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# Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain: Genesis 4:1-16 in the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the New Testament

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THERE APPEARS TO BE a long-standing interpretive crux in the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16) regarding why God looks with favor on Abel but not on Cain. The interpretive instinct to determine the reasons for God's favor is perhaps quite natural: religiously speaking, a deity who favors or disfavors without reason could appear arbitrary or unjust, an issue to resolve. The Old Greek (LXX) translation of the story also seems to explain God's favor toward Abel and not Cain in a particular way, perhaps providing one of the earliest extant examples of this interpretive practice.<sup>1</sup> Through what might be called a theological translation, the LXX paints a negative portrait of Cain (in his offering and in other ways), one that has left an indelible mark on later tradition. In this article I aim to show how this is the case, exploring how this reading has influenced later tradition, particularly the NT. I argue that the MT reveals a more elusive and ambiguous picture, while the development of Cain's character in the LXX and elsewhere is decidedly negative. As the MT is the text regularly deemed the best choice for Christian Scripture today (e.g., its foundational use in a majority of Bible translations and commentaries), this

Though I have not heeded their advice in every instance (thus any remaining deficiencies are wholly mine), thanks are due to John Byron, Robert Hiebert, Joel Kaminsky, R. W. L. Moberly, Stewart Weeks, and the anonymous *CBQ* reviewers whose helpful suggestions have strengthened this article.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I use the term "LXX" as convenient shorthand for the Old Greek version, though I am well aware of the designation's problems and the diversity that this body of literature represents.

raises interpretive and theological difficulties regarding the use of the LXX by NT authors.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that 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.<sup>3</sup> After showing how the LXX subtly slants the story to indict Cain for his offering, I argue that the more difficult MT version of the story should be permitted to retain its important voice in interpretive communities. Furthermore, the MT version might be used to correct negative assessments of Cain presented in the LXX, the NT, and later religious traditions.

### I. Genesis 4:1-16 and the LXX: A Theological Translation?

After handling a well-known Hebrew difficulty with relative ease (v. 1: קניתי יהוה את אֵיִשׁ = ἐκτησάμην ἄνθρωπον διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ) and translating some Hebrew idioms with remarkable woodenness (v. 2: וַתִּתֵּן לְלֶדֶת = καὶ προσέθηκεν τεκεῖν; and v. 3: וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ מַדְבָּר = καὶ ἐγένετο μεθ' ἡμέρας),<sup>4</sup> the translator contrasts the occupations of the brothers by means of the particle δέ (v. 2). In the Hebrew, the construction is slightly more ambiguous inasmuch as the reader must determine whether ו is disjunctive or coordinating.<sup>5</sup> More interesting here, however, is the translator's rendition of the brothers' offerings. Although both are a מנחה ("gift" or "offering") in the Hebrew, they are distinguished in the Greek: Cain's offering is designated by the term θυσία ("sacrifice") (v. 5), while the Greek word used for

<sup>2</sup> I here speak of the wider present-day Christian church, both Catholic and Protestant, which uses the MT as a basis for OT translation. Churches that use the LXX as Scripture (e.g., Greek Orthodox) do not face similar problems, as the NT and the LXX present a consistently negative picture of Cain with regard to his offering.

<sup>3</sup> For this idea, as well as for aspects of my work with Genesis 4 itself, I am much indebted to Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), as will become clear.

<sup>4</sup> The question of *what* the ancient translator(s) was translating (was it comparable to our MT?) is difficult to answer and is the subject of much debate. John William Wevers (*Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis* [SBLSCS 35; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993] xiii) regards the MT as a good starting point, essentially the *Vorlage*. This supposition, however, has been methodologically criticized. See, e.g., James R. Davila, review of Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis*, *CBQ* 56 (1994) 781-84 (cf. also his review of Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Deuteronomy*, *CBQ* 59 [1997] 363-64). As Davila convincingly argues, the Dead Sea Scrolls contribute important textual variants common to the LXX (many of which Wevers seems to ignore). For the purposes of this passage (4:1-16), however, 4QGen<sup>b</sup> (though its status at Qumran is not certain) is virtually identical to the MT, and other Greek and Latin recensions argue for the text's stability (with the possible exception of Cain's words to Abel in 4:8). Further discussion will follow.

<sup>5</sup> Although δέ certainly can be coordinating, the use of καὶ may have served such a purpose better had the translator so intended.

Abel's is δῶρον ("gift") (v. 4). What do we make of this seemingly insignificant detail? Why, though Greek Genesis translates מנחה with δῶρον consistently,<sup>6</sup> does it translate the term differently here? Perhaps the words of Philo are revealing:

What difference is there between a gift and a sacrifice? He who slaughters a sacrifice, after dividing it, pours the blood on the altar and takes the flesh home. But he who offers something as a gift offers the whole of it, it seems, to him who receives it. And the lover of self is a divider, as was Cain, while the lover of God is a giver, as was Abel. (QG 1.62)<sup>7</sup>

Could a similar idea have been borne in the translator's mind in the decision to vary the wording of the text as we find it? It is difficult to answer this question on the basis of the textual evidence;<sup>8</sup> other factors, however, discussed below, cumulatively suggest that the translator wished to distinguish the quality of the brothers' offerings.

Of equal interest is the translation of God's action toward the brothers and their offerings. Though in the Hebrew text Yhwh is said to gaze or not to gaze (הִשָּׁעַ), in the Greek, God "looked upon" (ἐπείδεν) Abel and his gifts, while God did not "pay attention to" (προσέσχεν) Cain and his sacrifices. It is initially difficult to determine what exactly we are to make of this decision to differentiate the verb הִשָּׁעַ. Usage of the verbs elsewhere in the LXX, however, may shed some light on the problem. God's action toward Abel, ἐπείδεν (from ἐφοράω, "to look upon"), is likely the closer of the two verbs to the Hebrew, and, interestingly, in the LXX it is often used, when God is the subject, to imply a looking upon with favor. For example, Hagar calls God ὁ θεὸς ὁ ἐπιδὼν με ("the God who *looks upon* me" [Gen 16:13]) after God heeds her affliction in the wilderness. Similarly, in Exod 2:25, God hears the groanings and cries of Israel under their tasks in Egypt (καὶ ἐπείδεν ὁ θεὸς τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ἐγνώσθη αὐτοῖς, "and God *looked upon* the sons of Israel and was [made] known to them").<sup>9</sup> Such usage, with God as the sub-

<sup>6</sup> This occurs nine times elsewhere in Genesis: 32:14, 19, 21, 22; 33:10; 43:11, 15, 25, 26. In the rest of the LXX, interestingly enough, θυσία is preferred.

<sup>7</sup> Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* (trans. Ralph Marcus; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953) 38. Space does not permit a full treatment of Philo's work and his use of Cain and Abel as types exemplifying wickedness and holiness; for a fuller treatment, see Hindy Najman, "Cain and Abel as Character Traits: A Study in the Allegorical Typology of Philo of Alexandria," in *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen; Themes in Biblical Narrative 5; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 107-18.

<sup>8</sup> Part of the difficulty lies in questions regarding traditions that call both Abel's and Cain's offerings "gifts," making it difficult to determine whether Greek Genesis simply translates the *Vorlage* or includes/inserts a tradition to elevate the quality of Abel's offering. Compare the targumic versions, some of which (e.g., *Tg. Neof.* [see margins] and *Tg. Yer.* [Genizah Frg.]) use the Greek loanword דורון for both Cain's and Abel's offering or only Abel's offering.

<sup>9</sup> The LXX does not translate הִשָּׁעַ with ἐφοράω consistently; in fact, such translation is rare. The examples above highlight the tendency of the translators to employ ἐφοράω when God is the

ject, suggests the translator's desire to communicate the favor God had toward Abel. What, then, of God's action toward Cain, where God does not προσέσχεν Cain and his sacrifice? The term προσέχω is used in Genesis and Deuteronomy imperatively to render מִשָּׁר ("keep closely"); see, e.g., Deut 32:46, προσέχετε τῇ καρδίᾳ ἐπὶ πάντας τοὺς λόγους τούτους οὓς ἐγὼ διαμαρτύρομαι ὑμῖν, "Keep close to heart all these words that I declare to you." Particularly noteworthy for our passage is the use of this word in Gen 34:3. Here, after Shechem seizes Dinah and lies with her by force, "he 'clung' to the soul (or person) of Dinah" (προσέσχεν τῇ ψυχῇ Δινας).<sup>10</sup> Is it significant that the translator of Genesis renders קָבַח ("to cling, attach, hold fast to") as προσέχω, the same verb used negatively concerning God's action toward Cain?<sup>11</sup> I think that it is of great significance, for the opposite of "keeping closely" to yourself or "clinging to" is the idea of rejecting or forsaking.<sup>12</sup>

In light of this analysis, we might ask why, in the space of the same sentence (Gen 4:5), the translator uses different Greek words for the same Hebrew term. As the verb נָשָׂא is not translated by προσέχω elsewhere in Genesis or in the rest of the LXX (and word variation is not a hallmark of the Genesis translator), I suggest that the translator wished to emphasize a divine rejection, perhaps a forsaking, of Cain in a way that clearly distinguishes him from Abel.

The story continues and Cain is exceedingly grieved over his rejection by God, causing him to "fall together with respect to the face" (συνέπεσεν τῷ προσώπῳ [4:5b]).<sup>13</sup> Cain's sadness draws out a dialogue with the deity that is quite different from that in the MT. The Lord God (κύριος ὁ θεὸς for יהוה) questions why Cain is very sorrowful and why his face is fallen, but then the translator renders God's words as follows:

οὐκ ἔαν ὀρθῶς προσενέγκῃς ὀρθῶς δὲ μὴ διέλης ἡμαρτες ἡσύχασον πρὸς σὲ ἢ ἀποστροφῆ αὐτοῦ καὶ σὺ ἄρξεις αὐτοῦ (v. 7)

Is it not [so] that if you offer correctly, but you do not correctly divide [it], you sinned? Be still. Towards you [will be] his/its return and you will rule him/it.

subject and the context of the "seeing" implies favor. Compare Pss 34:17; 112:6; 137:6; Ezek 9:9; 1 Chr 17:17; and—important though later—Luke 1:25. See also BDAG, 360, s.v. ἐπίδον, which suggests the gloss "to look with favor."

<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew here is somewhat different: וַיִּשָּׂא בְרִינָהּ, "And his soul clung upon/to Dinah."

<sup>11</sup> Space does not permit an exhaustive word study within the LXX; see also, e.g., Exod 9:21; 23:21; 34:11; Pss 22:1; 39:2; 54:3; and 68:19.

<sup>12</sup> On this idea, consult the interesting Ps 22:2 (LXX 21:2), a passage that apparently "adds" this term to the Hebrew version, shedding light on the contrast of being forsaken and distant from God: ὁ θεὸς ὁ θεός μου πρόσχεσ μοι ἵνα τί ἐγκατέλιπές με, "O God, my God, pay attention to me [or cling to me/keep me close]; why have you forsaken me?"

<sup>13</sup> The translation is Wevers's. See his reasons (and discussion on the curious use of the dative case for the term "face") in *Greek Text of Genesis*, 54.

The LXX explains the cryptic Hebrew in terms of cultic sacrifice and regards proper apportioning to be the primary issue.<sup>14</sup> The Hebrew here is difficult and not as clear-cut as the LXX would suggest: הלוא אם תיטיב שאת ואם לא תיטיב לפתח הלווא אם תיטיב שאת ואם לא תיטיב לפתח, “If you do well, is there not a lifting? But if you do not do well, sin is (a) crouching (one) at the door; its desire is for you, but you can/may/shall/must master it” (my translation; see discussion below). The LXX translation suggests that the problem with Cain and his offering is an error in a ritual detail of the sacrifice.<sup>15</sup> Is Cain thus found right in offering (i.e., doing so) but guilty of offering a sacrifice that is not divided properly? God’s rejection of Cain is given a clear reason, leaving little room to question whether Cain had sinned in his offering. The enigmatic Hebrew, however, seems to speak of God’s counseling Cain to do the right thing and master the sin that awaits in the future (more on this below). If the idea of sin being a “crouching one” at the door is removed (רביץ is read imperatively),<sup>16</sup> the Greek pronoun αὐτοῦ then points back to the most recent masculine reference in the text, Abel. Therefore, although Cain sinned, Abel’s return—perhaps suggesting subservience or reconciliation—is close at hand.<sup>17</sup> Abel’s turning (ἡ ἀποστροφή in place of תשוקתו)<sup>18</sup> will be toward Cain

<sup>14</sup> So Marguerite Harl, *La Genèse* (La Bible d’Alexandrie 1; Paris: Cerf, 1986) 114; Wevers, *Greek Text of Genesis*, 54-55.

<sup>15</sup> Some commentators have raised the possibility here of a corrupt or poor copy of the text, or a misreading by the translator of a פ for a נ (see, e.g., Wevers, *Greek Text of Genesis*, 55, and *BHS*). There is thus the possibility that the translator read לנתח (from נתח, “to cut up, to divide”) for לפתח (“opening, doorway, entrance”). This reconstruction has its strengths, though also its weaknesses. For example, the verb נתח never, to my knowledge, carries the sense of “divide” or “apportion” with reference to a fruit or grain offering. נתח is used in the Hebrew Bible only in the context of cutting up animals or, in one troubling case, a woman (Judg 19:29), but not grain. Unfortunately, 4QGen<sup>b</sup> contains a lacuna at this place.

<sup>16</sup> Although the noun “sin” (חטאת) is feminine and the verb רביץ is masculine in the MT, I take the latter as a substantival participle; thus sin is a crouching thing or beast that happens to be masculine, something to be mastered (this accounts also for the masculine pronominal suffix [ן] on תשוקתו and בו). See further Ellen van Wolde, “The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study,” *JSOT* 52 (1991) 25-41, here 30-31; and E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, translation, and notes* (AB 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 32-33; the latter suggests that רביץ can be understood as a “beast” or “demon” based on an Akkadian loanword.

<sup>17</sup> For discussion, see Wevers, *Greek Text of Genesis*, 55-56.

<sup>18</sup> It is possible that the translator decided that the noun was not תשוקה (“desire”) but תשובה (“turning”), perhaps regarding the Hebrew defective. But all three occurrences of the latter word in the MT—Gen 3:16; 4:7; Cant 7:11—are translated similarly (ἡ ἀποστροφή in the passages from Genesis and ἡ ἐπιστροφὴ in Canticles). If nothing else, this raises the possibility that the meanings of תשוקה and תשובה are not unrelated, likely indicating a turning toward (not unrelated to desire) and a turning, respectively. See further James R. Davila’s discussion in “4QGen b (Pls. VI-VIII),” in Eugene Ulrich et al., *Qumran Cave 4, VII: Genesis to Numbers* (DJD 12; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 37, and Walter C. Kaiser’s reasonable argument (*Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983] 204-5) that תשוקה is derived from שוק, which he takes to mean “to run.” He sug-

and Cain will rule him; Cain, however, is to remain still, and not commit further sin.

Apart from the inclusion of Cain's words to Abel in v. 8, "let us pass through into the plain," the LXX continues translating the story in a relatively uncomplicated fashion. This "plus" in the LXX, however, should not be overlooked. Support for the LXX's version is found in the Samaritan, Syriac, and Vg versions, and this reading has been the subject of perennial scholarly debate.<sup>19</sup> In agreement with the majority of English translations, James Barr recently asserted that the LXX reading is "massively more probable" than the MT's ellipsis.<sup>20</sup> He regards as unconvincing arguments that construe וַיֹּאמֶר as "he spoke" (without indication of what is said).<sup>21</sup> Although in agreement with Barr on this point, one cannot help wondering why the MT contains the ellipsis, especially given the manuscript evidence that provides a viable alternative. Surely the Hebrew is difficult, and the reader is forced to ask why the masoretes or the underlying tradition does not resolve it. To make sense of the text, the brief and somewhat logical διέλθωμεν εἰς τὸ πεδίον/השדה הלכה גלכה could easily have been included.<sup>22</sup> But what does the content of the statement imply? To my mind, it clearly indicts Cain further, as his subsequent action of killing Abel is now premeditated. Whether the MT has removed the words or the Greek has added them, included a common tradition, or simply translated the *Vorlage*, the plus here surely adds a dimension to the story. These words are not out of step with the LXX's already overarching negative perspective on Cain. Cain sinned with his offering, and his action of murder is now clearly premeditated.

The LXX continues. Cain kills his brother, God questions him, and eventu-

gests that the word implies a "running back and forth" or a turning—not "desire," a definition he states was erroneously first put forward in the translation of Wycliffe.

<sup>19</sup> A summary of various positions can be found in Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "What Cain Said: A Note on Genesis 4.8," *JSOT* 27 (2002) 107-13.

<sup>20</sup> See James Barr, review of Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, in *Review of Biblical Literature* (10/2002).

<sup>21</sup> Barr's review was published (more or less) simultaneously with Reis's article (see n. 18 above), in which she argues that the first half of v. 8, "Cain spoke *against* [אָל] Abel his brother," should be read in parallel with the rest of the verse: "and it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose *against* [אָל] Abel his brother and killed him," avoiding the awkward ellipsis. Reis's reading has its strengths (e.g., translation of אָל; see BDB, 40), but her arguments for rendering אָל as "spoke" remain wanting. Could it not still be thus translated, "Cain said against Abel his brother, . . ."? At any rate, the issue is difficult, as years of interpretive speculation demonstrate.

<sup>22</sup> I use the phrase "somewhat logical" here, as there are difficulties related to why Cain would need to lure Abel to the field (both in light of their occupations and the lack of witnesses presupposed by the narrative) and as the inclusion of the phrase makes the immediately following reference to the field redundant. In light of the targumic versions, one might surmise that the MT simply dropped any dialogue between Cain and Abel, so as not to have to settle on any one particular tradition.

ally God curses him from the earth. The earth will no longer give strength to Cain and he will be a groaning (στένων) and trembling (τρέμων) one upon it. Cain complains, *μείζων ἢ αἰτία μου τοῦ ἀφεθῆναι με* (“greater is my case than can be forgiven”), a statement that gives a moralistic tone to the story.<sup>23</sup> Yhwh’s somewhat awkward response in the Hebrew, beginning with *לכן* (“thus,” “therefore”), is smoothed out in the LXX with its *οὐχ οὕτως* (“not so,” suggesting an underlying reading of, or decision for, *כן* אָל). The story nears an end and Cain goes out from the presence of God to dwell in the land of Nod (v. 16). Although the Hebrew *נוד* is an obvious wordplay on Cain’s cursed condition (*נד*, “wandering” [vv. 10, 14]), the LXX translator transliterates the term (*Ναιδ*), making it a place-name and losing a potentially rich element of the narrative.<sup>24</sup>

Differences in the LXX that reflect negatively upon Cain may be summarized as follows:

<i>Verse</i>	<i>MT</i>	<i>LXX</i>	<i>(Potential) Effect</i>
2	ו	δέ	The brothers’ vocations are contrasted.
4	מנחה	δώρον	Abel offers a superior “gift.”
5	מנחה	θυσία	Cain offers a lesser “sacrifice.”
4	שעה	ἐφοράω	Abel is “looked upon with favor.”
5	שעה	προσέχω	Cain is rejected or “forsaken.”
7	Enigmatic Hebrew	Suggests a ritual error in Cain’s way of offering	Cain’s actions become clearly responsible for his previous lack of divine favor.
8	No speech	Cain says: <i>διέλωμεν εἰς τὸ πεδῖον</i>	Cain invites Abel to the field, suggesting a plotted, premeditated murder.

## II. Later Tradition, Jesus, and the New Testament

The MT version of the story provides little in the way of answers. It is ambiguous, vague, and elusive. We are not told why God accepts Abel and his offering. Cain, despite killing his brother, is left in a relatively positive light when

<sup>23</sup> The MT reads *מגדל עוניי מנשא*, which carries more ambiguity, having a sense of “my punishment is more than I can bear.” As Wevers notes (*Greek Text of Genesis*, 59), the Greek translation “insists on a moral interpretation with its *ἀφεθῆναι*.”

<sup>24</sup> It is likely, as suggested by Ronald S. Hendel (*The Text of Genesis 1–11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998] 128), that there was graphic confusion between a *ו* and a *י*, giving the LXX’s resultant transliteration.



compared to the LXX. To be sure, he is cursed for his action of murder, but it is not made explicit, prior to this act, whether he is guilty of any sin in his offering or if his actions constitute the reason for his lack of favor. Interpreters of the story have often sought to provide a more concrete rationale. Reasons for Cain's rejection vary among interpreters, including the idea that God prefers shepherds over farmers,<sup>25</sup> animal over grain offerings,<sup>26</sup> or a sacrifice of blood over one without.<sup>27</sup> Others suggest that it is because the  $\eta\eta\eta\aleph$  ("ground") was cursed in the previous chapter (3:17) and Cain should have known better than to bring an offering from it.<sup>28</sup> Still others point to the idea that Abel offers from the best sheep and their fat portions while Cain, it is said, offers only some of the fruit, likely bad fruit.<sup>29</sup> This is but a partial list.<sup>30</sup>

In actual fact, all of the above are quite difficult to maintain from the Hebrew text itself. If we engage in, to use Jon D. Levenson's phrase, such "microscopic

<sup>25</sup> See Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997) 48-49.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Saul Levin, "The More Savory Offering: A Key to the Problem of Gen 4:3-5," *JBL* 98 (1979) 85.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Herschel H. Hobbs, "Was Cain's Offering Rejected by God Because It Was Not a Blood Sacrifice? Yes," in *The Genesis Debate: Persistent Questions about Creation and the Flood* (ed. Ronald F. Youngblood, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986) 130-47.

<sup>28</sup> For detailed argumentation on the  $\eta\eta\eta\aleph$  as central to the story, see Frank Anthony Spina, "The 'Ground' for Cain's Rejection (Gen 4): 'ādāmāh in the Context of Gen 1-11," *ZAW* 104 (1992) 319-32, and 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 in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Astrid B. Beck et al., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 52-65.

<sup>29</sup> As Rashi says, "of the worst fruits" (M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, eds., *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary: Genesis* [Louisville: Shapiro, Vallentine, 1946] 17). Compare also similar ideas in Bruce Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 363-72, Speiser, *Genesis* 30, Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Readings, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 36-37, and John E. Hartley, *Genesis* (NIBC 1, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000) 81.

<sup>30</sup> Still further, some hypothesize that the issue relates to the condition of the offerers' hearts, taking up the idea in Heb 11:4, where Abel is said to have offered in faith (see, e.g., John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948] 1:194, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* vol. 1a, *The Pentateuch* [trans. James Martin, repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973] 110, and S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* [Westminster Commentaries, 4th ed., London: Methuen, 1905] 64-65). John Skinner (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* [ICC, 2nd ed., Edinburgh: Clark, 1930] 105) epitomizes the thinking of many who look for a fault in Cain and his offering: "Why was the one sacrifice accepted and not the other? The distinction must lie either (a) in the disposition of the brothers or (b) in the material of the sacrifice." But why must it lie in one of these two? Why the false dilemma? Might there not be something else in view? Contrast Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1984) esp. 297, who concludes that inequality in the divine decision is central to the meaning of the story. See also W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) esp. 55-56, who argues that discomfort with a God who acts arbitrarily "may be the point."

over-reading,” we could equally argue against the thrust of such interpretations.<sup>31</sup> It is Cain who offers first; Abel offers second and in imitation of his brother (the use of אֵת אֵבֶן, “even he,” or “he too,” in 4:4 lends support here). Cain brings forward an offering from his occupation, which followed in his father’s divinely placed footsteps (3:23); Abel brings an offering from his newly instituted occupation. Cain’s offering derives from a labor-intensive job, that is, “by the sweat of his brow” (3:17-19); there is no direct mention of this with regard to Abel’s activity. Note also that Cain is said to offer to Yhwh; of Abel this is not specified. The problem here seems to stem from a determination on the part of interpreters to explain the divine choice and excise any hint that it is arbitrary or unjustified. Surely Abel’s favor must have been with reason; surely Cain must have deserved his lack of favor in some way. As I have observed, the MT text does not make this explicit; the interpreter must make a conscious decision to fill these details in.

As shown above, the LXX suggests also that Cain is wrongful or sinful in his offering, albeit subtly. The NT, whose writers were largely dependent on the LXX as αἱ γραφαί (“the writings,” or “Scriptures”), received the LXX translation without reservation. Repeatedly Cain is regarded as evil because his offering is inferior or because he somehow lacks faith; in one place the writer regards Abel as righteous for offering a better sacrifice (θυσίαν) than Cain in faith, “God commending his gifts (δωροῖς)” (Heb 11:4). The terms of the LXX are here immediately apparent: the MT, we recall, considers both offerings indistinguishable as מִנְחוֹת and, unlike in the NT, in the MT there is no indication whether one offering is superior or offered in faith.<sup>32</sup> In the MT, even God’s words to Cain do not necessarily show that Cain’s action in offering is the reason for his lack of favor. The discussion is likely in the realm of future possibility; God counsels Cain “to do the right,” or “do well” (תִּיטִיב), for otherwise sin lies in wait, ready to pounce. If he chooses to do well, there is a solution to the problem God is addressing: Cain’s heated emotions will dissipate and his fallen face will be lifted.<sup>33</sup> Cain is counseled further that

<sup>31</sup> Levenson, *Death*, 72

<sup>32</sup> Ton Hilhorst (“Abel’s Speaking in Hebrews 11 4 and 12 24,” in *Eve’s Children* [ed Luttikhuisen], 119-27) examines this passage with similar results. My overall conclusions, however, lead in a different direction.

<sup>33</sup> Agam, the translation of the Hebrew here (Gen 4.7) is not straightforward “If you [will] do well, is there not a lifting? [Acceptance? Forgiveness?]” Though the term תָּאָחַץ can be and is used of forgiveness (normally in the context of עָוֹן, compare, e.g., Gen 18 24, 26; Isa 33 24), the natural meaning in context—note Yhwh’s question in v 6—is a lifting of what has fallen, that is, Cain’s face. One might surmise that how one translates this short line will determine one’s interpretation of the story. Translating תָּאָחַץ as “accepted” (as do a majority of translations *NIV, KJV, NRSV, NEB*, contrast *NJPS* and *NASB*) could wrongly imply that Cain’s “doing good” will make him accepted, as Abel was in his offering. In other words, if you do well, will you not be accepted too, as Abel was? But if God is here concerned with the heated emotion and fallen face of Cain, the verb better fits the idea of a lifting of the face, or restoration of happiness (see further Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary* [trans John H Marks, OTL, 2nd ed., Philadelphia Westminster, 1961] 101)

mastering the waiting sin is a possibility.<sup>34</sup> But Cain fails, and the result is tragic. The first and infamous fratricide of the Bible is met, however, not with punishment in the extreme but with a degree of mercy. God not only spares Cain, but God also protects him from others who might deem his punishment necessary.

Later tradition, it would seem, decides to concentrate on the opposite. Cain becomes the epitome of evil while Abel is exalted as righteous. From the words of the Matthean Jesus (23:35) and the author of Hebrews (11:4), one gets the impression that the description “righteous Abel” is one long accepted by convention; Cain, on the other hand, is “of the evil one” (1 John 3:12).<sup>35</sup> As John Byron has shown, Abel becomes the prototypical righteous martyr in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period (e.g., in Josephus, Philo, and later in *Targum Neofiti*), the culmination of which is found in the *Testament of Abraham*.<sup>36</sup> Here Abel becomes the great judge of humanity “who will distinguish between the righteous and the wicked” (*T. Ab.* 13:3-9).<sup>37</sup> In the NT, the blood of Abel even becomes somehow sacred (Heb 12:24; Matt 23:34-36), and in later Christian interpretation, for example, in Augustine’s *City of God*, it is Abel who founds the City of God to which all who live “according to God” belong, while Cain founds the city of mortals, the earthly city made up of those who are wicked and reprobate.<sup>38</sup>

The whole of the Hebrew Bible and the MT version of the story of Cain and Abel, however, have little to support such ideas. Abel is a shepherd and he brings forward an offering, but little more is said. We can infer that it is to Yhwh that he makes an offering but, as noted above, it is possible that his act is in imitation of his older brother. The Hebrew story, in fact, is relatively uninterested in Abel. His name is supplied by the narrator—not given by the man or Eve—and is not

<sup>34</sup> The verb תמשל has, with good reason in my opinion, become the underlying theme in John Steinbeck’s classic novel *East of Eden*. There the verb is understood as “thou mayest rule,” or “you are able,” and “have the choice,” to rule over the sin that lurks in your path—but also the difficulties and poor circumstances you face. Though this sense is often missed by interpreters and translators who regard תמשל strictly as a command, the great interpreter Rashi rightly understood the implicit dual meaning—the note of divine encouragement *and* obligation (*Genesis*, 18).

<sup>35</sup> The Lucan Jesus omits the description “righteous” (11:51). Although one cannot be certain, one reason may be that Luke’s intended (predominantly Gentile) audience would not have been familiar with the “righteous Abel” tradition. 1 John 3:12 is particularly interesting, as it states that Cain murdered his brother because “his deeds were evil” while his brother’s “were righteous,” undoubtedly referring to their respective offerings.

<sup>36</sup> John Byron, “Living in the Shadow of Cain: Echoes of a Developing Tradition in James 5:1-6,” *NovT* 48 (2006) 261-74. Compare also later Gnostic literature in which Abel is said to have been conceived by the “prime ruler,” while Eve conceived other children (i.e., Cain) by the seven evil authorities and their angels (see *Orig. World*, esp. 117, 15-18).

<sup>37</sup> Byron, “Living,” 264. On this point, Byron makes use of Levenson’s work (*Death*, 76-77).

<sup>38</sup> Augustine *Civ.* 15, esp. chaps. 1 and 5. For more on the development of Cain as wicked in Second Temple literature and beyond, see Byron, “Living,” 265-68, and his “Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry” (unpublished manuscript).

explained. The name means “vapor,” “breath,” or “meaninglessness,”<sup>39</sup> likely a foretaste of his role in the story, though the narrator assumes the reader’s perspicacity. Abel is spoken of only in relation to Cain (as “brother,” a term used seven times in the narrative), and the reader cannot help feeling that his role is only a foil to Cain’s. The story, without a doubt, is about Cain and God.<sup>40</sup> Abel takes part but is, apart from the act of offering, passive.

Nevertheless, it is not surprising that his character receives the attention it does in later literature. Not only is he innocently murdered, but he is, I would suggest, the favored one of God. As with characters who follow him, Abel is a divinely favored later-born son, favored without specified reason. His premature death at the hands of his brother could threaten the life of the chosen bloodline so integral to the whole of Scripture. The solution is not to start with another but to replace; as his name indicates, Seth (תש) *replaces* Abel’s position within the favored lineage: “and she bore a son and named him Seth (תש), for she said, ‘God has appointed (תש) for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him’” (4:25). Seth is Abel redivivus.<sup>41</sup> Choosing another will not do—God’s choice of Abel is maintained.<sup>42</sup>

### III. Conclusion

Why is it so tempting to find a reason for the favor, or lack of favor, of God? I suggest that the difficult reading of the MT here is an important textual tradition, one that leaves many questions unanswered but maintains a theme that the writers and shapers of Genesis regularly employ and develop, that is, the theme of God favoring the later-born son, usually at the expense of the elder. Levenson elucidates this theme in a full and sophisticated way. As he shows, however, stories like Cain’s also reveal that God has concern for the unchosen and that they too, somehow, can be part of the divine workings. Although Cain does not fare well in the story, he is not simply left without divine concern—God counsels him to do well, spares him from the vengeance of others, and ensures that he is not a wanderer

<sup>39</sup> BDB, 210-11; HALOT 1. 236-37; and *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 1. 1003-6. Consult the important discussion in Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 166-69, who suggests that the author of Ecclesiastes had the Genesis story (and הבל) in mind when composing the book; that is, Ecclesiastes serves as a kind of commentary on Genesis and the Cain and Abel story.

<sup>40</sup> As Anne-Laure Zwilling states, “Il [Caïn] monopolise la parole” (“Caïn versus Abel (GN 4,1-16),” in *Analyse narrative et Bible: Deuxième Colloque International du RRENAB* [Réseau de recherches en analyse narrative des textes bibliques], Louvain-la-Neuve, Avril 2004 [ed. Camille Focant and André Wénin; BETL 191; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005] 510).

<sup>41</sup> The phrase is Levenson’s (*Death*, 78).

<sup>42</sup> See 4:25-26 as well as the narrator’s important emphasis on humanity’s likeness to God and then Seth’s likeness to his father, drawing attention to the characteristics of the favored line (5:1-3).

and vagrant upon the earth. The favored line is the focus throughout Genesis and the Hebrew Bible, but the unchosen are not left outside of God's purview; they are not completely cursed.<sup>43</sup> In order to understand this perspective, however, one must read the text with restraint, not rationalizing its theological difficulties. Though it may be theologically convenient for Cain to be rejected because of poor action, or to deem Abel favored because he is somehow righteous, these ideas are not explicit in the text itself. The interpreter instead must read these details into an otherwise reticent text.

The difficult question of the NT's use of the LXX will not here be resolved, though this discussion clearly underlines the need for its reexamination. The question is all the more pronounced for Christian reading communities when one recognizes that the NT (and the traditions that gave rise to it or sprang from it) promotes specific hatred of Cain, and thus potentially of the unchosen more generally—without sufficient cause and contrary to the actions of God in the MT's version of the story.<sup>44</sup> A careful reading of the MT's more nuanced portrayal of Cain has the potential to recover a more complex view of the outsider and could perhaps be carefully applied more broadly (e.g., to such figures as Ishmael, Esau, or Balaam). Furthermore, in permitting the Hebrew Bible to have a greater voice in our discussions more generally (even correcting NT ideas when required), we might create greater theological space for meaningful Jewish–Christian dialogue. In his recent monograph, Jewish interpreter Joel S. Kaminsky suggests that Christian interpreters can and should, in certain instances, allow the OT to correct problematic NT ideas; that is, the NT need not always trump the voice of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>45</sup> This entails that texts be weighed carefully (text-critically, theologically, and canonically *inter alia*), keeping in mind the NT's often highly occasional and polemical nature. Doing so may raise theological difficulties, to be sure. But such a practice also has the potential to lead to a more coherent, comprehensive, and nuanced biblical theology, one that apportions appropriate weight to both the Old and New Testaments.

<sup>43</sup> See Levenson's discussion of Hagar and Esau (e.g., *Death*, 82–110, esp. 61–68). For more on this idea generally, see my *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> The problem is largely a Christian one (save perhaps for Greek Orthodox; see n. 2 above), though for Judaism my observations may raise questions regarding the negative presentations of Cain in the targums and elsewhere; see, e.g., Jouette Bassler's comments ("Cain and Abel in the Palestinian Targums: A Brief Note on an Old Controversy," *JSJ* 17 [1986] 56–64, here 62) on how *Targum Neofiti* and the *Fragmentary Targum* portray Cain as one who rejects "the key theologumena of Judaism." I am keenly aware that in what follows, making observations and suggestions for a particular faith community (Christian), I risk ostracizing other readers of biblical literature, particularly Jewish. My aim is not to do so, but rather (quite the opposite) to encourage a recovery of the Hebrew Bible in Christian interpretation, so as to foster dialogue and reconciliation between the two faith groups. See further my *Chosen and Unchosen*.

<sup>45</sup> See Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007) chap. 11.

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