THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

R. W. L. MOBERLY

University of Durham

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CHAPTER 5

Genesis 4: Cain and Abel

The famous story of Cain and Abel is puzzling for most readers. Why does God prefer Abel's sacrifice to Cain's? And what is the story really about? As with all the resonant narratives of Genesis, there are various possible readings, whose theological significance may differ considerably.

One time-honored approach is to see the Cain and Abel narrative as a negative exemplification of the double love commandment, a failure to love God and love neighbor. This reading takes its cue from the context of the story, subsequent to Genesis 3 (traditionally construed): "Gen 4 graphically illustrates how alienation from God produces alienation from one's fellow human beings."[1] Alternatively, one can read the story as exemplifying some of the problems of human free will: "The use that humans make of their freedom to be responsible for themselves is catastrophic: the first deed recounted is a murder, fratricide in fact. . . . We see here what humans are capable of. But we also see, with inescapable clarity, that God will not allow this: Cain is banished from the human community."[2] Or one can read the story as an overture that

[1] Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 163.

[2] Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Deo, 2005), 15–16.

introduces certain prime moral and theological categories that will be more fully developed elsewhere in the Bible: "Genesis 4 is not only the first narrative about sin and guilt that compresses the action into particular terms, it is also at the same time a narrative of forgiveness that unfolds at least in rudimentary ways."[3]

Interestingly, however, none of these three rather conventional readings gives weight to the divine preference for Abel over Cain, which sets the narrative in motion. A reading that is exegetically attentive and sharply focused theologically will surely need to give an account in the first instance of this surprising divine decision, without which Cain might not have acted as he did. I will come at this issue via one particular reading, which also has the advantage of highlighting one of the prime contemporary anxieties in relation to the Bible and the faiths rooted in it – that belief in one God leads people into brutality toward others, that monotheism entails violence.[4]

EXPOSITION OF REGINA M. SCHWARTZ'S INTERPRETATION

Regina M. Schwartz's book, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*,[5] nicely contains its thesis in its title; and, lest the

[3] Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. Leo G. Perdue, 2 vols., OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995–96 [German orig, 1992]), 2:172.

[4] Literature along these lines is burgeoning. Note, for example, Mark McEntire, *The Blood of Abel: The Violent Plot in the Hebrew Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 6: "[T]hat the plot of the Hebrew Bible pivots on acts of violence illustrates that violence is a central, if not the central, issue for the entire text." He goes on to say that the Cain and Abel story "is vital to the understanding of violence in the Bible because it is the initial occurrence" (17).

[5] Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997); subsequent citations will be parenthetical. I draw here on my "Is Monotheism Bad for You? Some Reflections on

reader should be in doubt, the cover illustration is a vivid detail from Titian's painting of Cain and Abel, in which Cain is brutally murdering his brother.[6]

Schwartz propounds a thesis about the nature of identity, primarily collective identity, in the ancient and modern worlds. She sees the characteristic modern construal of collective identity as operating with categories inherited from the Bible, categories determined by monotheism and its corollaries, categories that endure even when secularized, and yet are pernicious. Identity, in biblical categories, is at someone else's expense and entails violence and exclusion toward those whose identity is other.

Schwartz develops her thesis around a basic polarity between *scarcity* and *plenitude*, which involve two different visions of life. The vision of scarcity is "[w]hen everything is in short supply, it must all be competed for – land, prosperity, power, favor, even identity itself" (xi), while plenitude is the opposite, a vision that there is "enough for everyone . . . the challenge of living with the assumption, despite evidence to the contrary, that each will have his basic needs met" (35). The trouble with biblical monotheism is that it is inseparable from a vision of scarcity, which encourages violence against others in order to make secure both restrictive identity and limited resources.

Schwartz sees the Cain and Abel story as the paradigmatic biblical portrayal of these problematic dynamics:

> Why did God condemn Cain's sacrifice? What would have happened if he had accepted both Cain's and Abel's offerings instead of

God, the Bible, and Life in the Light of Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain*," in *The God of Israel*, ed. Robert P. Gordon, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 64 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 94–112.

[6] Rubens's comparable depiction of *Cain Slaying Abel* features on the cover of McEntire's book (see note 4).

> choosing one, and had thereby promoted cooperation between the sower and the shepherd instead of their competition and violence? 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 his 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. (3–4)

She also sees the important conceptual links (to which we will return) between the story of Cain and Abel and that of Esau and Jacob when she discusses the latter:

> That motiveless favoritism [YHWH accepting Abel and his offering, but not Cain and his offering] is precisely the point, for all we know is that, just as some unexplained scarcity makes a human father have only one blessing to confer but two sons to receive it, so some obscure scarcity motivates a divine Father to accept only one offering from two sons. The rejected son inevitably hates his brother. . . . According to the biblical myth, the origins of hatred and violence among brothers is scarcity. If there is not enough to go around, then Jacob must literally impersonate Esau to get what is his, and Cain must destroy his rival to seek the favor that was Abel's. Scarcity, the assumption that someone can only prosper when someone else does not, proliferates murderous brothers and murderous peoples. And it seems that even God, the very source of blessing, does not have enough to go around: "Bless me, me too, my father! . . . Do you have only one blessing, my father?" (82–83; cf. 4)

Moreover, Schwartz has in mind a contemporary, primarily North American, context as she writes, as becomes evident in the conclusion to her preface:

> Scarcity is encoded in the Bible as a principle of Oneness (one land, one people, one nation) and in monotheistic thinking (one Deity), it becomes a demand of exclusive allegiance that threatens with the violence of exclusion. When that thinking is translated into secular formations about peoples, "one nation under God" becomes less comforting than threatening. (xi)

This is a potent reading and use of the biblical text, which makes more conventional readings of the Cain and Abel story seem somewhat tame by comparison. Schwartz operates like a theologian, in moving between biblical text and contemporary world, seeking to draw out the implications of the former for understanding and living in the latter. However, her concern, like that of a significant number of other contemporary voices, is to *disable*, rather than enable, the enduring significance of the Bible; for she considers the biblical vision to be deeply destructive. Nonetheless, she poses the challenge for an explicitly theological reading to eschew comfortable pieties and to be comparably searching.

A THEOLOGICAL READING OF CAIN AND ABEL

An initial point to notice at the outset of the story, in the account of Eve's giving birth to both Cain and Abel, is that there is only one mention of Eve's conceiving (4:1b). It is thus a natural inference, often made in the history of interpretation, that Cain and Abel were twins. This strengthens the similarity between the story of Cain and Abel and that of Esau and Jacob, where Rebekah explicitly bears twins, the birth of one of whom before the other is basic to the

narrative that follows (25:21–26). Whether or not one grants that specific parallel, on any reckoning, the narrative analogy between the two pairs of brothers is important within Genesis.

The key to understanding the Cain and Abel story is surely how one construes YHWH's favoring of Abel and his offering over Cain and his offering (4:4–5). For the decision one makes here will strongly influence one's interpretative decisions at other difficult points.

Put simply: To rationalize, or not to rationalize, that is the question. The great majority of interpreters, from antiquity to the present, have felt a strong urge to rationalize at this point. They feel that there must be some reason, in principle accessible to the interpreter, to explain YHWH's preference and that this reason is likely to be some kind of defect. The defect could be in Cain himself: The New Testament classically depicts him as "from the evil one" and his deeds as "evil" (1 John 3:12). More commonly, however, Old Testament interpreters locate the defect within Cain's sacrifice: that it was inferior in quality to Abel's (which consisted of "firstlings" with "fat portions"; see 4:4), that it was from the earth that was cursed (3:17), or that there was something faulty in the sacrificial ritual. This last actually appears in the text of the Septuagint, in its rendering of the difficult words spoken by YHWH to Cain (4:7): "If you offered rightly, but did not divide rightly, did you not sin . . . ?"[7] Once the text thus ascribes fault to Cain (even if of an apparently minor, technical kind), the crucial step has been taken. Subsequent fuller depictions of Cain and his offering as defective, and Abel as correspondingly acceptable, on the part of the New Testament

[7] In terms of the consonantal text, the LXX's *Vorlage* may have differed from the MT by only one letter, despite the greatly divergent construal (see John W. Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis*, SBLSCS 35 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993], 55).

writers and the Fathers who mostly read their Old Testament in the Greek are thus simply developing the intrinsic logic of the biblical text when it is read in Greek. Moreover, there is no doubt that this reading of the text can be morally and theologically generative. For example, Cain as the negative counterpart of a David who said, "I will not offer burnt-offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing" (2 Sam 24:24), or an Abel who acted "by faith" (Heb 11:4) can, when well handled, have a valence not restricted to their common location in Sunday School curricula.

Even so, there are good reasons to resist rationalizing, reasons that I suggest bring us closer to the heart of the story in its Hebrew form. First, a comparable divine favoring of one sibling over another is pronounced while Jacob and Esau are still in Rebekah's womb (Gen 25:23). The logic of that scenario – that it necessarily excludes any question of merit or just deserts on the part of either Jacob or Esau – is nicely spelled out by Paul (Rom 9:10–12). The narrative analogy of Cain and Abel with Esau and Jacob is resonant.

Second, it is worthwhile to stand back from the biblical text and to reflect more generally on a fundamental and inescapable aspect of the human condition – that many of the factors that most matter to people are unequally distributed in ways that do not relate to people's merits. For many people, one of the things that they are most proud of, or most ashamed of, is bodily appearance and shape; likewise with intelligence. Yet these are factors substantially determined for us in the womb entirely irrespective of our preferences or deserving, and they are distributed in endlessly variant and unequal ways. To be sure, some modifications of appearance are possible (not least with the advent of cosmetic surgery – though this will only ever be an option for a minority), and quality of upbringing and education can make a difference to

the development and exercise of intelligence. Nonetheless, one can only modify within certain parameters what one has been given in the womb. It remains a fact of life that some are more attractive than others, some are more intelligent than others; in a nutshell, some are more "favored" than others, for reasons irrespective of what they deserve.

Further, much of what happens in life happens unpredictably and apparently randomly. One person enjoys robust good health; another gets cancer or multiple sclerosis. One person, born in prosperity and/or a time of peace, lives long; another, born in poverty and/or time of war, dies young. One falls in love, and the love is reciprocated; another suffers unrequited love. Deadly accidents, from drunken driver to earthquake, can strike out of the blue. And so on. It is hardly necessary to recount the endless ways in which tragedy strikes to recognize tragedy as a factor of the human condition; that is to say, once again, that some are less favored in life than others, for reasons irrespective of their merits.[8]

In situations of being "unfavored," people often display an instinctive tendency to try to rationalize: "Why me?" "What have I/we/you done to deserve it?" Yet such backward-looking questions are incapable of receiving a good answer, for it is intrinsic to the situation that what has happened to them has not been because they deserved it. The only questions that can be fruitful are questions that look forward rather than back: What is to be made of the situation? What can I/we/you yet hope for?[9] It is this that brings us back to the text of Genesis, for this is precisely the focus of YHWH's all-important admonition to Cain (Gen 4:6–7).

[8] This is not, of course, to deny that sometimes people bring tragedy onto themselves.

[9] Cf. John 9:2–3 where Jesus rejects a backward-looking, rationalizing question in favor of looking to a future transformation.

Unfortunately, the Hebrew of 4:7 is difficult, and the divergent construal of the Septuagint does not help. Nonetheless, it may be that some of the perceived difficulties relate to a failure to see the basic thrust of YHWH's words. In any case, this is a passage where exegesis and theological interpretation are inseparable, and so we must linger a little.

A common rendering of YHWH's opening words in v.7 is the following: "If you do well [*or* do what is right], will you not be accepted?" This tends to direct the reader to thinking that Cain has done something wrong. Schwartz, for example, remarks on this:

> This sounds much like the unhelpful dictum from Exodus, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy." Yet however circular, God's response does suggest that Cain has already done something wrong (even before he has) since he has been rejected. In what follows, Cain earns that judgment retrospectively by murdering his brother. (3)

Yet the interpretation revolves around discerning the Hebrew idiom. YHWH's opening words are, quite literally, "Is there not if you do well lifting up?" – that is, "If you do well, will there not be a lifting up?" The question then becomes, the "lifting up" of what? This is a matter of the usage of the verb *nāśāʾ* (lift up). Although *nāśāʾ* is commonly used with *ʿāwôn* (guilt, punishment) in the sense of "forgive/accept," and *nāśāʾ* can be used on its own with this same sense (e.g., Gen 18:24, 26) – hence the common translation here – this is most likely the wrong idiom in context. The sense of *nāśāʾ* is surely contextually determined by the "falling" of Cain's face in the preceding narrative and the immediately antecedent question (4:5, 6): that which has fallen, that is, the expression on Cain's face (or possibly his drooping head), can be raised again. Thus, YHWH's words do not have Cain's supposed wrong in view,

but rather make the point that the disappointment writ large in his face can be remedied if he handles the situation well.

However, Cain may fail to handle the situation rightly ("if you do not do well"). If so, then sin is at the door like an animal that is "lying down." The image here may be of an animal making its lair, where the point would be constant latent threat; or the image may be of an animal crouching, preparing to leap upon its prey for which it is hungry. Either way, Cain would be at risk from this animal ("its desire is for you"). In context, the animal would seem to be an embodiment of Cain's resentment at being unfavored, a resentment that threatens to consume him. Yet the coming of this threatening beast does not mean a foregone conclusion, for Cain can still resist: "[B]ut you must master it."[10] The challenge is hard, but not impossible.[11]

To be sure, as the storyline resumes, Cain simply rejects YHWH's words and allows the beast of sinful resentment to have its way with him; he kills Abel. Cain responds bitterly and overreacts to favoring with murder. Indeed, in the following dialogue between Cain and YHWH, it may be a reputation for overreactive murderousness, as embodied in the saying, "Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance," that subsequently constitutes the mark of Cain, which will preserve him and his descendants.[12] Yet in terms of human

[10] The precise translation of *timšol bô* is unclear because of Hebrew's general paucity of modal auxiliaries. Is it "will" or "may" or "should" or "must" master it? There is a wonderful probing of the issue in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden.*

[11] Another possible rendering of 4:7a reads, "Is there not, whether you do well in lifting or whether you do not, sin crouching at your door . . . ?" An appropriate idiomatic sense for "lift" is not obvious in this case. However, the thrust of YHWH's words would still be on the nature of the challenge facing Cain, which would face him whatever he did.

[12] See my "The Mark of Cain – Revealed at Last?" *HTR* 100 (2007): 11–28.

dynamics, it need not have been so; and the possibility within YHWH's words receives a different outworking in the story of Esau and Jacob.

When Jacob steals Esau's blessing, Esau is overwhelmed with grief (27:38), an instinctive response that is a narrative analogy to the falling of Cain's face. Unsurprisingly, this is closely followed by murderous intent (27:41). So, Jacob leaves home for a long time. Yet many years later (in a part of the story neglected by Schwartz), when he returns home, Jacob remains fearful that Esau may yet wish to settle old scores and makes varying preparations – and also encounters the mysterious figure at Peniel, where the encounter with God appears also to be in some way an encounter with the brother whom he has cheated and whom he fears (Gen 32). Astonishingly, when the brothers meet, Esau tearfully welcomes Jacob (33:4). For the Christian there can be no greater commendation of Esau's welcome than that its terminology and gestures are those with which Jesus depicts the father's welcome of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20). In other words, although the narrative has followed Jacob during his absence from home and said nothing about Esau, Esau, who was in a situation comparable to Cain's, has spectacularly done what Cain failed to do. He has mastered the beast of resentment, which might have devoured him; he has indeed done well – though how he got there we are not told.[13]

CONCLUSION: DOING WELL IN DEMANDING CIRCUMSTANCES

I am proposing that the fundamental issue posed by the story of Cain and Abel is the fact that many of the things that matter most

[13] It is a pity that in the history of interpretation, Esau has generally received a bad press.

in God's world are unequally distributed and that being favored or unfavored represents an imponderable element largely beyond human design or deserving; this raises the searching existential issue of how one is to respond when apparently unfavored and tempted to resentment and bitterness. Within Genesis as a whole, this regularly takes the form of God's subverting the "natural" order of things by favoring a younger son over an older.[14] In the paradigmatic narrative of Genesis 4, the issue is focused in God's differing responses to the sacrifices of Cain and Abel, with the younger Abel being favored, and God's challenging Cain about how to respond.

Jon D. Levenson pithily puts the theological issue thus:

> [God's] warning locates the source of the crime in the criminal himself: it is not God's favoring Abel that will bring about the murder, but rather Cain's inability to accept a God who authors these mysterious and inequitable acts of choosing. What Cain cannot bear is a world in which distributive justice is not the highest principle and not every inequity is an iniquity.[15]

One might suggest that Schwartz is a direct descendant of Cain in this matter. For her, apparently, inequity is indeed iniquity. It is in keeping with this that she is simply dismissive of YHWH's words to Cain ("unhelpful") and does not linger to consider their likely thrust; neither does Esau's momentous response to Jacob receive any attention whatsoever.

[14] See the groundbreaking treatment in Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); also Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 15–78. Note also Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[15] Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 74–75.

The issues here are, of course, difficult to handle well.[16] The fact that the biblical writers, not only in Genesis 4 but also elsewhere, do not shrink from ascribing differential favoring to God can easily be taken (and, in the history of the last two thousand years, often has been taken) to justify complacency on the part of the favored and passive acquiescence in their lot on the part of the unfavored. Yet to think thus would be precisely to fail to grasp the biblical vision. For passive acquiescence is the very thing that is *not* envisioned for the unfavored Cain and Esau – rather, a life and death struggle with a beast that is seeking to devour them. More generally (at the risk of generalizing unduly), the biblical understanding of divine favoring – "election" in various forms – is, I think, best summed up in the axiom of Jesus that "much is expected of those to whom much has been given" (cf. Luke 12:48); the response that God seeks and commends is always in line with what people have initially been given, or not given.

One can readily understand – even sympathize with – Schwartz's dislike of aspects of our world. But whether the remedy is to see them as rooted in the Bible, and escapable if only one could truly break free from the Bible's lingering influence, raises basic issues about one's worldview and how best one forms it. For the reasons given previously, I think Schwartz's strategy is mistaken, not least because so much of that which she finds problematic is intrinsic to life in this world.[17] Getting rid of the Bible and talk of God will not solve the problems.

[16] From a wider biblical and theological perspective, one may feel that God's words to Cain in 4:7 say too little about grace, the resources from God for coping with the struggle. But that may simply be a reminder that one story cannot say everything and that responsible use even of foundational stories requires a wide-ranging canonical frame of reference.

[17] An interesting omission in Schwartz's discussion is the struggle for resources in the animal world and its relation to evolution.

If believers ascribe all life in the world to God's providential purposes, then their concern should be neither to rationalize injustice, oppression, and tragedy, nor to deny that the disappointments and resentments that can be felt in response to undeserved misfortune and tragedy often constitute some of the hardest struggles that people ever face. Rather, the concern is to express trust and hope that within a difficult world that has much that is often searingly unwelcome, it indeed remains possible to respond constructively and in life-giving ways.