the curse has somehow been lifted from the ground. Indeed, practical experience in this world reminds any reader of thorns, thistles, famine, and other such results of the Curse and Fall.

[40] LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocent*, 20.

[41] Greidanus, "Preaching Christ," 391, argues, "Why did God look favorably on Abel and his offering and not favorably on Cain and his offering? The Israelites would have known the answer instinctively. Abel obeyed God's instruction, which called for an offering of the very best: the firstborn, a perfect specimen, including especially the fat portions for burning on the altar. By obeying God, Abel showed total dedication to the Lord, giving Him the very best."

[42] Genesis Rabbah, (Freedman, H. and Maurice Simon (translators); London: Soncino, 1939), 182, observes,

In modern times, Walter Brueggemann has noted this difference, arguing that Abel brought of the best of his flocks, while Cain brought only some of what he harvested.[43] John Byron agrees, expanding on Brueggemann's argument:

> Though it is not spelled out, the more detailed description of Abel's offering is usually taken by modern commentators to provide the reason God was pleased with his sacrifice. The care used by the author to describe Abel's offering as being from among the choice of his flock echoes biblical mandates for such (Exod 22:28–29; 34:19–20; Lev 3:16; Deut 32:38; Ps 147:14). The obvious conclusion, based on the descriptions offered, is that Cain's sacrifice was defective, since, unlike Abel's, it was not taken from the choicest part of the harvest.[44]

The argument, then, is that because the text uses more detail to describe Abel's sacrifice, the offering itself was better than Cain's.[45] Waltke points to the vocabulary and syntax of vv. 4–5:

> The storyteller intends to contrast Abel's offering with Cain's by paralleling "Cain brought some" with "Abel brought some," by adding with Abel, "even he" (gam hu') (v. 4), and by juxtaposing in a chiastic construction the LORD's acceptance of Abel and his gift with his rejection of Cain and his gift (vv 4b–5a).[46]

This is not the only evidence in the text. After Yahweh refuses to regard Cain or his sacrifice, he says to Cain, "If you would do well, will there not [be] a lifting up? But, if you would not do well, sin will lie down at the door. Its longing is for you, but you yourself must rule over it" (4:7). Though, as has already been discussed, this verse presents some grammatical and syntactical challenges, the thrust of the statement seems to point the reader to the fact that Cain has fallen short and needs to do better. The most natural understanding of what needs to be done

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"Cain brought of the fruit of the ground: of the inferior crops, he being like a bad tenant who eats the first ripe figs but honours the king with the late figs."

[43] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 56. See also Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 16.

[44] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 40. See also Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 50.

[45] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 368, stresses, "Abel's sacrifice, the interlocutor aims to say, passed that test with flying colors. Cain's sacrifice, however, lacks a parallel to 'fat.'"

[46] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 368.

well would be a better sacrifice.[47]

Yet, many scholars disagree. With restraint, Cassuto attempts to walk a line between recognizing the difference in descriptions while also arguing that the difference is not, in itself, the reason for God's favor or disfavor.

> In Abel's case the Bible uses two expressions to emphasize that the oblation was the best of its kind…this distinction is not made pointlessly. On the other hand, it must be noted that although there is a *distinction*, there is not *contrast*. Apparently the Bible wished to convey that whilst Abel was concerned to choose the finest thing in this possession, Cain was indifferent. In other words: Abel endeavoured to perform his religious duty ideally, whereas Cain was content merely to discharge this duty.[48]

In other words, the reason for God's favor for Abel has more to do with his intention and less to do with the sacrifice *per se*, with the same true in the negative for Cain.[49] Edenburg's argument is much stronger.

> This short word, *too* ([גַּם]), is significant, for not only does it characterize Abel as a 'copycat,' but it also allows us to infer that Cain's offering was comprised of the firstfruits, just as Abel's was of the firstborn. According to this reading, there is not anything intrinsically better about Abel's offering, and YHWH's rejection of Cain's firstfruits is arbitrary.[50]

Her argument moves from later in the text to earlier, positing a textual connection between the description of Abel's sacrifice and Cain's one verse prior. While possible, this understanding

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[47] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 368–9, sees echoes of this playing out in the life of the people of Israel: "By offering the firstborn Abel signified that he recognized God as the Author and Owner of Life. In common with the rest of the ancient Near East, the Hebrews believed that the deity, as lord of the manor, was entitled to the first share of all produce. The firstfruits of plant and the firstborn of animals and man were his. The LORD demonstrated that he gave Egypt its life and owned it by taking its firstborn. Israel's gifts from the animals involved those that open the womb (Exod 13:2, 12; 34:19) and gifts from the ground had to be the "firstfruits" (*bikkurim*) (Deut 26:1–11).20 Abel's offering conformed with this theology; Cain's did not. In such a laconic story the interpreter may not ignore that whereas Abel's gift is qualified by "firstborn," the parallel "firstfruits" does not modify Cain's… Abel's sacrifice represents acceptable, heartfelt worship; Cain's represents unacceptable tokenism."

[48] Cassuto, *Commentary*, 205.

[49] This idea will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

[50] Cynthia Edenburg, "From Eden to Babylon: Reading Genesis 2–4 as a Paradigmatic Narrative," in *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneateuch* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 159. The idea of Yahweh's arbitrariness will be discussed at length in chapter four.

seems unlikely, as the absence of the descriptor in relation to Cain's offering is conspicuous and should not be assumed, despite the appearance of *gam* in the text.[51]

Again, if any argument could be said to have the most textual evidence, it would be that Abel's offering was simply of a better quality, the implication being that he offered the best of his flock to Yahweh, while Cain simply went through the motions by bringing *from* (some of?) the fruit of the ground. However convincing this might be, and however convenient for the reader, the biggest issue with this interpretation is that it is an argument from silence. While the difference in descriptions may imply a difference in the quality of sacrifices, that fact proves nothing. Furthermore, when looking at the remainder of the text, the evidence in favor of the argument can be explained in other ways. For example, when Yahweh speaks to Cain about "doing good," it could mean any number of things. And, as the next two chapters will reveal, there are still plenty of other interpretive options left on the table. After all, verses 4–5 of chapter 4 seem to show that it was not simply the offerings the Lord regarded, but also the brothers themselves.

[51] It may be the that appearance of *gam* simply compares the brothers' acts of bringing (i.e. "Abel also brought") and not necessarily the equating of what was brought.

CHAPTER THREE

BAD APPLE: WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH CAIN HIMSELF?

This review of the history of interpretation will now shift from Cain and Abel's sacrifices to Cain and Abel as people. Despite the new interpretive category discussed in this chapter, the sacrifices themselves do not become somehow unimportant in the following interpretations. Many scholars and theologians have, throughout the centuries, still recognized a supposed difference between the sacrifices. However, as will become evident, these writers reject the idea that the difference in sacrifices was *the* reason why God regarded Abel and not Cain. The sacrifices themselves become evidence that there is something deeper and much more sinister, something hidden, which only God himself could see.

In this chapter, various interpretations will be discussed and analyzed. Issues of Cain and Abel's origin, their professions, their virtue, and their faithfulness will help to shape the discussion of the question of why God regarded Abel and not Cain. The question for this chapter, then, is this: Did God reject Cain and accept Abel because of who they were as people?

Was It That Cain was Evil, A Son of the Devil, and Abel Righteous? (Origin)

Ancient Jewish traditions attempt to answer the questions surrounding Cain and Abel by appealing to mythical lore surrounding the story. The traditions reveal Cain's supposed sinister origins, which are much different than what any reader would first assume when reading the text of Gen 4. Byron explains, "In some traditions, Eve had relations with the devil (or someone else)…Cain, thus, becomes, quite literally, the "son of the devil."[1] Cain is said to be the son not of Adam, but of the Serpent himself, who is said to be the devil. Such traditions are reflected, for

[1] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 17.

example, in Targum Pseudo Jonathan, which declares that Adam is not Cain's father.[2] Cain's actions in Gen 4, then, would have been consistent with his origin as a son of the Serpent, who tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden. His missteps in bringing the offering, as well as the later murder of his brother, would have simply been consistent with his character.[3]

To make this understanding work with the text, the targumim reinterpret what it means for Adam to have "known" (ידע) his wife Eve.[4] Instead of understanding the term as a euphemism for sexual relations, the targummim argue that Adam "knowing" Eve meant that he found out that she had slept with someone else.[5] Verse 2 is reinterpreted so that Abel, who was "born" (ילד) after Cain, was the true physical son of Adam and Eve after Cain's conception and birth. Abel, then, is the righteous son of the first man and woman, while Cain is the wicked son of a devil, who was the serpent.

Along with Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and other targumim, other mythical understandings arise around the first several centuries after Christ. A Qumram poem, for example, describes Eve as "one who is pregnant of the serpent."[6] Some early Christian traditions are said to have a

[2] Tg. Ps.-J, n.p. "And Adam knew Hava his wife, who had desired the Angel; and she conceived, and bare Kain; and she said, I have acquired a man, the Angel of the Lord."

[3] Hayward, "What Did Cain Do Wrong?", 117–18, writes that Pseudo-Jonathan actually lists four reasons for God's disregard for Cain: 1) Cain is the son of the evil angel Samael; 2) Cain brought the wrong offering at the wrong time; 3) Cain unlawfully mixed sacrifices that were meant to be kept separate; 4) Cain denied the order of creation and God's commands. However, the latter three reasons all occur because of Cain's origin as a son of a devil, the evil angel Samael, who had taken the form of a serpent, tempted Adam and Eve, and also had relations with Eve.

[4] This reinterpretation ignores the clear use of ידע *twice more* to mean sexual intercourse later in vv. 17 and 25 in Gen 4. See further discussion below.

[5] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 17.

[6] Martinez, "Eve's Children in the Targumim," 27.

similar understanding. Scholars will point to 1 John 3:12,[7] especially in connection to John 8:44,[8] as evidence of an early Christian tradition that matched with contemporary Jewish myth and legend revolving around Cain's wicked origin as the son of a devil.[9]

The implication of the text, though, is quite clear, both to native Hebrew readers and to English readers. When Adam "knew" Eve, it meant that he had sexual relations with her. This is why, in immediate succession, the words "knew" (ידע), "conceived," (הרה), and "bore" (ילד) appear, not to mention the use twice more of ידע clearly to mean sexual relations later in Gen 4:17 and 4:25. Cain is plainly a son of Adam and Eve, just as is his brother Abel. However, this makes the point of the text all the more powerful. After the Fall of Adam and Eve, when the sin had been something seemingly innocuous like eating fruit from a forbidden tree, the escalation of sin happens so quickly *in the sons of man*. Sin intensifies rapidly, resulting in the first murder just a generation after Adam and Eve, confirming the corruption of a human nature that continually refuses to listen to the Word of God (cf. Gen 4:6–7).

Was It That Cain Was A Farmer and Abel A Shepherd? (Occupation)

The understanding of the *targumim* is obviously the stuff of legend and myth. But, the text

[7] "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous." (ESV)

[8] "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (ESV)

[9] Martinez, "Eve's Children in the Targumim," 27. All of this, of course, ignores the context of John 8 and 1 John 3. For example, in John 8:44, Jesus is quite obviously speaking figuratively when describing the Jewish leaders, who had challenged Jesus' authority (8:13). Jesus does not believe that the leaders are physically sons of the devil. His point is that they are doing the works of the devil, whose word they are following. 1 John 3:12 is much the same. The point John is making has to do with evil deeds flowing out of an evil heart, not a literal son of the devil doing what a son of the devil would be expected to do. More than anything, John's point has more to say about human nature than it does anything else. The only way any person – Abel included – can love and abide in God's Word (3:24) is because that person has been called a child of God (3:1) and has been first loved by God (4:19).

of Gen 4 does make a clear distinction between the brothers, who are both clearly sons of Adam and Eve. After describing their births, the text immediately distinguishes Cain and Abel based on their professions. "Now Abel was a herdsman of flocks, and Cain was a worker of the ground" (Gen 4:2b). As early as the writing of the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, and continuing through to Christian theologians like Didymus the Blind in the fourth century, scholars have noted the importance of the distinction between the respective professions of the brothers.[10] However, it is not until the nineteenth century that the professions themselves begin to take center stage in explaining Yahweh's favor.

In his commentary on Genesis, Herman Gunkel argues that the distinction in professions is more than just historical information, and more than just a practical set-up for the family of Adam and Eve. "The narrative maintains that Yahweh loves the shepherd and animals sacrifice, but wants nothing to do with the farmer and fruit offerings."[11] For Gunkel, the respective professions of the brothers become the reasons for God's favor for Abel and disfavor for Cain. Following Gunkel, Gehard von Rad agrees, writing,

> Abel was a shepherd, Cain a farmer. Thus begins the division of mankind, so fraught with grave consequences, into individual vocations with quite different attitudes toward life. The profoundness of this division, which leads to two altars and goes hand in hand with a real shattering of man's brotherhood, remains hidden for the time being.[12]

[10] Geljon, "Philonic Elements," 292–93. However, both Philo and Didymus see the professions as stand-ins for deeper issues, namely that Cain was a lover of the body and sought after earthly pursuits. This will be discussed at length in the next subsection.

[11] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 43. However, a page later, Gunkel concedes, "The sense of vv 6ff. may have been, Yahweh, who knows hearts, recognizes what is taking place privately in Cain."

[12] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1972), 104.

For von Rad, the distinction between shepherds and farmers is not arbitrary. The difference between the two causes a deep-seated division in belief in Yahweh and the practice of the cultic religion surrounding it.

> The shepherd sacrifices from his flock, the farmer from the produce of the earth – just as one would expect! And yet the different in the life of both is not something external, but rather is so deep that it works itself out in distinctive acts of religious practice. Cult belongs intimately to culture, and every culture gives birth to its own peculiar cult. Thus there was more than one altar![13]

The implication, of course, is that farmers begin to drift away from the proper worship of Yahweh, while shepherds maintain a much purer religion.

Some scholars in the twentieth century expand on this interpretation. The argument is that farmers bring God's disfavor by living in such a way as to go against the intention of the Creator, causing tension also with those who are living a more primal, nomadic lifestyle. John Allen writes, "The Cain and Abel story conveys a condemnation of urban farmers by telling of divine disfavor for Cain's sacrificial worship, and is therefore an historical continuation of the tensions and conflicts inherent in the cyclical transitions of mixed economies."[14] Scholars in this camp would argue that urban agriculture, by its very nature, is a sign of the human propensity to gather, gain, and control, as Cain's name may perhaps indicate.[15] Byron points out, "Cain's choice [of occupation] does not prepare him for any type of leadership position, but instead demonstrates a life dedicated to earthly and inanimate things."[16] While some scholars favor a

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[13] Von Rad, *Genesis*, 104.

[14] John Allen, "The Mixed Economies of Cain and Abel: An Historical and Cultural Approach," *CBW* 31 (2011): 51.

[15] See the discussion of the etymology of Cain's name in chapter 1, under verse 1.

[16] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 33. Again, there is much more discussion on Cain's virtue, or lack thereof, in the next subsection.

more nuanced approach,[17] the general consensus in this interpretive camp matches up with what Gunkel and von Rad wrote. For example, Eichhorn argues from the greater context of the Old Testament, writing,

> The three characters of the Bible who took up farming seriously all came to a bad end: Cain a murderer, Noah a drunkard, and King Uzziah a leper. All three were punished because they abandoned the way of God and put their trust in earthly goods. They idolized material property and material values and physical strength and power.[18]

LaCocque agrees, pointing to Saul, the farmer (1 Sam 11:5) and David, the shepherd (1 Sam 16:11) as further proof that the Lord favors shepherds (David, Abel, etc.) over farmers (Saul, Cain, etc.).[19]

Is it the case that Abel was regarded because he was a shepherd and Cain ignored because he was a farmer? Despite the long tradition among historical-critical scholars, neither the text of Gen 4 nor the whole of the Old Testament specifically identifies Yahweh's preference of shepherds over farmers.[20] Similarly, while acknowledging the difference in their professions, as well as the thematic pattern[21] that will fill Genesis and much of the rest of the Old Testament,

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[17] For example, Miller Jr., *Genesis 1–11*, 40, writes, "There is indeed in the story a conflict between modes of life as verses 3–5 indicate without question. But one cannot easily characterize the story as giving prior place to one or the other. Abel, his mode of living, and his sacrifice are given a positive judgment. His sacrifice is acceptable and Cain's is not. He is the victim and Cain the killer. There are other aspects of the narrative, however, that make the interrelationship of these figures and the judgments on their modes of life more complex than these facts, which are certainly true, would suggest at first glance. For one thing, Abel is an extremely passive almost secondary character in the narrative. His major role is to be the victim. Apart from bringing his sacrifice, the most active part he plays in the story is when his blood cries out (*sa'aq*) from the ground. Cain is obviously the central figure. It is no accident that he is the *'obed 'adamah* rather than Abel. One could not interchange the vocations of the two brothers without completely ruining the story and its unity with the surrounding material. The task given to '*adam* when he is sent forth from the garden is to work the '*adamah*. Cain continues the line of '*adam* as God's creation and as sinful creature. If '*adam*, i.e. "Adam," is representative of humanity in an obvious way, then so is Cain."

[18] Eichhorn, *Cain*, 36.

[19] LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocence*, 27.

[20] In reality, this division is rarely so cut and dry. For most of history, 'farmers' have raised livestock, while 'shepherds' have had plots of land to grow food that they needed to survive. It is not until the modern world that the division of labor becomes more clear-cut.

[21] For example, Alter, *Genesis*, 16, points out, "The widespread culture-founding story of rivalry between

most scholars do not attribute Yahweh's pleasure or displeasure to the professions of the brothers as farmer and herdsman, respectively. For his part, Brown argues that the story is simply about sibling rivalry, regardless of the brothers' respective professions,[22] though the account is most certainly about more than two brothers fighting.[23] Context, of course, provides the best arguments against identifying the brothers' professions as the source of Yahweh's favor or disfavor. In the immediate context, Gen 1–2 reference the work to be done by human beings, including working the ground (2:5, 15)[24] and caring for animals (1:28; 2:19–20). It would be hard to argue, based on the foundational work of Yahweh in creation, that either Cain or Abel is doing something preferred by God, on the one hand, or against his will, on the other. In fact, "The two brothers divided between them the labour necessary for the sustenance of the family,"[25] and, even more, the care of creation. Fretheim argues that the brothers' respective occupations are, in fact, fulfilling the Lord's commands in Gen 1.[26] Noah himself, whom the author of Genesis describes as a "righteous man" (6:9) who had "found favor in the eyes of Yahweh" (6:8), became אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה, "a man of the ground" (9:20). While it may be true that herdsmen and farmers sometimes have contradictory interests,[27] the same can be said about two groups of herdsmen (cf.

herdsman and farmer is recast in a pattern that will dominate Genesis – the displacement of the firstborn by the younger son." Then, on page 19, he continues, "The first recorded founder of a city is also the first murderer, a possible reflection of the antiurban bias in Genesis."

[22] Brown, *Ethos of the Cosmos*, 164: "Many modern interpreters have understood the story of Cain and Abel as an etiology of two ethnically distinct cultures represented by the farmer, on the one side, and the shepherd on the other…[But] the story recounts a conflict generated by an archetypal rivalry not between shepherds and farmers but between siblings. The violence that ensues is kept within the family."

[23] See the Introduction, where the argument is made that the author of Gen 4 is seeking to show the exponential growth of the power of sin among human beings after the Fall.

[24] Cf. Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 51.

[25] Cassuto, *Commentary*, 203.

[26] Fretheim, *God and World*, 77, points out that Gen 4 shows the fulfillment of God's commands to be fruitful and multiply (Eve), have dominion over the animals (Abel), and to subdue the earth (Cain).

[27] Ed Noort, "Gen 4:1–16. From Paradise to Reality: The Myth of Brotherhood," in *Eve's Children: The*

Gen 13:2–7). Gunkel's conclusion is, in the end, untenable based on the context of Genesis, as well as the entire Old Testament. Nowhere is it apparent in Genesis that the agrarian life is less pleasing to God than the pastoral life.

Understanding Cain and Abel, as well as God's regard for them, should not be based on the foundation of their professions. They are individuals,[28] who in their own ways, help to further the narrative of creation, sin and fall, punishment, and redemption found time and time again in Genesis, as well as in the entirety of the Scriptures. Abel is not favored simply because he is a herdsmen, nor is Cain ignored simply because of his work of the ground. Indeed, those who work the ground can and do acknowledge Yahweh as their creator and find favor in his eyes.[29]

Was It That Cain Was Greedy and Abel Generous? (Virtue)

While the professions themselves may not offer a helpful explanation to the question of God's favor, they still may be a window into something deeper. From ancient times, scholars have debated what could be considered a natural solution to the problem attributed to the text: Abel was simply a better, more virtuous person than Cain. As the argument goes, Cain was greedy and corrupt, while Abel was generous and full of virtue.

Philo of Alexandria is perhaps the earliest example of such a position. Philo interprets the whole of the primeval history (Gen 1–11) allegorically, beginning with his understanding that the universe was not created in six literal days, but outside of time. Rather, the *six* days refers to a

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Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen, Themes in Biblical Narratives, 5th ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 105.

[28] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 100, writes, ""The parallels between chaps. 3 and 4 are also important for determining the character of the Cain and Abel story. They show that Genesis understand Cain and Abel to be individuals belonging to the primeval history, not personifications of tribes or peoples, as sometimes maintained."

[29] Van Wolde, "Cain and Abel," 33, writes, ""From the beginning, Cain is linked to the earth. He is a tiller of the soil, and he makes YHWH an offering of the fruits of the earth. He therefore acknowledges YHWH as creator, and he acknowledges the close tie existing between YHWH, humans and the earth."

"perfect" (complete) number.[30] He also sees representations of virtues, like expertness, perseverance, and memory, in the trees of the Garden, with the Tree of Life representing "that most general virtue which some people call goodness."[31] Likewise, the four rivers (Gen 2:10–14) represent prudence, temperance, courage, and justice, while the great River represents, again, goodness. Where there is gold, it is not literal, but represents prudence.[32] Every detail of the text, whether the account is historical in itself or not, seems to function as an exhortation to lead a virtuous life.

When moving on to chapter 4, then, Philo sees a similar drive toward virtuous exhortation. Cain and Abel, whether they were actually real people and brothers or not, represent a greater truth for the reader. On the one hand, the reader should avoid corruption; on the other hand, the reader should strive for virtue.[33]

> "There are two opinions contrary to and at variance with one another; the one of which commits everything to the mind as the leader of reasoning, or feeling, or moving, or being stationary; and the other, attributing to God all the consequent work of creation as his own. Now the symbol of the former of these is Cain, whose name, being interpreted, means, 'possession,' from his appearing to possess all things; and the symbol of the other is Abel; for this name, being interpreted, means 'referring to God.'"[34]

[30] Philo, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 25.

[31] Philo, *Works*, 31.

[32] Philo, *Works*, 32.

[33] Hindy Najman, "Cain and Abel as Character Traits: A Study in the Allegorical Typology of Philo of Alexandria," *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Themes in Biblical Narratives 5 (ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 107, summarizes, "The types of Cain and Abel [presented by Philo are] as two aspects of the human soul, representing the human capacity for good and the human capacity for evil."

[34] Philo, *Works.* 94.

Cain and Abel, then, are symbols of something much deeper than the contention between shepherds and farmers; they represent a battle between virtue and malice. [35]

Cain, who is born first, receives the power and stature that tempts him toward self-love and greed. In fact, "According to Philo, Cain's deepest problem is his flawed conception of God, which is reflected in his very name. For Cain believes himself to possess all things."[36] Philo pulls no punches, as it were, in describing the baseness of Cain,[37] who has already fallen into the trap of self-aggrandizement by the time of the offerings made to Yahweh.

> Here are two accusations against the self-loving man; one that he showed his gratitude to God after some days, and not at once, the other that he made his offering from the fruits, and not from the first fruits, which have a name in one word, the first fruits.[38]

His self-love is shown in his delay and in his stinginess toward the Lord himself, which will result in the Lord showing him no regard.[39]

Abel, on the other hand, shows himself to be a man of deep virtue. His name itself, which

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[35] Najman, "Can and Abel as Character Traits," 113, writes, ""According to Philo, Cain exemplifies the *type* of wickedness, while Abel exemplifies that of holiness. In a sense, these biblical characters *are* types."

[36] Najman, "Cain and Abel as Character Traits," 113. Also, Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 345, summarizes, "Although Philo does not credit Cain with the invention of weights and measures, he does emphasize the notion that Cain was driven to gain more property and possessions. As with Josephus, this too is predicated on Philo's understanding of Cain's name meaning 'possession' (*Cher.* 52). The central flaw in Cain's character, according to Philo, was his failure to recognize that all possessions belonged to God rather than him (*Cher*. 52, 65). For Philo, Cain is the ultimate narcissist. He represents self–love and those who are willing to go to any lengths in order to secure riches, honor, glory, and authority." In the end, this ironic, since the implication of Cain's name is that he himself has been acquired or 'begotten,' not that he acquires anything or 'gets' anything. Of course, the change in emphasis is not impossible.

[37] Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 339–40, summarizes, "Among the numerous negative descriptions that Philo uses for Cain he says that Cain is an atheist (*Det.* 103, 119) and those who think like him are a part of the race of Cain (*Post*. 42). Elsewhere he calls Cain wicked (*QG* 1.59), the representative of evil doctrine (*Sacr.* 1.5) and the ultimate symbol of wickedness (*Fug*. 64)."

[38] Philo, *Works*, 100.

[39] Philo, *Questions and Answers in Genesis*, trans. Ralph Marcus (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 39, writes, ""It is not proper to offer the best things to that which is created, namely oneself, and the second best to the All-wise. This is a reprehensible and blameworthy division," showing a certain disorderliness of order."

Philo (as well as most scholars) infers to mean "nothingness,"[40] reveals a man who is willing to recognize that he is worthy of nothing in himself, but rather gives thanks to God[41] for his exceeding greatness to him.[42] When he brings his offering to the Lord,

> "Abel did not bring the same offerings, nor did he bring his offerings in the same manner; but instead of inanimate things he brought living sacrifices, and instead of younger things, worthy only of the second place, he offered what was older and of the first consideration, and instead of what was weak he offered what was strong and fat."[43]

Abel held nothing back, reserved nothing for himself, and gave of his best to the Lord. He loved virtue more than he loved himself.

These actions set up more than a distinction between two brothers. They seem to overturn the commonly held ideas of man. For example, age and birth order matter little compared to the virtue of goodness attributed to Abel.[44] Furthermore, to look out for oneself first, to love oneself above anything, cannot compare to the virtuous self-giving exhibited by Abel.[45] In the end, Philo argues that Cain is playing the zero-sum game that the world plays, where what Abel gains must mean that something is somehow taken away from Cain.[46]

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[40] See chapter one of this thesis, where in the notes for Gen 4:2, the etymology of Abel's name is discussed.

[41] Najman, "Cain and Abel as Character Traits," 113, writes, "In contrast [to Cain], Abel's 'name means one who refers (all things) to God.'"

[42] Philo, *Works*, 101, asks, "When is it then that you do not forget God? When you do not forget yourself; for if you remember your own nothingness in every particular, you will also be sure to remember the exceeding greatness of God in everything."

[43] Philo, *Works*, 105.

[44] Philo, *Questions and Answers*, 36–37, writes, ""Even though the righteous man "was younger in time than the wicked one," still he was older in activity . Wherefore now, when their activities are appraised, he is placed first in order. For one of them labours and takes care of living beings even though they are irrational, gladly undertaking the pastoral work which is preparatory to rulership and kingship. But the other occupies himself with earthly and inanimate things."

[45] Philo, *Questions and Answers*, 37, writes, ""Scripture manifests a distinction between the lover of self and the lover of God. For one of them took for himself the fruit of the firstfruits and impiously thought God worthy (only) of the second fruits. For the words "after some days" instead of "immediately" and "from the offerings" instead of "from the firstfruits" indicate great wickedness. But the other offered the firstborn and elder animals without any delay at all or rejection by his Father."

[46] Philo, *Works*, 94.

What, then, will happen to the man of virtue and the man of malice? Philo describes the story in this way:

> "First, (Scripture) does not mean that he is first by nature who happens to be the first to be perceived, but he who comes in his time and with sound morals. Second, as there were two persons, good and evil. He turned toward the good man, looking upon him because He is a lover of goodness and virtue, and first seeing him to be more inclined toward that side in the order of nature, He deprecates and turns away from the evil man. Accordingly, most excellently [Scripture] says not that God saw the offerings but that He first saw those who were offering gifts before the gifts themselves, for men look at the quantity of gifts and approve them; but God looks at the truth of the soul, turning aside from arrogance and flattery."[47]

When the two men present themselves before God with their offerings, God will see behind what is being offered. He will see when one is a lover of self, a man of malice, and the other is a man of virtue. God thus regards Abel, the virtuous son, and ignores Cain in his greed and self-love.[48] Philo's conclusion, then, is that "neither the sacrifice nor God were deficient, rather it was Cain's action of keeping a portion of the offering for himself" that made him a "greedy worshipper who did not give God all the offering" and thus is rejected by God.[49]

The story, of course, does not end with Abel's favor and Cain's anger. Cain, despite the warning from the Lord, ignores the call to virtue (אִם־תֵּיטִיב) and repentance[50] and invites his brother to the field, which Philo argues is a representation of strife and contention.[51] Cain then manifests his lack of virtue by killing his brother. But, Philo infers from the text that Cain did not kill Abel only, but that, even more, he killed himself (4:8), destroying any virtue or love of

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[47] Philo, *Questions and Answers*, 37–38.

[48] Philo, *Questions and Answers*, 38, writes, "The lover of self is a divider, as was Cain, while the lover of God is a giver, as was Abel."

[49] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 43.

[50] Najman, "Cain and Abel as Character Traits," 116, says, "According to Philo, God's question is an opportunity for Cain to confess and repent."

[51] Philo, *Works,* 115.

God.[52] He not only showed himself to be a man who lacked virtue, but he destroyed any chance to change when he ignored the call from the Lord and murdered his brother. Conversely, Abel, the man of virtue, departed this life to enjoy an immortal life as a reward for his goodness.[53] When confronted, Cain's sarcastic question only becomes a judgment on his lack of virtue.

> "It would therefore have been worth the while of this self-loving Cain to have been the keeper of Abel; for if he had kept him he would have attained to a compounded and moderate kind of life, and would not have been filled with unmodified and absolute wickedness."[54]

In the end, the call to virtue is clear: it is better to live a virtuous life like Abel and to avoid the wickedness personified in Cain. [55]

Other Jewish scholars and theologians of the first century and beyond follow a similar interpretive path. In his *Antiquities*, Josephus clearly sees Abel as virtuous and righteous, while Cain is "wholly evil."[56] In the Jewish writing titled, *The Wisdom of Solomon*,

> "Cain is presented in 10:3 as the first person to reject Wisdom and to be labeled 'unrighteous' (ἄδικος)… Furthermore, in 10:4 Cain is regarded as the reason for the flood thereby making his responsibility for evil far greater than is communicated in

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[52] Philo, *Works*, 117.

[53] Philo, *Works*, 117, concludes, "The wise man, therefore, who appears to have departed from this mortal life, lives according to the immortal life; but the wicked man who lives in wickedness has died according to the happy life."

[54] Philo, *Works*, 119.

[55] Najman, "Cain and Abel as Character Traits," 116, writes, ""Philo argues that it is preferable to die like Abel than to live like Cain, in a state of eternal death."

[56] *Ant. 1:53–54*: "Now, the two brethren were pleased with different courses of life, for Abel, the younger, was a lover of righteousness, and, believing that God was present at all his actions, he excelled in virtue; and his employment was that of a shepherd. But Cain was not only very wicked in other respects, but was wholly intent upon getting; and he first contrived to plough the ground. He slew his brother on the occasion following." See also Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 339, who summarizes, "In Ant. 1.53, Josephus contrasts the dispositions of Cain and Abel. Following the order in Gen 4:2, he describes Abel's occupation first, but then adds an interpretive gloss stating that Abel was 'one who had regard for righteousness.' Similar to the author of Wisdom, however, Josephus enhances the depiction of Cain's evil by the way he uses the adjective πονηρός. In 1.53 Josephus portrays Cain as 'wholly evil' (πονηπότατος) using the superlative form of the adjective which seems to be a calculated move to present a totally depraved Cain. In 1.61 Cain is described as advancing evil to the extent that not only does he increase his own wickedness, but he even becomes a teacher of evil activities to others (διδάσκαλος αὐτοῖς ὑπῆρχε πονηρῶν). Lastly, in 1.66, using the superlative form of πονηρός again, Josephus claims that Cain's descendants became even more evil than him and that each one, in succession, surpassed the other in their evil exploits."

> Gen 4. The result is that the author of Wisdom enhances the evil of Cain so that he is responsible for three crimes, each related to and more serious than the first. He rejects Wisdom, murders his brother and brings destruction upon the world."[57]

In later centuries, Jewish tradition continues to label Abel as righteous and Cain as wicked, leading to God rejecting Cain and accepting Abel.[58] Even more, as Byron writes,

> Rabbinic interpreters were not always as critical of Cain as their predecessors, but they were not above making some sharp comments about him. In *Gen. Rab.* 2:3, we find a parallel to the claim in Wisdom and Josephus that Cain's evil actions had repercussions on creation. Rabbi Judah interpreted the description of the earth as 'void' in Gen 1:2 as a reference to Cain. Connecting Cain's act of lawlessness with the chaos of the pre-creation world, he said, 'And void refers to Cain, who desired to return the world back to formlessness and emptiness.' Other interpreters referred to Cain as an 'empty pot' (*Gen. Rab.* 19:11) or a 'vessel full of urine' (*Num. Rab.* 20:6).[59]

Christian authors sometimes followed the same interpretive trajectory. Byron quotes 1 John 3:12 and Jude 11 as examples, pointing out that Cain is described as unrighteous and a murderer (πονηροῦ ἦν καὶ ἔσφαξεν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αυτοῦ) in 1 John, while Jude condemns those who walk in the "way of Cain" (τῇ ὁδῷ τοῦ Κάιν).[60] Byron's position is that these examples resonate with claims made by Josephus, that Cain was not only evil,[61] but that he taught others how to do

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[57] Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 339. The text reads, "She [wisdom] preserved the first formed father of the world, that was created alone, and brought him out of his fall, And gave him power to rule all things. But when the unrighteous went away from her in his anger, he perished also in the fury wherewith he murdered his brother. For whose cause the earth being drowned with the flood, wisdom again preserved it, and directed the course of the righteous in a piece of wood of small value. Moreover, the nations in their wicked conspiracy being confounded, she found out the righteous, and preserved him blameless unto God, and kept him strong against his tender compassion toward his son." (KJV)

[58] John Byron, "Living in the Shadow of Cain: Echoes of a Developing Tradition in James 5:1–6," *NovT* 48 (2006): 263–64, writes, "Targum Neofiti, in good Targumic fashion, takes advantage of the lacuna in the text and expands upon the Genesis account by speculating that Abel's offering was accepted by God because he was righteous *(Tg. Neofi* Gen 4:8)."

[59] Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 340.

[60] Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 340.

[61] John Byron, "Slaughter, Fratricide and Sacrilege: Cain and Abel traditions in 1 John 3," *Bib* 88 (2007): 527, argues from the word choice of 1 John 3:15 that the extent of Cain's evil is far beyond simply being a murderer. He points out that the term *anthropoktonos* in 1 John 3:15 is used scarcely in ancient literature, and in those instances it seems to refer not simply to murder, but especially repugnant acts, including human sacrifice. In the NT, it occurs only here and in John 8:44, where it describes the devil. The term seems here seems to mean more

evil works as well. Byron also points to 1 Clement 4:7, where Cain is viewed as "the prototype of hatred and envy towards one's brother that leads to murder."[62] Finally, Byron identifies an epistle attributed to Ignatius Cain, as well as the so-called *Apocryphon of John*, where Cain is called the successor to the devil (*Hero* 5), as well as 'unrigheous' (*Ap. John* II, 24, 16–25, 118–119), respectively.[63]

This kind of interpretation extends well beyond the Christian Church of the first century. For example, Irenaeus claims that God had no regard for Cain's offering because of his jealousy and malice. [64] A short time later, in a work titled *On Prayer*, Origin argues, "In the case of Cain his wickedness did not begin when he killed his brother. For even before that God, who knows the heart, had no regard for Cain and his sacrifice. But his baseness was made evident when he killed Abel. (Origen–*On Prayer* 29.18)."[65] Irenaeus and Origen thus both see in Cain and Abel a cautionary tale about one's lack of virtue.

In the fourth century, Ambrose takes this understanding even farther. Interpreting allegorically, Ambrose sees Cain as representing the Jews, while Abel stands in for the Christian Church.[66] Like many scholars before and after, Ambrose does refer to some 'clues' in the text in reference to the question of why God would favor Abel and not Cain. [67] However, the clues are

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than just murder, but fratricide. Thus, Cain's evil is extensive and barbaric.

[62] Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 340.

[63] Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 340.

[64] Hayward, "What Did Cain Do Wrong?", 114, quotes Irenaeus: "He had no regard for Cain's offering, because with jealousy and malice which was against his brother he had division in his heart, as God declares when he denounces his hidden dispositions: 'Have you not sinned if you offer correctly, but do not divide correctly? Be tranquil.' (*Adv.Haer*. IV.18.4)."

[65] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 63.

[66] Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 383, concludes, "Hence Abel was a shepherd and Cain a tiller of the soil, who in foolish fashion could not brook the bright lineaments of virtue that adorned his own brother."

[67] For example, Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 360, writes, "Cain means 'getting,' because he got everything for himself. Abel, on the other hand, did not, like his brother before him, refer everything to himself. Devotedly and

simply tangential to the main point: the account of Cain and Abel is ultimately meant to be an allegory of the Jews (who rejected Christ) and the Church (both Jews and Gentiles, who repented and believed in Christ). Ambrose goes so far as to compare Cain to Judas Iscariot, both of whom, because of their lack of virtue, also lacked justice.[68] Ambrose points out in the story that God's question to Cain reveals that he wants Cain to confess and repent.[69] He, of course, does not, and becomes a fugitive,[70] much like Judas, who has nowhere to go after betraying the Lord Jesus and also being turned away from the religious leaders (cf. Matthew 27:3–5).

During the Reformation, the interpretation of a righteous Abel and wicked Cain continued. For example, John Calvin pointed to Abel's obedience as the cause of God's favor, since the Lord has always favored obedience to sacrifice.[71] Calvin's position is that God was much more concerned with the heart of Cain and Abel than he was with the sacrifice itself:

> We must, however, notice the order here observed by Moses; for he does not simply state that the *worship* which Abel had was pleasing to God, but he begins with the *person* of the offerer; by which he signifies, that God will regard no works with favour except those the doer of which is already previously accepted and approved by

piously, he attributed everything to God, ascribing to his Creator everything that he had received from him." In addition, Ambrose continues on page 383 by describing Cain's lack of virtue being shown concretely in that he waited "a period of days" (מִקֵּץ יָמִים), that he did not bring the firstfruits, simply "from the fruits of the earth" (מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה), and concluding on page 397 that his sacrifice was not living. He later argues, on the same page, that the firstborn of Abel's flock were "very closely related to what has a spirit," and thus more important than 'earthly' things.

[68] Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 422–3, argues, "The Lord recommends us to seek justice saying, 'Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Judas did not have this justice; otherwise, he would not have betrayed his Lord and Master. Cain, too, did not possess this virtue; otherwise, he would have offered to the Lord first-fruits of the soil, not those of inferior quality. So, too, he failed to divide his gifts into parts. Hence the reply: 'If you offer rightly and you do not divide equally, thou hast sinned. Hold thy peace.' You see the seriousness of the offense. Where there is no division into parts, then the whole sacrifice comes to naught."

[69] Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 428.

[70] Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 436., writes, "The blood of the just man who has suffered death cries out to God, whereas the sinner's life is like that of a fugitive from justice."

[71] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 1 of Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 193, argues, ""It has been true from the beginning of the world, that obedience is better than any sacrifices (1 Sam. Xv. 22) and is the parent of all virtues."

> him. And no wonder; for man sees things which are apparent, but God looks into the heart (1 Sam. Xvi. 7).[72]

Some modern scholars persist in maintaining that the difference between Cain and Abel was not their sacrifices *per se*, but their virtue,[73] despite no explicit mention in the text.[74] LaCocque points to the words of Yahweh in Gen 4:7 as evidence for such an understanding:

> Remarkably, in response to Cain's despondency, God tells him to *do* well. Cain's remedy is not in finding better ingredients to offer – although this also may happen if he *does* well – but in a dynamic ethical choice (see Deut 30:15, 19)…In summary, God tells Cain that he can do better. Not in using a better technique of sacrifice, but in not taking God for granted. Then it may have an impact upon the very performance of the sacrifice as it mirrors the soul of the sacrifice. It is thus a matter of respect, a matter of 'reasonable worship,' as Paul said (Rom 12:1).[75]

In other words, neither the sacrifices themselves nor how they were offered mattered in their own sense, but rather were windows into each man's soul.[76] Furthermore, the presence of 'lying down' sin, according to the words of Yahweh in v.7, imply sin's continuing and constant presence and desire.[77] But later, it is Cain's anger, wrath, and eventual murder of his brother that "casts doubt on the purity of his intentions in making an offering."[78]

David Eichhorn follows a similar path, though he sees Cain and Abel's virtue through the prism of their professions instead of their sacrifices. He states, "[Cain] selected farming as his

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[72] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 194.

[73] LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocence*, 20–21, writes, "Though the ingredients of the sacrifices themselves may not be the issue, perhaps the quality of the sacrifices (some of vs. the fatty portions) may reflect ethical value."

[74] LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocence*, 16, argues, "This ancient interpretation [that Cain's offering came from an evil man] is indeed textually debatable, but its intuition is correct."

[75] LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocence,* 25. LaCocque continues later, on page 33, "'Doing well' or 'not doing well' is to be understood from within the sphere of ethics, not primarily of the ritual. Not doing well is, in Cain's instance, being possessed by anger."

[76] LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocence*, 23.

[77] LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocence*, 37.

[78] Krasovec, "Punishment and Mercy in the Primeval History (Gen 1–11)," 11.

occupation because real estate is the most tangible of all earthly assets."[79] If Cain had been virtuous, Eichhorn argues, he would have separated himself from material temptation by living a simpler life, one that allows for contentment and contemplation. Abel, on the other hand, showed himself to be full of virtue by doing just that.[80] To bolster his argument, Eichhorn even brings God himself into the discussion regarding the brothers' professions, writing, "The sages say that God Himself has settled this argument in the most convincing of ways. In the Bible, God refers to Himself a number of times as a Shepherd but never once does He call himself a farmer!"[81] Obviously, the understanding is that Cain, the farmer, is such *because* he lacks virtue. Cain's lack of virtue is also why he becomes angry and cannot understand why the Lord would refuse to regard his offering.[82] In fact, his lack of virtue is so complete, that no situation, and no word from the Lord himself, will be able to change the direction of his life.[83]

The fact that the history of interpretation is filled with this trajectory is no accident. John Byron, an accomplished modern Cain-and-Abel scholar, describes any number of reasons why this is has been the case. First, he points to the understanding of Cain's name. "The etymology of Cain's name became important to those who sought to describe him as greedy and the archetype

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[79] Eichhorn, *Cain*, 36.

[80] Eichhorn, *Cain*, 36, argues, ""It is remembered that Israel's greatest Biblical leaders, Moses and David, spent their formative years in the wilderness herding oxen, goats, and sheep. This is the way, then, that a good man prepares himself for the Godly life: by separating himself from material temptations, by living simply, by developing within himself the power of inner contemplation and the joy of inner contentment. The sages believe that Abel displayed wisdom and strength of character when he decided to become a shepherd rather than a farmer."

[81] Eichhorn, *Cain*, 38.

[82] Eichhorn, *Cain*, 43, writes, "It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for the Cains to understand why they are rejected by both God and history. Technically they do no wrong. They stay, rather precariously sometimes, within legal bounds. They observe just enough social amenities and fulfill just enough social responsibilities to get by. They do what they have to do with no social feeling and no sense of spiritual communion."

[83] Eichhorn, *Cain*, 109, states, "Human nature is, indeed, a curious phenomenon. One would have thought that Cain's shattering experience and continuing ordeal would have eradicated thoughts of ambition and might from his mind entirely and permanently. But it was not so. He had suffered a severe set-back, but the thoughts were still there…That is the way a thorough-going materialist is. He builds continually for his own selfish purposes. He never finishes building because he is never satisfied with what he has already built."

of the rich oppressors of the poor."[84] Cain, who is understood to be one who "acquires," becomes a convenient stand in for the millennia-old problem of the disparity between rich and poor. Furthermore, "For Cain, his infamy as the first murderer resulted in his identification as the archetype for all wicked people…Abel was sometimes seen as the archetype for the oppressed poor. Cain, on the other hand, became the archetype of the wicked rich."[85] Seeing Cain and Abel as archetypes of wicked and virtuous people, respectively, is natural, seeing that they play major roles in the story of the first murder, which happens also to be the murder of someone who was, by all accounts, innocent of any crime. Abel becomes associated with righteous people who die unjustly, while Cain stands in for the unrighteous aggressor.[86]

Eric Peels summarizes the main thrust of this entire argument by giving four reasons why Cain's lack of virtue is to blame for his rejection. First, he states that there is a "clear incongruence in the description of the gifts." Second, he says that scholars describe a progressive hardening of Cain throughout the text. Third, he points to the argument that throughout the Old Testament, the attitude of the one offering the sacrifice is crucial to its acceptance. Finally, he explains that the movement of Gen 2–11 shows mankind going from bad to worse, with Cain the new representative of this problem for mankind.[87]

Clearly, this argument holds weight with scholars across time and space. It is also difficult to argue against the idea that Cain has a problem with his attitude, which may be a

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[84] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 31.

[85] Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 331.

[86] Byron, "Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond," 338, writes, "Abel's status as a righteous person is an exegetical development probably associated with the acceptable sacrifice he offered to God and his unjust death. The fact that Abel was the first person in the Bible to actively please God and be accepted by God outside of the garden positioned him as the first paradigmatic figure…As the tragic story of the two brothers reveals, Abel was the first in this new world to choose righteousness while Cain chose unrighteousness."

[87] Peels, "World's First Murder," 37–8.

window into his heart. “But the question is, did the attitude problem come after the rejection or was it the cause of the rejection?”[88] In other words, is the evidence of the text strong enough to confirm that the cause of Yahweh’s disregard of Cain was his lack of virtue, while Abel was himself a man full of virtue? The evidence is hardly overwhelming.

Byron himself calls scholars out for saddling Cain “with titles and character traits that do not appear explicitly in the Gen 4 story.”[89] More often than not in the Old Testament, if there is not explicit mention of a person’s wicked nature (e.g. Gen 6:5–7; 1 Kgs 16:30), there is at least foreshadowing (cf. 1 Sam 25:3 ff.). None of this seems the case with Cain. On the contrary, the excitement surrounding Cain in 4:1 seems to call for joy that, despite the Fall into sin, God continues graciously to provide for the increase of life, according to his command and blessing in Gen 1. Cain’s name itself is, most certainly, up for debate.[90] For his part, Byron posits, “Via the popular-etymological punning with the verb קנה (to bring forth, create), it is suggested that Cain (*qayin*) is a creature in relation to Yahweh,”[91] and thus not a commentary on his character as an unrighteous, greedy villain.

Similarly, the suggestions of Eichhorn regarding the professions of the brothers being windows into their hearts holds little weight in the greater context of the Old Testament. To imply that shepherds are innocent and righteous ignores accounts like that of Moses’ sin against the Lord, which prevents him from entering the Promised Land (Num 20:10–12), or, perhaps even more strongly, David’s string of horrendous sins in 2 Sam 11, which climax in the murder

[88] Quek Suan Yew, “God’s Acceptance of Abel’s Offering and Rejection of Cain’s (Gen. 4:1–7),” *BurB* 6 (2000): 93.

[89] Byron, “Cain and Abel in Second Temple Literature and Beyond,” 338.

[90] See the discussion on Cain’s name in the section on v.1 in chapter one.

[91] Peels, “World’s First Murder,” 24.

of the (more-righteous-than-David?) Gentile husband of Bathsheba. Both Moses and David, like Cain, fall into sin and receive a punishment from the Lord, as well as words of promise and consolation (cf. Deut 34:4; 2 Sam 12:13). But, perhaps most egregious is Eichhorn's statement that the Lord never once calls himself a farmer. One need not go farther than two chapters back from the account of Cain and Abel to see the Lord getting his hands dirty, both by planting (2:8) and by forming man out of the ground (2:7). Isaiah 5:1–5 also comes to mind as strong imagery used by the Lord in reference to working the ground. In the New Testament, of course, there are any number of images of the Lord doing the work of a farmer (e.g. Matthew 13). Again, the implication that Cain is somehow pigeonholed as a wicked person because of his profession does not hold its weight under scrutiny.

Another concern is the general understanding that Cain's eventual murder of his brother necessarily provides a window into whether or not he is a virtuous man before bringing the offering to Yahweh. Must this be true? Common sense and experience provide any number of possibilities and examples of otherwise virtuous people who end up making terrible decisions. In the Scriptures, David again comes to mind. The man who is described as a man after Yahweh's own heart (1 Sam 13:14) is the same man who ends up forcing himself on one of his married subjects and murdering the woman's husband. Back to the point, Cain's wrath might not cast doubt on the purity of his offering. Rather, his reaction may be the result of genuine surprise over God's lack of regard for what he brought. Perhaps he is confused, which easily leads to frustration. Maybe Cain even feels a sense of unfairness, because he thinks he has done everything according to the Lord's will, even with pure intentions. The text, of course, is ultimately silent, which should cause any reader to be cautious in making assumptions.

This argument is tempting for any number of reasons, mostly because it appeals to a

sense of fairness. In other words, the Lord *should* favor someone who is righteous over someone who lacks virtue. As it is, it is God who can see the heart. But, in the end, the biggest problem with this argument is that, like so many other answers to the question at hand, it is an argument from silence. The author of the text makes no explicit mention of Cain as wicked or Abel as righteous. Such a conclusion requires inferring from the text what may or may not be present, or, more commonly, reading certain character traits into the brothers after the fact in an attempt to make those traits the basis for their actions. Instead, arguments are made from strings of clues that have multiple possible explanations, which the reader has already come to know all too well.

Was It that Cain Was Faithless and Abel Full of Faith? (Faith)

The fact remains, though, that God himself can see the heart. When he sees the hearts of Cain and Abel, perhaps virtue is not what he is looking for. Perhaps the issue is one of faith. This is the contention of many Christian scholars and theologians from arguably the first century through today. While some scholars will make the argument based on tidy theology, others make the case that they have the New Testament writers on their side.

Early Christian writers portrayed Abel as the prototypical Christian who suffered because his offering, which was seen as faith in Christ, was acceptable to God.[92] On the other hand, Cain was the ultimate representative of those who claim to serve God while willfully rejecting God's commands.[93] Unlike in the previous discussion, this argument has less to do with virtue *per se* as it has to do with faith. Most scholars, then, will see in Cain and Abel representations of faithless

[92] Lewis, "Offering of Abel," 486, writes that Cyprian [of Carthage] was an early example, affirming that in the sacrifices of Cain and Abel God looked not at their gifts but at their hearts: "so that he was acceptable in his gift who was acceptable in his heart Abel, peaceable and righteous in sacrificing in innocence to God, taught others also when they bring their gift to the altar, thus to come with fear of God, with a simple heart, with the law of righteousness, with the peace of concord."

[93] Tom Thatcher, "Cain and Abel in Early Christian Memory: A Case Study in 'The Use of the Old Testament in the New,'" *CBQ* 72 (2010): 740.

and trusting people, respectively. The details of the Gen 4 account come into play, for example, when early theologians see Cain's vegetable sacrifice as prefiguring the Jewish sacrificial system (which is superseded by Christ), while Abel's meat offering signifies the body of Jesus Christ. When Cain murders Abel in his jealous anger, the murder translates into the persecution and martyrdom of believers by unbelievers. Cain's willful rejection of God's Word in the entire story represents those who claim to serve God while, all the while, rejecting his commands nonetheless (Jews, pagans, heretics, etc.).[94]

Nowhere is this fleshed out so completely in early Christian memory than in the works of Augustine. Augustine of Hippo, who was mentored by Ambrose of Milan, diverged from his father in the faith in relation to the interpretation of Gen 4. Like Ambrose, Augustine recognized some of the possible clues in the text, clues that might offer insight into God's favoring Abel over Cain. For example, he recognized the vague distinction of time and 'division' found in the early verses of Gen 4.[95] However, he forged a different path, concluding that finding the reason for God's disfavor from such details in the text is quite difficult.[96] Instead, Augustine interpreted the account of Cain and Abel with a strong typological discernment.

In his *magnum opus*, *The City of God*, Augustine argues at length that there are two cities in existence: the city of God, and the city of man. The citizens of God's city are spiritual beings, full of faith, and dedicated to the Word of God. These people are pilgrims on earth, awaiting a

[94] Thatcher, "Cain and Abel," 741.

[95] Based on the text of LXX. See discussion in chapter 2.

[96] Augustine, *City of God*, 60, discerns, "The division [of the sacrifice] may be evil made upon a bad distinction of the times, place, offering, offerers, or of him to whom it is offered, or of them to whom the offering is distributed: meaning here by division, a discerning between offering at due times, in due places, due offerings, due distributions and the contraries of all these: as if we offer, where, when, and what we should not: or reserve better to ourselves than we offer to God: or distribute the offering to the unsanctified, herein profaning the sacrifice. In which of these Cain offended God we cannot easily find."

fuller life, which God has in store for them in eternity. The citizens of the city of man are carnal beings, lacking faith in the Almighty, and who ignore God's Word. These stake their claim to earthly pursuits, ideas, and possessions. Augustine argues that Cain belongs to this so-called city of man, while Abel is a citizen of the city of God. [97]

Augustine's typological trajectory is quite strong in his interpretation of Cain and Abel. He sees in the story a commentary on human nature battling against the spiritual regeneration of faith, for example.[98] These two natures, embodied by Cain and Abel, are always in opposition.[99] In fact, Cain and Abel were destined to clash, according to Augustine, because the city of God will always face cruel opposition and violence at the hands of the city of man.[100] The hatred the city of man has for pilgrim citizens of the city of God finds its climax when Cain kills his brother Abel.[101] Abel becomes, then, the first martyr of God's people, who live by faith and in hope for the life to come.

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[97] Augustine, *City of God*, 54–5, writes, "Cain belongs to the city of man: Abel was the later, and he belongs to the city of God. For as we see that in that one man (as the apostle says) that which is spiritual was not first, but that which is natural first, and then the spiritual (whereupon all that comes from Adam's corrupted nature must needs be evil and carnal at first, and then if he be regenerate by Christ, becomes good and spiritual afterward: so in the first propagation of man, and course of the 'two cities' of which we dispute, the carnal citizen was born first, and the pilgrim on earth, or heavenly citizen, afterwards, being by grace predestined, and by grace elected, by grace a pilgrim upon earth, and by grace a citizen in heaven…It is recorded of Cain that he built a city, but Abel was a pilgrim, and built none."

[98] Rick Benjamins, "Augustine on Cain and Abel," *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen, Themes in Biblical Narratives 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2003): 134, summarizes Augustine's position this way: "Scripture tells us that the citizen of this world, Cain, was born first. This reflects the truth that each man is first of all born of Adam, evil and carnal, and only becomes good and spiritual afterwards, when he is grafted into Christ by regeneration."

[99] Augustine, *City of God*, 58, explains, "[The strife] of Cain and Abel shews the opposition of the city of men and the city of God. The wicked oppose the good: but the good being perfect, cannot contend amongst themselves."

[100] Byron, "Shadow of Cain," 264, summarizes Augustine's argument this way: "In a comparison of the city of God with the earthly city Augustine says: Cain was followed by Abel, who was killed by his brother and served as the first prophetic symbol of the city of God. He was like an alien on earth, destined to suffer cruel persecutions at the hands of the wicked men who can properly be called natives of earth because they love this world as their home and find happiness in the worldly felicity of the earthly city (*City of God,* 15.15)."

[101] Augustine, *City of God*, 57, argues, "This earthly city's foundation was laid by a murderer of his own brother, who he slew through envy, and who was an earthly pilgrim, of the heavenly city."

The whole account is one that reveals the stark difference between the righteous man of faith and the wicked, rebellious man. Augustine argues that this is clearly the reason for God's rejection of Cain and regard of Abel:

> This proves that God respected not his gifts; for that he divided evil, giving God only some of his cattle, and giving himself to himself, as all do that leave God's will to follow their own, and living in perverseness of heart, offer gifts unto God as it were to buy Him, not to cure their vicious desires but to fulfill them…But God giving a reason why He would not accept his, that he might have juster cause to dislike himself than his brother, having not divided, that is, not lived well, and being not worthy to have his sacrifice accepted, shews that he was far more wicked, in this, that he hated his just brother for no cause.[102]

In his eyes, this argument is confirmed by the authors of the New Testament, who point to Cain's wicked lack of faith. For Augustine, the prime example of this argument in the New Testament is found in 1 John 4, where John writes, "If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. (1John 4:20 ESV)." The account of Cain and Abel, then, is the first example of this type of action, namely empty 'love' for God and hating one's brother.[103]

This interpretive arc is, of course, fulfilled later in the struggle between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, as well as in the contentious relationship between the Church and the world. In his typological interpretation, Augustine saw Abel as a type of Christ, who was killed by the Jews, those who had rejected God and the one whom he had sent.[104] Abel was also a type for the Church, those who have been made children of God through faith in Christ, especially over against the empty, 'earthly observances' carried on from the Old Testament by the Jews who

[102] Augustine, *City of God*, 60.

[103] Augustine, *City of God*, 60.

[104] Augustine, *City of God*, 61., writes, "How [Cain] furthermore was a type of the Jews, that killed Christ the true Shepherd, prefigured in the shepherd Abel, I spare to relate…"

refused to repent and believe the Gospel.[105]

Martin Luther, the Augustinian monk and doctor of theology, carried Augustine's interpretation into the Reformation period. Echoing Augustine's image of two cities, Luther discusses two churches in this world: one of faith in God, and one based on the works of man.[106]

As one might expect, Luther ignores any supposed differences in the quality of the sacrifices and instead hammers home the understanding that faith is key to the story.[107] From verse 1 in Gen 4 through the rest of the account, Luther sees faith playing the most important role in every aspect of the story. For example, Luther sees Eve's exclamation at Cain's birth to be one of joy because of the belief that God had fulfilled his promise in chapter 3, the promise of the seed which would come to crush the head of the serpent.[108] This same faith is what sets Abel apart from Cain. Luther argues that Cain did not have faith in the Word and promise of God, which is fulfilled in Christ:

> Abel, however, by faith held to the promise given to Adam, his father, concerning the Saviour. This faith was the reason why he 'offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh' (Heb. 11:4)."[109]

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[105] Benjamins, "Augustine on Cain and Abel," 132, points out, "As Cain's sacrifice is rejected and Abel's sacrifice is accepted, so the faith of the New Testament is preferred to the earthly observances of the Old Testament. If Cain had obeyed God, he would have ruled over sin. Likewise, the Jews 'of whom all these things are a figure' would have rules over their sins. But instead, ignorant of God's righteousness, they are proud of the works of the law and have stumbled."

[106] Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*, 96.

[107] Lewis, "The Offering of Abel," 493, summarizes, "Luther rejects Lyra's suggestion that Cain had offered only chaff. The fault lay not in the materials offered but in the person of the one making the offering. Faith added value to Abel's offering. Cain put his trust in his primogeniture while he despised his brother as an insignificant, worthless being."

[108] LW 1:242.

[109] Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*, 93.

Referencing Hebrews 11:4, Luther makes a distinction between Cain and Abel based on their faith. Cain had no faith, and thus his offering was rejected. Abel had faith, and thus he and his sacrifice were regarded.

Luther carries this understanding through to the end of the account. In Luther's eyes, God's curse for Cain was about much more than a curse to wander the earth and never be able to reap the strength of the earth. It was a curse that Cain would be forever separate from the people of God, with all the benefits and blessings therein.

> The fact that Cain was cursed must be understood in the sense that he was excluded from the (*hope of the*) promised Seed. There should not come from him the Saviour and the blessing (*of His redemption*)…Thus there began the two churches which opposed each other bitterly. The one was that of Adam and all believers (*in Christ*) who had the hope and promise of the blessed Saviour. The other was that of Cain who forfeited this promise by (*his*) sin and could never regain it.[110]

Following this argument, Luther concludes that Cain has thus been "excommunicated" from Adam's family and from the Church, where he wanders apart from the grace and salvation of God, which is received by faith alone.[111]

Modern scholars also continue to interpret the story through the lens of faith, doing so with Biblical reference and warrant. LaCocque, for example, argues that Cain counts on the alleged blindness of God (cf. Ps 10:11; 94:7) associated with human murdering (cf. Ps. 94:11, which dubs human thoughts as *hebel,* "breath/emptiness"). Referring to Crenshaw, LaCocque sees Cain's life as one of 'practical atheism.' His appeal is to the first verses of Pss 14 and 53, both of which state, "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God" (ESV). This 'practical atheism' translates into action in verse 3 of each Psalm: "They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one" (ESV). LaCocque's

[110] Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*, 105.

[111] Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*, 105.

argument, then, is that these verses offer a striking parallel of Gen 4:7, in which Yahweh warns Cain, "If you do well…If you do not do well…[112]

Waltke argues that the reason is as simple as the Lord seeing Cain as unworthy to offer true worship, both in his heart and in his face:

> The sulking Cain was a sinner unworthy to worship. Cain's visible behavior confirms the LORD's privileged assessment of his heart. Cain's anger against God is written large on his face (vv 5–6; contrast Hab 2:4), and he progresses in sin from deficient worship to fractricide (v 8). Cain's speech, disclosing his unregenerate heart, condemns him. His sarcastic question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" betrays both his callousness against God and his hate of his brother made in God's image (v 9). He calls into question God's wisdom, justice, and love and attempts to justify himself, claiming: "My punishment is more that I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence" (vv 13–14). Even after God mitigates his sentence (v 15), he fails to respond to God's grace (v 16).[113]

Like many who have come before, modern scholars will also use Cain's and Abel's respective names as evidence for the argument that Cain lacked faith in God, while Abel's faith was strong. Cain, the one who 'acquires,' is simply trying to manipulate God. On the other hand, Abel, the one who is but a 'breath,' relies on God for everything in his day-to-day life.[114] Robert Candlish argues,

> But Cain went about to establish a righteousness of his own. He brought his offering as one entitled, in his own name, to present it, – as one seeking, by means of it, to conciliate or satisfy his God…it was the cold and calculating homage of a contented self-confidence, paying, more or less conscientiously, its due to God, with heart

[112] LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocence*, 40.

[113] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 370.

[114] Allen, "Mixed Economies," 50, argues, "Cain is depicted as trying to control and possess God's favor so that he might possess more "immovable property" of the worldly realm. His sacrificial disposition is one of hedging his bets with God, manipulating the divine realm in order to reap some earthly benefit—for example, more rain, a good harvest, or a greater surplus. Cain begins to cultivate not only the earth, but heaven as well. Cain's rejected sacrifice was a calculus designed to acquire something back from God—and thereby withholding something essential from God. In contrast, Abel's lifestyle demands a day-to-day trust in the tribe, the herd, and God. Given the pastoral nomadic model of life, the Abel character aspires to offer the best he has, without reservation, while claiming nothing as his own. With no surplus on which to rely, Abel may lose his best lamb today, the choicest meat, the most coveted offering, yet the character still implicitly trusts God to provide for tomorrow." See also Radiša Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth, and the Meaning of Human Life as Portrayed in the Books of Genesis and Ecclesiastes," *AUSS* 44 (2006), 204. Antic further states, like Ambrose, that their faith is reflected in the alleged quality of their sacrifices.

> unbroken by any true sense of sin, and spirit unsubdued by any melting sight of the riches of redeeming love.[115]

This sense of Cain's own self-righteousness is a common theme in the arguments of modern scholars who follow Augustine and Luther. Again, Candlish argues, "The acceptance of the person must precede the acceptance of the service; and the acceptance of the person is by faith."[116] Sidney Greidanus agrees, writing,

> The Lord looks on the *person* before He looks at the gift. "The LORD looked with favor on *Abel* and his offering" (v. 4). The Lord looks first at the heart of a person, at his or her motivation, before He looks at the person's offering. "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did" (Heb. 11:4).[117]

Cain, who trusted in his own works and in his own power would never have been able to offer an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord. After all, any offering given in any spirit other than the spirit of faith is given in sin.[118] On the other hand, Abel, who was full of faith, was accepted even before he brought his offering to the Lord. This, then, is what the Lord's warning to Cain in 4:7 was about. It was a call to faith for Cain,[119] who up until that point lacked it entirely.[120]

Further evidence from chapter 4 is found in how Cain reacted to the Lord.

> Cain reveals his disposition, as often happens, when he is rebuked. He is angry (Gen 4:5). Here is sufficient evidence that Cain's attitude prior to his sacrifice is perverse (cf. 1 John 3:12). By contrast Abel as a person of faith was accepted (Heb 11:4). The

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[115] Robert Candlish, *Studies in Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979), 96.

[116] Candlish, *Studies in Genesis*, 95.

[117] Greidanus, "Preaching Christ form the Cain and Abel Narrative," 392.

[118] Candlish, 94, writes, "To trust the mere animal sacrifice,– the mere bodily service,– would have been superstition. To reject that sacrifice, in its spiritual and typical meaning, and to appear before God, with whatever gifts, without atoning blood, as Cain did,– was infidelity."

[119] Bruce, *Hebrews*, 283, argues, "The unvarnished Masoretic text makes the situation plain enough; since Cain was told that he would be accepted if he did well, it follows that Abel was accepted because he did well – because, in other words, he was righteous."

[120] Bruce, *Hebrews*, 281, writes, "[In line with the] later prophetic teaching about sacrifice, sacrifice is acceptable to God not for its material content, but insofar as it is the outward expression of a devoted and obedient heart. Let Cain gain the mastery over the sin which threatens to be his undoing, and his sacrifice will be accepted as readily as Abel's was."

> attitude, rather than the materials of sacrifice, was decisive in Yahweh's response to the sacrifice.[121]

Yet, "Cain has no right to complain, and no reason to despair. He has no right to complain of his not being favourably received, as if a wrong were done to him, – as if he were deprived of his due. He knows, that "if he doeth well, he will certainly be accepted."[122] Because of his lack of faith, Cain can neither see nor receive this warning from the Lord, and instead murders his brother. But, when the Lord confronts Cain, asking him for the location of his brother, he basically lies and responds with a sarcastic question: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9, ESV). Cain thus shows himself to have fallen prey to the intensification of sin, for whereas Adam told the truth (even if he was deflecting), Cain boldly lies to Yahweh's face.[123] When the Lord responds, then, he appeals to the voice of Abel's blood, which cries out for justice. He has been slain unjustly by a wicked, faithless man. As with Augustine and Luther, some modern scholars see this as typifying the blood of the Lord Jesus, who was unjustly crucified by evil men. [124]

As has become quite evident, scholars ancient and modern rely heavily on New Testament[125] texts to make the argument that Cain was rejected because of his lack of faith, while Abel was regarded because of his faith. Hebrews 11:4 is the prime example and most often quoted. It reads, "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through

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[121] Elmer Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 3rd ed. (N. Richland Hills: BIBAL, 1998), 58.

[122] Candlish, *Studies in Genesis*, 97.

[123] Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth," 204–5.

[124] Bruce, *Hebrews*, 361, writes, "Abel's blood cried out to God from the ground, protesting against his murder and appealing for vindication; but the blood of Christ brings a message of cleansing, forgiveness, and peace with God to all who place their faith in him." See Hebrews 12:24.

[125] There are also occasional references to Old Testament texts, besides Pss 14 and 53, which were already listed. For example, Kidner, *Genesis,* 75, refers to Prov 21:27.

which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks" (ESV). The argument is that the brothers had different dispositions: one faithful, and the other selfish.[126] 1 John 3:12 is also another popular example, as it reads, "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous" (ESV).[127] Scholars are also eager to appeal to Jesus' words in the Gospels. For example, in Matthew 23:35, Jesus says, " So that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar" (ESV).[128] Jesus calls Abel righteous, which fits in with the greater New Testament connection between righteousness and faith.[129]

With these references from the rest of Scripture, is it an open-and-shut case? Other scholars are quick to point out that these references hardly make a solid case in favor of faith being the key to understanding the differences between the brothers in Gen 4. Sidney Breitbart pushes back on the idea that Cain was faithless. He insists that Cain actually showed his faithfulness by being the first to have the idea to bring a sacrifice to God (cf. Gen 4:3).[130] Tom Hilhorst argues that the understanding of Hebrews 11 championed by Augustine, Luther, and others "represents

[126] Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth," 204, writes, Hebrews 11:4 points out that 'by faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain,' suggesting that the different motives of the two brothers, known only to God, account for their different treatment." Antic also states, like Ambrose, that their faith is reflected in the alleged quality of their sacrifices.

[127] Kidner, *Genesis*, 75, argues, "The New Testament draws out the further important implication that Cain's life, unlike Abel's gave the lite to his offering (1 Jn. 3:12) and that Abel's faith was decisive for his acceptance (Heb. 11:4)."

[128] See, for example, Hayward, "What Did Cain Do Wrong?", 109, 112.

[129] Cf. Rom 3:21–28; 4:13–25. See also Luke 18:9–14, though "faith" is not explicitly mentioned.

[130] Breitbart, "Cain and Abel Narratives," 123. "Cain first had the idea of sacrifice to God, without the incentive of a promise by God as was the case with Abraham. This indicates the natural expression of Cain's innate spiritual quality."

a departure from the Genesis narrative, both in its Hebrew and Septuagint forms."[131] In other words, nothing in the text of the MT or LXX would put forth the conclusion that Cain was faithless and Abel full of faith. Instead, the discussion should center on what "by faith" actually means in Hebrews 11.[132] Robert Hayward concludes that the Greek of Hebrews 11:4 is ambiguous, at best, and should not be used to make the argument that Abel was regarded because of faith, while Cain lacked faith altogether.[133]

Scholars who question the conclusion that Cain lacked faith seem to be on the right track. Not only is the language of Hebrews 11:4 ambiguous, an argument can easily be made to counter the use of 1 John 3:12, Matthew 23:35, and other texts. Clearly, Abel is described as righteous, while Cain as wicked. But, must the wickedness of Cain be the *cause* of his disregard by God? Or, could the wickedness the New Testament describes simply be the result of Cain's murder of his brother? Obviously, the text does not say.

As has been pointed out on numerous occasions, the text of Gen 4 also seems utterly

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[131] Hilhorst, "Abel's Speaking," 122.

[132] Hilhorst, "Abel's Speaking," 123, writes, "What exactly does [faith] mean here?...Faith thus seems to comprise a double conviction: that the invisible God exists and that he has in store an eternal reward for the righteous."

[133] Hayward, "What Did Cain Do Wrong?", 109., argues, "According to this verse, what Abel offered was a *thysia*, so there is no dependence on LXX Gen 4:3–5 at this particular point. It is tantalizingly described as *pleiona thysian*, literally 'a more sacrifice,' which would indicate a more substantial and satisfactory offering than Cain's. The verse also presents textual and exegetical issues which have long been debated (Attridge 1989, 305, 316–317). Whether we retain this verse as translated here (it represents the reading of all the textual witnesses at this point), or resort to conjectural emendation and read *hēdion thysian*, 'a more pleasing sacrifice,' however, the result is the same: Abel's sacrifice was accepted because in some sense it was superior to Cain's (Bruce 1964, 282; Attridge 1989, 305). Through Abel's sacrifice, or through his faith—the Greek is ambiguous and may refer to either one, or even both of these things—he was attested as being 'just' (Attridge 1989, 316). As we have seen, the same epithet was applied to Abel in Matt 23:35, yet this passage differs from the passage in the Gospel in its explicit association of Abel's sacrifice with his status as just. The following clause, 'God bearing witness over (or: in respect of) his gifts,' is plagued with textual uncertainty, though the reading adopted here is generally accepted (Bruce 1961, 282; Attridge 1989, 316–317). Here the author seems to recall the description of Abel's offering as 'gifts' in LXX Gen 4:4, and, if the LXX is in mind here, as would seem probable, then the notion that God bore witness or attested to Abel's offering would be doing duty, as it were, for the LXX's declaration that God *epeiden*, 'looked upon' Abel's gifts. Cain, we may infer, was given no such divine 'witness' regarding his offering. In the concluding remark, however, the author of the epistle takes leave of the LXX altogether, declaring that through his faith or his sacrifice—the language is again ambiguous—Abel still speaks (Attridge 1989, 317, 376–377)."

unconcerned with the question of why Cain and his offering were rejected. What the text does describe, however, is Yahweh's appeal to Cain: that he "do well" to "be accepted," and that he "must rule over" the sin that is lying down at his door (4:7). The fact that Cain brought a sacrifice means that he, at the very least, is concerned with pleasing God. It would be hard to argue, based on the actions found in Gen 4:1–7, that Cain was without faith. Even more, it would be almost impossible to imagine that Cain, who is of the second generation of *all of mankind*, would somehow be, as was described earlier, a 'practical atheist.'[134] Cain's parents knew the Lord intimately, the God who walked with them in the Garden in the cool of the day. This same God seems also to have appeared to and talked with Cain in some way in chapter 4. If anything, Cain is not an atheist, but a frustrated human being struggling with the effects of sin, which entered the world through his parents. While it is convenient, helpful, and even faithful to the entirety of the Scriptures to see Cain and Abel as typifying events that will come much later, especially in Jesus and the Church, it is a stretch to then apply everything from the later events, especially an understanding of faith and faithfulness, to the text of Gen 4. While the argument from the basis of faith may be complete, and even convincing at times, there is simply too much imported into the text of Gen 4 to make it an open-and-shut case.

In the end, it is difficult, even impossible, to see exactly what God is doing in Gen 4. Brevard Childs offers a helpful, contextual summary:

> The understanding of the purpose of God in his deeds is therefore inextricably tied to the condition of the one viewing God's works. There is a need for God's grace, the gift of a true perception, in order to see what God is doing in the world.[135]

[134] Even more, the idea of 'atheism' *per se* is a distinctly modern idea. Ancient peoples had a tendency to see the divine in everything, not in nothing. To deny the existence of God (or gods) would be to deny reality itself.

[135] Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 47.

What is God doing in the world? Those who read the text of Gen 4 may not be able to know for sure. But, that has not stopped some from looking to God himself as the cause of and reason for Cain's rejection. As is about to be made evident, one of the main characters, who has often been simply overlooked in the story, may be the key to understanding why Cain was rejected and Abel shown favor. The Lord himself might be to blame.

CHAPTER FOUR

CRAB APPLE: IS GOD TO BLAME?

Thus far, a brief history of interpretation has traced two main categories of answers to the question of God's favor: Cain's sacrifice and Cain himself. Each has its respective complications and issues,[1] some more obvious than others. But, one prevalent category remains. For some scholars, when the details from the text seem to point in no apparent direction, and when every other argument is exhausted, the only place to point the finger is heavenward.[2] The remaining option, in their eyes, is to blame God for the entire account.

The ambiguity of the text itself leads some to sympathize with Cain.[3] With the evidence available, God's decision seems, at best, unfair, and at worst, unjust.[4] As the argument goes, Cain appeared to do everything correctly, in relation to the cultic requirements (or lack thereof) in bringing his offering to Yahweh. Even more, there appears to be nothing necessarily wrong

[1] Edwin M. Good, *Genesis 1–11: Tales of the Earliest World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 49, summarizes, "Yahweh gives no indication that Qayin's offering was in any way wrong. He just doesn't accept it. The later sacrificial system in the Hebrew law allowed for both animal and vegetable offerings, though it seems that the animal offerings were more expensive and prestigious. Hebel was the herdsman; Qayin, the farmer. Why should that be reason enough for Hebel and his sacrifice to be accepted where Qayin and his were not? Yahweh gives no reason."

[2] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 2, concludes, "Even when details are provided, they often raise questions rather than provide answers. For instance, why should the first murderer received divine protection and be allowed to marry, raise a family and initiate a monumental building project? How, in light of the crime, is this justice for murdered Abel? Even more significantly, what does this say about God and the way that the affairs of the world are handled by the divine?"

[3] For example, Edenburg, "From Eden to Babylon," 159–60, writes, "This type of ambiguity invites the reader to identify with Cain, for who would *not* be downcast under similar circumstances? In v. 7, YHWH warns Cain about 'doing good,' but at this point in the story both Cain and the reader are confused about what, if anything, he has done wrong."

[4] Joseph Klein, "How Job Fulfills God's Word to Cain," *BRev* 9 (1993): 41–42, asks, "Why is Cain so upset? Perhaps it is because God's behavior was more than unfair, it was unjust. Cain had much more invested in his offering than his brother. As a farmer, Cain had to prepare the ground, secure and then plant his seeds, tend and take care of the field, harvesting its fruit at the right time. As a 'tiller of the soil,' Cain devoted time and energy to the production of the fruit he brought to the Lord. In bringing his gift, he was truly giving the Lord something of himself. His brother, on the other hand, brought an offering of little personal sacrifice. Sheep feed themselves, take care of themselves and produce new sheep all by themselves."

with Cain himself. In fact, Cain just as well may have had pure intentions. Yet, God nonetheless refuses to give any regard to Cain or his sacrifice. Cain, then, seems to have the right to be angry, as the actions of the Lord cause an existential crisis for Cain.[5]

What is the reader to make of this? Is God simply capricious in his decision to favor Abel and not Cain? If so, then the blame for Abel's murder lies primarily on God's shoulders.[6] Does Yahweh favor the younger brother over the older simply because he is younger? If so, then the reader, like Cain, will have important questions with which to struggle as a result. Is God testing Cain? If that is the case, then Cain seems to be left with the unenviable task of reading the mind of God.[7] In the end, the reader is also left wondering what, exactly, the Lord was asking of Cain.[8]

Was It That God Was Completely Arbitrary in Favoring One Over the Other?

Beginning in the twentieth century, scholars begin to ask whether the reasoning behind Yahweh's decision to favor Abel and not Cain is simply unknowable, at best, or indiscriminate and capricious, at worst. Two influential scholars in particular pose these questions, which later scholars continue to debate. The first is the German scholar Claus Westermann. His argument stems, in part, from a lack of strong evidence in favor of viewing either Cain's offering or Cain himself as deficient. Rather, he traces the reason for Yahweh's choice to a will that is immutable

[5] Jørstad, "Ground That Opened Its Mouth," 709, argues, "It would be a mistake to consider Cain's anger an overblown reaction to a minor slight; God's refusal to look on Cain's gift strikes directly at Cain's basic identity, an identity that the writer of Genesis has taken pains to emphasize."

[6] Peels, "World's First Murder," 36, concludes, "In this passage, do we not encounter a God who is essentially unpredictable and in the end starts the spiral of violence, or is at least partly responsible for it?"

[7] Perry, "Cain's Sin," 262, asks, "Is the text asking us to read God's mind? Or, more cleverly and as we shall argue, is God portrayed as leaving that decision up to Cain alone, with the issue being less reading God's mind than his own?"

[8] Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 46, makes the point that already in the second generation of humanity, there is a major lack of understanding of what God's will actually is. He writes, "There is a massive disruption which has obscured God's will in making himself known to humanity…That there has been a major disruption between God and his creation recurs throughout the entire Old Testament" [Isa 1:2–3; 42:19–20; Hos 13:2; Ps 106:20–21; Hos 4:1–3]."

in itself and unknowable to humankind.

> When such an experience as the brothers had is traced back to a divine action, then this is a sign that it is something immutable. It is fated by God to be so. God's disregard for Cain's sacrifice does not go back to Cain's attitude nor to a sacrifice that was not right nor to an incorrect way of offering the sacrifice. It is saying something about the immutable; it happens so.[9]

For Westermann, there is no indication in the text that Cain or his sacrifice should be regarded as somehow inferior to Abel or his sacrifice. Instead, where Westermann sees equality in the midst of two brothers, he is left only with an inequality caused by the unknowable will of God. In the end, mankind can neither understand nor manipulate this will, but simply know that inequality among brothers will arise because of Yahweh himself.[10] Mankind must, in a sense, simply 'live with it' and its consequences.[11]

Following Westermann, Walter Brueggemann also points fingers at Yahweh as the sole cause of Cain's rejection. But, Brueggemann labels Yahweh as capricious[12] and writes that, while Cain is left to deal with Yahweh's unfair verdict, the Lord himself is free to choose and to act as he pleases.[13] His argument extends into the remainder of Genesis, as he contends that

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[9] Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 296.

[10] Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 297, explains, "Inequality enters where there should be equality. This is what the story is about. The point of departure is equality; both have the means of subsistence in the division of labor. Both recognize the give in their gifts and therefore both are linked with the power which is the source of blessing. Now inequality enters in; it has its origin in the regard of God. Blessing or its absence depends on the regard of God. It is a misunderstanding of the real meaning to look for the reason for the inequality of God's regard. The narrator wants to say that in the last analysis there is something inexplicable in the origin of this inequality. It does not consist in application, in attitude or in any circumstance that one can control. When such inequality between equals arises, it rests of a decision that is beyond human manipulation. The reason why God regards Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's must remain without explanation. And the narrator wants to make clear that this is one of the decisive motifs for conflict wherever there are brothers."

[11] Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 303, concludes, "It is a question of preference which belongs to God; that alone arouses the envy that leads to murder. When brothers lives side-by-side, equal and with equal rights, then inequality is a possibility. The one is accepted, the other is not. Because this inequality is conditioned by God's regard, then humankind must live with it and also with the possibility of the murder of a brother."

[12] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 61.

[13] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 56, writes, "The trouble comes not from Cain, but from Yahweh, the strange God of Israel. Inexplicably, Yahweh chooses – accepts and rejects. Conventional interpretation is too hard on Cain and

Yahweh consistently "is there to disrupt, to create tensions, and to evoke the shadowy side of reality."[14] Brueggemann goes so far as to imply that God, while not quite an enemy of Cain *per se*, certainly is playing a dangerous game with Cain and Abel.[15] In the end, there is no other explanation for what occurs in the story, and the way forward is left up to the reader.

Other scholars have continued to see the story in a similar light. They argue that, from the text, all that the reader can glean is that God is arbitrary at best,[16] and the cruel source of Cain's anger (and Abel's death!) at worst.[17] "God's act of discrimination preceded and provoked rivalry and resentment that produced murder, fratricide."[18] What God has in mind is simply unknowable, and humankind must learn to make do with this reality.[19]

In Cain's response to Yahweh after Abel's murder, Sidney Breitbart sees an honest question from Cain:

> Cain answered God's question with '*Am I my brother's keeper?*' (v. 9), perhaps meaning, "Am I the only one to be my brother's keeper? You, God, are just as

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too easy on Yahweh. It is Yahweh who transforms a normal report into a life/death story for us and about us. Essential to the plot is the capricious freedom of Yahweh. Like the narrator, we must resist every effort to explain it. There is nothing here of Yahweh preferring cowboys to farmers. There is nothing here to disqualify Cain…Life is unfair. God is free."

[14] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 57.

[15] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 60, concludes, "It may well be asked if God is a gamesman, setting such dangerous alternatives and playing with this elder son whom he has so easily rejected. Yes, says the story. The story brings to expression the haunting presence of God, known to every enraged brother or sister. God presents himself not quite enemy, surely not friend, certainly not advocate, finally leaving it fully 'up to us.'"

[16] Joel S. Kaminsky, "The Theology of Genesis," *Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Petersen; Leiden, Brill, 2012): 650, argues, "God's enigmatic speech to Cain focuses upon Cain's reaction to God's favoritism of Abel, not upon the quality of Cain's offering (Gen 4:6–7), thus highlighting the mysterious and seemingly arbitrary nature of God's choice."

[17] Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), 45, writes, "This is the impression of the text. Repudiated by God, Cain sank into a black depression. Whereupon God, with a cruelty as startling as it was unprovoked, asked why he looked so crestfallen, why he was so depressed. As though He did not know, as though He was not the cause!"

[18] Ollenburger, "Creation and Peace," 152.

[19] John H. Hewett, "Genesis 2:4b–3:31; 4:2–16; 9:20–27; 19:30–38," *RevExp* 86 (1989): 238, concludes, "We do not know why God regarded Abel's sacrifice with favor and granted him the blessing. The inequality injected into their brotherly relations here is inexplicable. It is God's doing. God's creatures are to accept that, even if it means a struggle."

> responsible. Why did you not stop me from killing your creation?" Cain did not understand God's last words of advice that he can be the master of his choice, or perhaps he did not care to listen to God because Cain considered God's preference as very unfair.[20]

Joel Hewitt takes this even farther, arguing that Cain has no choice but to take control of an unfair situation if he seeks to become a complete and mature human being.[21]

Some go so far as to attribute the source of all violence and hatred to God.[22] As Wiesel argues, Cain really had no choice in the end. Yahweh pushed him to his limit and beyond, forcing him into a situation where he had no option but to murder his brother.[23] This attribution extends into the current world of scholarship. As Regina Schwartz argues, humans continue to live in a world of scarcity, including the scarcity of the favor of a God who, in his own will and way, prefers some and leaves others to fend for themselves.[24] Thus, the story becomes a saddening tale of tragedy, apathy, and fatalism, where men and women across the world must

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[20] Breitbart, "Cain and Abel Narratives," 123.

[21] Hewett, "Genesis," 238–9, writes, "Abel dies and is relegated to the background – a victim, and no more. The story is Cain's. He is the Everyman who works hard, minds his own business, makes his offering to God, and is still refused the blessing for no reason he can fathom. God's sovereign preference for Abel is more than Cain can stand. So, he takes control of the situation and removes his competitor for God's favor. He actualizes himself through the murder of his brother, saying, 'he must decrease so I can increase.'"

[22] Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 83, writes, that the origin of hatred and violence is scarcity. "And it seems that even God, the very source of blessings, does not have enough to go around."

[23] Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, 46, argues, "Judging by the tone and rhythm of the verbal exchange, it would appear that God was doing His utmost to multiply the pressures on Cain and push him to the limits of his endurance. By rejecting him, by ridiculing him, by denying his acts all spiritual meaning, God seems to have tried to create a kind of maladjustment: Cain would no longer know the difference between what was just and what was not…Cain could not help but kill: he did not choose the crime; instead, the crime chose him."

[24] Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 3–4, writes, "What kind of God is this who chooses one sacrifice over the other? This God who excludes some and prefers others, who casts some out, is a monotheistic God – monotheistic not only because he demands allegiance to himself alone but because he confers his favor on one alone. While the biblical God certainly does not always govern the universe this way, the rule presupposed and enforced here, in the story of Cain and Abel, is that there can be no multiple allegiances, neither directed toward the deity nor, apparently, emanating from him. Cain kills in the rage of his exclusion. And the circle is vicious: because Cain is outcast, Abel is murdered and Cain is cast out. We are the descendants of Cain because we too live in a world where some are cast out, a world in which whatever law of scarcity made that ancient story describe only one sacrifice as acceptable – a scarcity of goods, land, labor, or whatever – still prevails to dictate the terms of a ferocious and fatal competition. Some lose."

simply deal with the consequences of being born in a world created by a capricious deity.

However, many modern scholars are quick to rebut the argument that God is fickle, even sinister, when it comes to showing favor to individuals and groups. Spina offers a helpful and even-handed commentary on this very issue when he writes,

> [Even if] Yahweh's response was unrelated to the content of the offerings, the way they were presented, or the persons who brought them forward, that does not necessarily mean that the deity was being utterly capricious. It is one thing to say Yahweh's reaction was not based on the behavior or attitude of the two brothers. It is quite another to assert that Yahweh was merely operating on what amounted to whim.[25]

Indeed, the lack of explanation by the author of Genesis is glaring. If the point of the story were simply God's freedom and, as it were, his arbitrary nature, then why is there no indication in the text, let alone an argument from any ancient Jewish or Christian scholars, that would lead to such a conclusion? In fact, quite the opposite is the case.[26] Both ancient scholars and the text itself give the picture not of a God who is capricious or menacing, but rather a God who is dealing with a man, indeed, with an entire human nature, that finds itself very quickly becoming exponentially wickeder.[27]

Dominic Rudman summarizes the arguments against recognizing a capricious and random deity in the words of Gen 4 when he writes,

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[25] Spina, "Ground for Cain's Rejection," 321.

[26] LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocent*, 11, rightly argues, "This narrative gap has led some scholars to conclude that the deity acts capriciously – even sadistically – toward Cain. For what reason, they do not say. Pure divine arbitrariness? Then, J's admirable sobriety is turned against him for not being more explicit…J felt no necessity to explain that God is free to agree more with some offerings than with others. J assumed that his audience would *not* conclude that the deity was acting capriciously but would rather question either the kind of sacrifice disregarded by God or the integrity of the one offering it. No ancient commentator, Jewish or Christian, missed that point. From the time of the incipient biblical traditions down to the present post-modern period, there has been a faithful confidence that God is *not* capricious – a term that fits pagan gods; not even Job believed that he is. God is unfathomable, yes; erratic, no. It belongs to a false conception of God to apply a logic according to which if God does not shield the innocent from being slaughtered, he has the power to do so but does not (perhaps by whim)."

[27] Peels, "World's First Murder," 38, writes, "Gen 4 fits seamlessly in the structure of the book of Genesis. Not a capricious and inscrutable God, but rather man himself is responsible for the thrust to violence that corrupts creation and brings a curse on man. It is man who willingly and knowingly forces the bursting of the dike."

> God's puzzled reaction to Cain's anger suggests that what we are dealing with here is more than divine ambiguity. Even if the precise nature of Cain's transgression is unclear, some omission is implied by Yahweh's words…For the first time we see a moral or ethical expectation on the part of God.[28]

Was It That God Simply Favors The Younger Brother?

The fact that God is neither capricious nor random does not, however, mean that God is not the source of the conflict and the answer to the question of why Cain is not regarded in the same way as his brother Abel. Scholars in the twentieth century have argued from the perspective of the wider Old Testament (and, in some cases, New Testament)[29] witness that Yahweh simply favors the younger brother over the older.[30] In this way, he is not capricious, but consistent. Though he largely argues for an unknowable, even dangerous, assessment of Yahweh in the book of Genesis,[31] Brueggemann still points out that, throughout Genesis as a whole, the firstborn does not fare well.[32] Here, in Gen 4, the conflict arises because Cain recognizes that Yahweh is favoring his younger brother, and Cain himself is afraid of losing his birthright.[33]

What evidence might there be in the text for such an argument? After all, there is again no mention of Adam and Eve favoring the firstborn, let alone explicit mention of Yahweh himself favoring the younger brother. Cassuto points out that the terseness of Abel's mention might give weight to the custom of firstborn lordship.[34] For his part, Abel, whose name arguably

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[28] Rudman, "A Little Knowledge," 464.

[29] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 62, wonders whether there are connections between Gen 4 and Luke 15, where Jesus tells the so-called Parable of the Prodigal Son.

[30] Lohr, "Righteous Abel," 486, writes, "The reasons for Yhwh's choice of Abel are not to be readily found in the Hebrew text. A good alternative to finding fault with Cain as a reason for his lack of divine favor is to understand the story via a theme common to Genesis: divine choosing – particularly of the later-born son."

[31] See the discussion in the previous subsection.

[32] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 55.

[33] Perry, "Cain's Sin," 259.

[34] Cassuto, *Commentary*, 202.

means “breath” or “emptiness,”[35] is named thus, according to Luther, because “Cain, [Adam and Eve] believed, would accomplish everything (their redemption from sin), while Abel would do nothing.”[36] Luther also finds evidence for this in the professions *given* to each child. He argues that the parents gave Cain too much honor as the one who would carry on the responsibilities of his father Adam, therefore leading to God having to show favor to Abel as a grand reversal.[37]

Brigitte Kahl adds evidence from the wider Old Testament, as well as from other social and literary contexts, when she writes,

> [Abel’s dependence on Cain] is stressed in the social and literary context. In the patriarchal system of Israel the first-born son, being the successor to the father as family head, was always considered superior to the second-born…Might this not be the reason why God in Genesis 4:4 takes special care of him? The context of the Book of Genesis could well support this thesis. Among the brother-couples dealt with there is not a single one where the first-born gets his traditionally sanctioned legal right. It is always the second-born who takes his place.[38]

Some examples include Yahweh’s favor of Isaac over Ishmael (Gen 17:19–21), the prophecy that Esau would serve Jacob (25:23), the intriguing case of the birth of Perez and Zerah (38:27–30), and Jacob’s blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh (48:13–20), among other examples.[39]

In the greater context of the Old Testament, this argument is tempting. Especially in Genesis itself, there are any number of instances of Yahweh favoring the younger sibling over the firstborn son. However, two points should be made. First, just because Yahweh favors one over the other in other instances does not mean that this is a necessary part of his very nature. Second, in each instance, it seems that Yahweh is, as Luther wrote earlier, doing so in a ‘grand

[35] See the discussion under verse 1 of chapter one above.

[36] Luther, *Genesis*, 92.

[37] Luther, *Genesis*, 92.

[38] Kahl, “Human Culture,” 134.

[39] In the case of Jacob’s sons in Genesis 49, for example, it is his *fourth* son, Judah, whom he blesses.

reversal.' In other words, one son (the firstborn) is favored by his parents (or others), and thus Yahweh is acting as an all-powerful counterbalance. If that is the case here, the text gives no indication that Cain is favored by his parents, unless one infers from Eve's exclamation, as well as Abel's name and lack of discourse, that this is the case. In the end, the argument that Yahweh favors the younger *simply because he is younger* may be an argument based on any number of other examples in Genesis and the wider Old Testament, but it remains in Gen 4 an argument that fails to break through the silence of the author, and the lack of a word from God himself.

Kaminsky offers a helpful conclusion:

> "This short episode is the first of a host of stories in Genesis in which God's favor toward a specific person sets off the jealousy of those not chosen…While critics have suggested various reasons why God prefers Abel's offering to Cain's, the text remains enigmatic. Equally important is that God's favor toward Abel does not indicate that Cain is hated or cut off from God. Thus it is Cain with whom God discourses, not Abel. It is only after Cain commits murder that he is driven from God's presence."[40]

God may favor Abel, but the text is unclear as to the reason being Cain's place in the birth order. In fact, though Cain is not regarded initially, Yahweh offers Cain what seems to be a path toward acceptance in vv. 6–7, which Cain ultimately ignores. Yet, as will become apparent now, these verses may, in a different way, hold the key to understanding how God may still be the source of Cain's initial rejection and Abel's favor.

Was It That God Was Testing Cain?

Not all interpretive options have yet been exhausted. Though it seems Yahweh is not the capricious deity some make him out to be, and though there is no indication that Yahweh is favoring Abel simply because he is the younger brother, some scholars have begun to ask if this

[40] Kaminsky, "Theology of Genesis," 641.

entire account describes a test. In other words, Cain may have brought a fine sacrifice, and he may have done so with good intentions; but, as the argument goes, perhaps Yahweh is testing Cain to see how he will respond to disregard or perceived unfairness.[41] For some, it becomes the only way to make sense of what seems like an arbitrary choice of favor.[42]

In the text of Gen 4, the foundation for this argument is found in Cain's response to the sacrifice, as well as Yahweh's discourse, in vv. 5–7. In verse 5, the reader encounters Cain's sadness, frustration, and anger.[43] Obviously, he is reacting negatively to Yahweh's disregard. It seems likely that Cain's negative reaction is due to his expectation that Yahweh would show regard for his sacrifice. It also seems likely that Cain's reaction is intensified by the fact that his younger brother was regarded, while he himself was not. Whatever the reason or reasons, Cain is now in a situation in which he did not expect to find himself.

But, the point of the account, as the argument goes, becomes clear as Yahweh responds to Cain in his sullen state. In asking Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?" (Gen 4:6 ESV), he is not looking for information, but setting up Cain for a test that will affect the rest of his life.[44] Yahweh's words, then, should not be understood in any way as a rebuke of

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[41] Brown, *Ethos,* 165, argues, "There is no indication that Cain sinned at all by offering a deficient sacrifice, even though Abel wins Yahweh's favor. The matter-of-fact recounting of Yahweh's disregard for Cain's offering precludes any moralistic reading. The narrative spotlight focuses on Cain's reaction: inflamed with rage, "his face falls," he is frustrated and discontented… The 'lifting up' refers to the lifting up of Cain's face and can also connote Yahweh's favor. But if Cain cannot change his attitude and conduct, then a far more terrible danger lurks at the threshold. In short, Cain is not culpable for offering a deficient sacrifice, for the conundrum provoked by Yahweh's rejection occurs primarily in order to determine what Cain will do next (cf. 2:19), and therein lies his responsibility."

[42] For example, Edenburg, "From Eden to Babylon," 161, writes, "The concept of [God's obedience test] assumes that the subject is ignorant of being tested and has free choice, and that the outcome of the test is not known in advance. In order to test blind obedience and fear of God, it is essential that the conditions of the test be arbitrary, so that the subject not be swayed by the justification given for a command, prohibition, or other trial. In my opinion, the idea of the divine test is also fundamental to the story of Cain, for only within the setting of a test is it possible to make sense of the arbitrary dealings of God with Cain."

[43] See discussion of verse 5 in chapter 1 above for an examination of the possible options for understanding וַיִּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד וַיִּפְּלוּ פָּנָיו.

[44] Thomas L. Thompson, "Genesis 4 and the Pentateuch's Reiterative Discourse: Some Samaritan Themes,"

Cain, but rather "an expression of comfort and fatherly counsel, as though to say: My son, you have no reason to be grieved and dejected; bear in mind that *if you do well*, etc."[45] In other words, Yahweh is giving Cain a choice: if he does well, there will be a "lifting up" (שְׂאֵת); if he does not do well, then sin will become an overwhelming problem. Thus far, Cain has done nothing wrong, as the argument goes;[46] but Yahweh is testing him to "do well" in the face of adversity.[47] It is in the doing well that Cain will find his "lifting up."

But, what does it mean to "do well?"[48] The importance of this understanding cannot be overstated. If, as has been argued earlier, that doing well refers to Cain bringing the correct or a better sacrifice, then it is not a test so much as a command to redo what has already been done. If doing well means being more virtuous, then Yahweh's words are less a test and more a matter of introspection. But, if the reader understands Yahweh's words as a test, doing well almost certainly refers to Cain's reaction to Yahweh's disregard.

If, then, this is a test, Cain has two choices. Do well, and find a way to deal with Yahweh's disregard in a situation where he did not expect rejection, or allow sin and its desire to

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Samaria, Samarians, Samaritans, ed. József Zsengellér (New York, de Gruyter, 2011): 10, writes, "Yahweh's question to Cain: 'Why are you angry?' is entirely rhetorical. Rather than waiting for an answer he puts Cain to the test. Like Eve before him (Gen 2:16–17), Cain is given a singular, fate-determining choice."

[45] Cassuto, *Commentary*, 208.

[46] Hauser, "Thematic Links," 300, states, "The text offers no explicit reason why God looked with favor on the offering of Abel but did not look with favor on the offering of Cain. This is because the writer is not concerned with Yahweh's action but rather with Cain's response, as vv 5–6 clearly show."

[47] Klein, "How Job Fulfills God's Word to Cain," 43, argues, "What is Cain supposed to do well? Surely the nature of the offering is not what is referred to, for we are given no indication that his sacrifice was either insufficient or deficient. It must be that Cain is told that he if now 'does well' with how he handles the Lord's response to his offering, he will be lifted up, and if he does not, then sin will 'get him' Clearly he has not done anything wrong yet, the choice still is his: to do well or not."

[48] There is debate over the meaning of "doing well," as well as Yahweh is actually testing. Good, *Genesis 1–11*, 48, summarizes, "Is this a test of Qayin? It surely seems so, and he appears to take it as such. And if it is, what kind of test is it? Is it to see whether Qayin makes the correct response? If so, it is a fair test only if Qayin knows what the correct response is. Or is it to find out what response he will make? If that, then it illustrates again Yahweh's ignorance of the future, that he is searching for knowledge. Or might the test have to do with the fact that Qayin's occupation is like his father's, as a 'servant of the ground?'"

infiltrate his heart and rule over him.[49] Sin is described as lying in wait, desiring to take hold in Cain's life. If Yahweh's words are to be taken seriously, the argument goes, then there lies a very real and important choice for Cain to make. It is, in its very essence, a test of how Cain will respond to such a situation.[50]

As the reader quickly finds out, Cain does not pass the test. Instead, he ends up not only allowing anger and frustration to take hold, but takes that anger out on his brother by killing him in the field.[51] Instead of there being a "lifting up" of Cain's countenance, Cain himself instead "rises up" (וַיָּקָם) against his brother in violence.[52] He ignored the words of Yahweh and refused to take them to heart, instead allowing his sinful emotions to take root and grow.[53]

Thus, when Yahweh approaches Cain following the murder, and asks, "Where is Abel your brother?" (Gen 4:9 ESV), Cain acts as if he has no idea where his brother is. The escalation of sin becomes vividly evident, as Cain surpasses the misdeeds of his parents in any number of

[49] Klein, "How Job Fulfills God's Word to Cain," 43, summarizes, "Cain is being asked how he will respond to the pain of disregard, to divine indifference. If the world is not just, how is one to act in return? If one chooses well, there is 'uplift'; that is, if one accepts that bad things do sometimes happen to good people not because the people are bad or good but just because they live in a natural world where accidents naturally occur, then uplift comes from the knowledge that the Lord is not indifferent or uncaring, only waiting to respond to the right questions. And if one does not do well, a person will lash out at what he sees as an unjust world. The opportunity-to-sin waits, crouches, is coiled like a serpent outside the door of the person who is not able to control himself."

[50] Good, *Genesis 1–11*, 49, sees the test from a slightly different perspective, writing, "'Doing well' might have nothing to do with either sacrifices or morality. It can sometimes have an objective meaning, entailing matters going well in life and leading to positive feelings about life. 'If things are going well for you, you're lifted up,' happy, pleased with your life. 'But if things are not going well for you, then sin is crouching at your door;' you are in danger of attack from sin. But 'you can take charge of it.' You are not, then, the victim of your circumstance. In effect, 'Just get on with it.'"

[51] Fretheim, *God and World*, 78, argues, "Cain's dejected response to God's choice is not the problem as much as his failure to respond positively to God's interaction with him about it. God makes clear that Cain is able to master his anger."

[52] Brown, *Ethos*, 166, points out, "The apparition lurking at the threshold is the beast within. As much as Cain's father must master the land to yield its produce, Cain must master himself. Cain fails. He 'rises up,' as if he were the one 'crouching,' and kills his brother."

[53] Brown, *Ethos*, 166, continues, "Much is left unsaid in the narrative: Cain's dark and turbid impulses give rise to cold calculation; his predatory beast within is the source of premeditation. By mortally dominating Abel, Cain has allowed 'sin; to dominate him."

ways.[54] Outside of the Garden, Cain appears to be unable to make the choices using the 'knowledge' gained by his parents, who had eaten of the forbidden tree. Though Adam and Eve sought "knowledge of good and evil," when Yahweh asks Cain to "do good," he does not. Instead, he tries to hide behind a technical point, namely that he is not his brother's keeper. "Such an answer, however, is no answer, and Cain's denial of knowledge, captured by the image of the reversal of the Fall (3:6; 4:11) and its concomitant curse, becomes his undoing as its appropriation was the undoing of his parents."[55] Even more, Cain shows himself to be quite like the serpent in the Garden, using elusive language in his argument against the Lord. But, as when he confronts the serpent, Yahweh is not ignorant of the truth of what Cain has done.[56]

How could this have happened? Perry argues that Yahweh's oracle in vv. 6–7 is intentionally ambiguous. This vague challenge, in turn, leaves Cain with no clear path to accomplishing the "good" to which Yahweh exhorts him. Instead, Cain does what is forbidden, even though he does not understand that what he is doing is necessarily wrong.[57] More convincing, however, is the appeal to other, more evident tests throughout the Old Testament. The prime examples are in the near context. The account of Gen 2–3, specifically the command not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, could be viewed as a test, though that

[54] Rudman, "A Little Knowledge," 465, writes, "Cain, whose offering was rejected because he could not know God's wishes, now pretends not to know the whereabouts of his brother. Where his mother and father sought to go beyond the appointed boundaries of human knowledge, Cain retreats behind them – but in doing so implicitly challenges God's knowledge."

[55] Rudman, "A Little Knowledge," 466.

[56] Brown, *Ethos*, 167, points out, "Cain wins the technical point [about not being his brother's keeper], but loses the battle, however, for he cannot apply the expression in such a way as to disclaim all form of fraternal responsibility. Cain's cunning, like the serpent's, is a 'truthful' ruse."

[57] Perry, "Cain's Sin," traces some instances of what he calls "oracular ambiguity," appealing to the instructions in Gen 2:17 and subsequent appeal of Adam in 3:12, as well as to Yahweh's strange command to David in 2 Sam 24:1 to "number" (מְנֵה) Israel and Judah, after which Yahweh punishes David for taking a census (24:10 ff.). His argument is rather complex and is not all that convincing, but he argues nonetheless that the ambiguous nature of Yahweh's words constitute tests which cause his people to "ponder [their] worst fears and suspicions."

understanding is debatable. Much more clearly can the reader see a test (נסה) in Yahweh's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on the mount of Moriah (Gen 22:1–2). Knowing this, it would not be out of character for the Lord to be testing Cain with the words he speaks in vv. 6–7. While Cain and his parents both failed, however, Abraham passed. But, such is the nature of tests: some pass, and many fail.

As always, not all scholars agree. Brueggemann, for example, writes, "The narrative is not for moral instruction. It enables us to reflect upon the enigmatic situation in which we are set."[58] In other words, the point of the text is not that Yahweh is testing Cain, nor is it that readers should glean from it any instruction for themselves when they feel tested. The text is simply there for reflecting on the confusing and discomforting situations in which people of all times and places find themselves as the result of the Lord's unsearchable will.

Ultimately, though, the argument that Yahweh is testing Cain comes down to understanding Gen 4:5–7 in a specific way. "Doing well" must be understand as somehow responding favorably to God's disregard, even when his disregard seems unfair or unwarranted. "Ruling over sin" becomes the ultimate good choice, which, if it is not accomplished, will lead to sin ruling over Cain.

Again, however, like other interpretive options, this argument is essentially an argument that cannot be proven from the text. The author of the text reveals no such explicit plan to test Cain. Neither are Yahweh's words necessarily indicative of a test *per se*. They may simply be referring Cain to bringing a better sacrifice or being a better person. In other words, he was rejected because of a very real deficiency, and not as a test. Though this interpretive option is highly intriguing, and may offer insight into Yahweh's words and Cain's later response, it cannot

[58] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 61.

ultimately be proven based on the text of Gen 4, nor by the greater context.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

"The story of the offerings of Cain and Abel, by definition, is enigmatic. It contains so many layers of meaning that it is as if its original intention is to hide, not to reveal."[1] Readers of the text of Gen 4 can easily come away with this sense, that there are more questions than answers. How much more true is this, then, for the scholar who traces the history of the interpretation of this text! While there are certainly other examples of perplexing texts and mysterious words scattered throughout the Scriptures, this text seems to carry with it special force and weight. Perhaps this is because the story of Cain and Abel is so well known, partly because it is so early in the Scriptures, and partly because it is the story of the first murder. Perhaps this is because readers lament Cain's missed opportunity to offer a better sacrifice or to change his heart and intentions. Perhaps this is because there seems to be a shroud of seeming unfairness or injustice covering the story, at least from the reader's perspective, and certainly from the perspective of Cain himself.[2] Whatever the reason, the questions continue.

Indeed, the text will never fully answer the question of why Yahweh rejected Cain but regarded his brother Abel. While some point to Cain's sacrifice, some to Cain himself, and some to God in heaven, none will be able to prove his argument pointing to the ultimate reason for God's favor. This will no doubt frustrate many readers, who simply want an explanation of why such events were allowed to occur at all.[3] At best, this is simply because the point of the text has

[1] Chung Youjin, "Conflicting Readings in the Narrative of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1–26)," *AJPS* 14 (2011): 247.

[2] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 39, writes, "Cain's anger suggests that the rejection by God caught him by surprise." Indeed, Cain's frustration would not be so if he didn't expect, or at least hope, to be regarded by the Lord.

[3] Anthony Campbell, *Making Sense of the Bible: Difficult Texts and Modern Faith* (New York: Paulist,

little to nothing to do with why, but seeks rather to expose how quickly and how viciously sin takes hold after the Fall of Adam and Eve. For those who read Gen 4 as a part of the greater context of Gen 1–11, especially in light of what happens immediately before, there are any number of themes that are not only reoccurring, but intensifying. One such motif involves the *adamah*, or ground.[4] Brown writes,

> "Like his father, the firstborn Cain is a 'tiller of the ground,' and so it is a matter of poetic justice that the ground's 'mouth' testifies against him, if his own mouth will not…As *'ādām* was 'taken' from the '*ădāmâ* and is eventually to return there, Cain has violated the ground by making it 'take' back his brother."[5]

Another such theme is the importance of the Word of God.

> "This juxtaposition of [the Genesis 3 and 4] narratives involving speech suggests a tragic irony with heavy theological overtones. When humans created for communion with God ignore God's word, their communion with one another is not only arrogant, it is hopelessly futile."[6]

Yahweh, who spoke all of creation into existence by his Word (Gen 1), speaks to Cain and offers him acceptance if he "does well." Yet, when Cain speaks to his brother (4:8), he brings death! The difference between Yahweh's words and the words of a man could not become more different than they are in Gen 4.

However, if the best case scenario is that the text simply wishes to show the extent of sin's

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2010), 51, reflects in this way: "Inequality is a painful reality of human life, often culpable but also often clearly inculpable. Many want God's regard and disregard explained…no elucidation is given." It seems that the question of 'why' is, in the end, problematic. Readers oftentimes cannot take the text on its own terms, wanting instead to know what is either unknowable or not suitable for knowing. Indeed, in the modern age, the quest for knowledge has become so fiercely central to the human experience that it is now harder than ever to resign oneself to the unknown. Much better is it nowadays to impress upon a text our own biases and presuppositions than it is to let the text be the text. But, on some level, it seems almost impossible to do otherwise. Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 363–4 astutely writes, "Partially because of the laconic style in which the Cain and Abel story is told and partially because of prejudgments, scholars are divided in their opinions why God rejected Cain's offering… This writer comes to the text with the prejudgments that the storyteller drops clues in his text demanding the audience's close attention to details in the text, Gen 4:1–16."

[4] Brown, *Ethos*, 168, explains that the 'ground' motif intensifies from Adam to Cain.

[5] Brown, *Ethos*, 167.

[6] Kevin Hall, "The Theology of Genesis 1–11," *SwJT* 44 (2001): 61.

intensification, the worst case is that the will of Yahweh is not only unknowable, but the Lord himself is seen to be capricious, even a trouble-maker, when dealing with the people that he created. But, the context of Gen 1–11, as well as the entirely of the Scriptures,[7] testifies against this understanding of God, an understanding which has led some to despair.[8] Throughout the rest of the Scriptures, God is revealed to be not capricious or unfair, but a God who consistently reaches out in fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, offering the path to acceptance in his sight.[9] Whether the text has any concern or not for the question of Cain's disregard does not nullify what the text does reveal for certain: that Yahweh wills to have mercy on each person, from the younger brother (*hebel*, "but a breath"), to the older, frustrated brother.[10] Any reader, then, would do well to recognize what is certain and clear in the text.

[7] Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," 364 rightly indicates, "The second presupposition entails that the interpreter also listen to the rest of Scripture in order to determine the text's meaning and/ or to validate his interpretation of the narrative."

[8] Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition,* 39–40, for one, seems to despair when he writes, "This lack of detail creates two problems, one on the narrative level and the other theological. First, the absence of an explanation for the rejection leaves a gap in the narrative that makes it impossible for the reader to learn from Cain's actions. How can one offer God a better sacrifice if the text is not clear about the nature of the problem? Second, the absence of an explanation makes God seem unpredictable…God's seeming capriciousness in rejecting one sacrifice over the other creates a theological problem. The problem is compounded by Abel's murder. Since Cain's act of fratricide is precipitated by God's unexplained rejection of the sacrifice which resulted in Cain's anger, God becomes complicit in the act."

[9] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 49, reminds the reader that Yahweh may have rejected Cain's sacrifice, but he admonished him paternally.

[10] Van Wolde, "Story of Cain and Abel," 39, summarizes quite well: "YHWH does give attention to this so-called worthless one: he looks at his offering and he repeatedly confronts Cain with his failing to be a (good) brother. In this way he implicitly expresses the value that Abel has for him. In this way he also confronts the reader with the value of the human being who is written off by fellow human beings as worthless. YHWH, in his autonomous acting, looks at the weak brother but not at the strong brother who fails to be a brother. He is very consistent in this, because, at the very end of the story, when Cain himself has become an underdog and a fugitive, YHWH offers Cain, too, his support in the shape of a mark of protection. The story of Cain and Abel shows that YHWH holds out a plea for brotherhood between human beings in spite of their differences. But above all this text makes it clear that YHWH's preference is for the weak, for those who are labeled by other people as *hevel*. Both the contents and the ellipses in the narration persuade the readers to follow YHWH's option by not nullifying the human beings who are labeled as *hevel*."

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