

CAIN AND ABEL

Genesis's sustained meditation on the idea of chosenness begins with the story of Cain and Abel in Gen 4. Several aspects of this disturbing and enigmatic episode directly or indirectly touch on the issue of election. As most readers know, the story is set immediately after the first couple's expulsion from Eden due to their failure to obey God's command. In a mere two verses Eve gives birth to two children, Cain the elder, who becomes a farmer, and Abel the younger, who becomes a shepherd. Each brings an offering: Cain, produce from the ground, and Abel, some firstborn of his flock. When God accepts Abel's offering but not Cain's, Cain is troubled. God and Cain have a rather cryptic conversation in which Cain appears to be advised not to let his rejection lead him to any rash acts. But in the very next verse Cain kills Abel. The story ends with God's indictment and punishment of Cain, which are slightly tempered by God's promise to protect Cain from anyone seeking to kill him.

The story line appears rather straightforward, but its terseness raises a number of issues, many of which will not receive attention here because they are not of direct relevance for this investigation into the biblical concept of election. Thus, one might wonder how the brothers know that God had accepted one offering and not the other when all the text says is that God "had regard for" or, more literally, "looked upon" Abel and his offering but did not look upon Cain and his offering. Did fire come from heaven as in Lev 9:24 or 1 Kgs 18:38? Did the glory of God appear as it did in Lev 9:23 or Exod 40:34? Do Abel's cattle prosper and Cain's crops not? How quickly is this known?¹ These types of questions, while interesting, are secondary to the focus of this book.

However, four questions are highly pertinent to any attempt to understand what this narrative might contribute to our view of the idea of election. (1) Were Cain and Abel not only siblings but actually twins inasmuch as Abel's birth is prefaced with the words "next she bore his brother Abel," rather than the expected fuller formula "Adam again knew his wife and she conceived"? (2) Was God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and rejection of Cain's due to the fact that Cain brought an inferior offering and, thus, Cain had no one but himself to blame? Several interpretive possibilities attribute YHWH's rejection of Cain's offering to some deficiency in its type or quality. The strongest of these is the notion that while Abel brought from "the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions," Cain just brought "fruit of the ground," not the most select vegetables or the firstfruits. But another possible explanation is that Cain's vegetable offering was doomed to fail either because God preferred meat offerings over vegetable ones or because vegetables were tainted by God's earlier curse upon the ground (Gen 3:17-19). (3) Is it possible to grasp the meaning of the conversation between God and Cain in verses 6-7, especially since verse 7 contains a number of unsolved grammatical and textual problems? This conversation may help illuminate what, if anything, Cain did wrong before he killed his brother, and what his relationship to God was in the short period after his sacrifice was rejected and before Abel's murder. (4) What is the nature of Cain's punishment, and what does it reveal about Cain's status at the close of the narrative? Is Cain utterly cut off from God, or is he still within the pale of God's mercy?

Are Cain and Abel Twins?

The first question about whether Cain and Abel are twins is relevant to the discussion of election in that if Cain and Abel are twins, the issue of who is the firstborn and who is the younger child turns on a few short minutes. This would heighten the rivalry between the siblings by stressing their near equality. Furthermore, it might lead one to see this narrative and the Jacob and Esau account as a pair of narratives that should be read over against each other. Unfortunately, whether Cain and Abel are twins or just brothers is not a question that can receive a definitive answer from the language of the verses themselves. The possibility that these brothers are twins is raised by the fact that there is only one verb indicating Adam had sexual intercourse with Eve (עָדַן in Gen 4:1) as

well as only one verb describing a single conception (וַיְהִי in Gen 4:1), but each birth is described separately (4:1 using וַיֵּלֶד and 4:2 using לֵלֶדֶת). The ambiguity is that the second use of the birthing verb may have been just a shorthand way of summarizing Abel's conception and birth.

While many commentators assume that Cain and Abel are siblings rather than twins, some favor the idea that they are twins based not just on the ambiguous language of verse 2, but because they recognize that this story shares a host of similarities to the Jacob and Esau episode. That story also contains two siblings born from the same mother in very close temporal proximity who each take on different vocations, with one receiving God's favor and the other not. And there the elder almost kills the younger, but the younger is the one driven into exile, albeit not for a whole lifetime. The close relationship between these two narratives may be a textual signal that one should assume that Cain and Abel were indeed twins like Jacob and Esau. My suspicion is that Cain and Abel are not twins, but that the author(s) of the text may have been purposefully ambiguous in order to have the first story of brotherly struggle serve as a paradigm for all the subsequent ones—those about twins like Jacob and Esau and those about regular siblings as in the Joseph story. Thus, while the Cain and Abel story will surely be helpful in illuminating various aspects of the later sibling stories, particularly the Jacob and Esau narrative, the argument for using evidence from this latter narrative to solve a textual ambiguity in Gen 4 is less compelling.

Why Might God Not Have Accepted Cain's Sacrifice?

The second question mentioned above, about whether Cain's offering was defective in some way, is perhaps the most pivotal issue in connection to the concept of election raised by this passage. This is because it directly relates to the Bible's view of how people are chosen. Is election primarily a divine decision with little or no human input, or one that is strongly influenced by a variety of human factors (i.e., can God's choice be rationalized)? Some scholars argue for the latter position by claiming that Abel's sacrifice earned God's favor and/or that Cain's displeased God. As indicated above, numerous theories propose exactly what Cain

might have done wrong or what Abel did correctly. Two weaker hypotheses center on the fact that Cain brought a vegetable offering, either arguing that such an offering was inherently inferior to a meat sacrifice,² or claiming that while a vegetable offering became acceptable later in the biblical period, at this point the ground is still under the curse it received in Gen 3:17-19.³ Such theories draw additional support from the widespread acknowledgment that this narrative's oldest kernel is likely an etiological tale explaining the eventual cultural triumph of shepherds over farmers. But while an older etiological tale about shepherds and farmers may have formed the earliest kernel of the now extant narrative, it is no longer the dominant point of the story. There is less support for the even more far-fetched Girardian reading that Abel's meat sacrifice was "an appropriate outlet to control violence," but Cain "does not have the violence outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal."⁴ Any hypothesis that seeks to fault Cain for failing to bring a meat sacrifice must reckon with the fact that there is no explicit evidence in Gen 4 that God was upset with Cain because he failed to bring a meat sacrifice. Such theories draw their evidence from elsewhere in the Bible but can muster little or no basis for importing such notions into Gen 4.

A much more viable possibility is that Abel's sacrifice was accepted because he offered "the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions" (Gen 4:4), while Cain brought "fruit of the ground," not the most select vegetables. This line of interpretation, which is found not only in modern scholarship⁵ but also in ancient Jewish and Christian sources,⁶ certainly has merit to it; nevertheless, there are problems with it as well. After all, Cain could bring only what he produced, and to be fair, one cannot bring fat portions or first-born pieces of grain in a way that one can bring firstlings from the flock and the most delicious parts of an animal. Although it is conceivable that Cain is being condemned for failing to bring firstfruits (Deut 26:1-11), a number of factors speak against this possibility. To begin with, if one wishes to pin so much on a word or two in the text, one could easily come up with a reading that turns Cain into a pious person and Abel into a mere imitator. As Jon Levenson notes, "Whereas Cain brought his sacrifice 'to the Lord' Abel, on this sort of microscopic over-reading, did not."⁷ Additionally, while the first conversation between God and Cain in verses 6-7 is admittedly cryptic and difficult to interpret, God does not tell him, "Well, next time all you have to do to please me is to bring better produce."

Perhaps the greatest piece of evidence against the view that Abel influenced God's decision to favor him is that it is quite difficult to find much

support from other biblical texts for the idea that God's initial decision to bestow favor on some individual or group is primarily dictated by human behavior rather than by mysterious divine fiat. Internal biblical evidence suggests that one should read this as the first of many stories about brotherly struggles set off by God's mysterious choice to elevate one brother to preeminence, sometimes in consonance with a parental choice to favor the same child.

It is a misunderstanding of the real meaning to look for the reason for the inequality of God's regard. . . . 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.⁸

The point of introducing this motif of divine favoring is not to argue that such favoring is deserved by those who receive it, but that it is inevitable even in egalitarian circumstances. No matter how fairly things are divided up, soon enough one person will outshine another and human jealousy will be unleashed.

Most mysterious is the fact that the elder brother, Cain, whom one would expect to be favored by the rule of primogeniture,⁹ is overshadowed by the second-born Abel. This unusual occurrence is repeated in the cases of Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his ten older brothers. Toward the end of Section 1, I will offer some explanations for the prominence of this motif in these sibling stories and elsewhere within the Hebrew Bible. The point to be noticed here is that God's recurring mysterious elevation of the younger sibling over the older one strongly indicates that God's attention to Abel's sacrifice is not driven by either Abel's proper or Cain's improper behavior.

The Theological Implications of the Cain and Abel Story

If the Cain and Abel story is not one about the human ability to influence God's mysterious choice, then what is this story about? Unfortunately, this story will continue to remain somewhat enigmatic because, as indicated above, the conversation between Cain and God in verses 6-7 is quite cryptic and likely textually corrupt. Many scholars consider verse 7

to be one of the greatest cruxes in the Pentateuch. The most obvious problem is that the word **חַטָּאת** (sin) is feminine, and the participle following it, **רָבַץ** (crouching), is masculine. Additionally, the use of the word **נָשָׂא** (from the root meaning “to lift up”) can carry a number of possible meanings. It can be short for lifting up an offering, as in Ps 96:8; for forgiving one’s sin, as in Gen 18:24, 26 (an interpretation favored by those who think Cain did something wrong with his sacrifice); or for lifting up one’s head (Gen 40:13) or face (Job 11:15 or Deut 28:50), perhaps as an act of deference. Alternatively, it could be (and I believe likely is) intended as a contrast to Cain’s fallen face mentioned in Gen 4:5-6, implying that if he overcomes his jealousy, his anger/depression will also abate. There is also a cryptic allusion to Gen 3:16 in that the identical words for “rule over” and “desire” are used in both places in strikingly similar phrases (**וְאֵלֶיךָ תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה**, and **וְאֵלֶיךָ תְּשׁוּקָתְךָ וְהוּא יִמְשַׁלְּבְךָ** and **וְאֵלֶיךָ תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה**, respectively). The NJPS translation is better than most in that it allows one to glimpse the cryptic nature of the Hebrew verse: “Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right sin crouches at the door; its urge is towards you, yet you can be its master.” But no translation is likely to receive wide approval absent a newly discovered ancient manuscript that is less corrupt.

However, there are two reasons one need not solve all the textual difficulties in this verse for the purposes of the present discussion. First, it is clear that the general thrust of verses 6-7 is a warning to Cain to control his jealous reaction.¹⁰ Furthermore, regardless of what exactly God said to Cain, the fact that God engages in a conversation with Cain after God’s rejection of his sacrifice is itself quite significant. That Cain and God are having an intimate conversation suggests that the non-acceptance of Cain’s offering does not mean that Cain is utterly alienated from God or somehow cursed, but only that he is not specially blessed. At this point in the narrative, Cain appears to occupy a type of middle ground best described by the term “non-elect.” While this idea will be filled out in great detail in later chapters, for now it is enough to say that Gen 4 already indicates that those who are not divinely favored must learn to accept that God’s blessing flows through the world in mysterious ways that, while merciful, are not, strictly speaking, equitable. God’s “unfairness” in choosing some over others is not simply a benefit for the chosen or a detriment to the non-chosen. It is difficult to substantiate this claim only on the basis of Gen 4 in that Cain’s murder of Abel truncates this narrative, but when one looks at the larger theology articulated by the full

range of sibling stories, one discovers that often the non-elect also receive some form of blessing. Furthermore, the blessing of the non-elect is frequently brought about by their relationship to the elect.

Cain's failure is not in relation to the offering he brought, but in his reaction to God's mysterious favoritism of Abel. He allows his jealousy to get out of control, even after God has warned him of this danger. Rather than accept God's choice of Abel, he tries to overcome Abel's election by killing him. Interestingly enough, Cain's elimination of God's elect does not leave him occupying that role. Instead it results in Cain's becoming alienated from God and from the soil from which he earned his livelihood (vv. 11-12). At least initially, Cain moves down a rung from the middle ground of the non-elect and joins those who are beyond God's communion (v. 14). However, when Cain pleads with God that his sin/guilt or punishment¹¹ is too much to bear and that he can be killed by anyone seeking Abel's vengeance, God offers him a measure of divine protection. Whereas some maintain that the mark set on Cain may be from an earlier etiological tale that attempted to explain a tribal marking, within the current text it indicates that Cain is not destined for destruction like others who rebel against God's plan. Rather, he still receives a measure of God's mercy, even while he remains alienated from God (v. 16).

Another interesting facet of this story occurs several verses later in Gen 4:25, a narrative fragment that may have been more closely linked with Gen 4:16 at an earlier redactional point. This verse tells us that not only does Cain's murder of Abel, God's elect, fail to gain him the elect's position, which he jealously wished to assume, but the status of the elect instead passes to the latest born son Seth, who, as the text reports, is Abel's replacement. Thus, God's mysterious tendency to favor certain people remains unabated, offering evidence that the point of these stories is not to critique God for having elevated one brother over the other, but to critique the all too human propensity to become hateful and hurtful toward those whom God favors. Some of the later stories examined below do contain a critique of the elect who misunderstand the purpose of their election and thereby act wrongly, but it is difficult to apply such a reading to this passage where Abel is eliminated almost immediately. It is clear that this narrative is not focused on Abel, a character who does not even receive a full naming from his mother, whose name itself means "mist" or "vapor" and symbolizes the notion of the ephemeral, who is barely present, and who functions only as Cain's foil. Cain dominates this story by controlling much of its action and engaging in two extended

dialogues with the Deity. The fact that the first narrative to struggle with the issue of election is so lopsidedly preoccupied with the non-elect strongly indicates that the concept of election was never assumed to be only for the benefit of the elect, but it was always about God's plan for the whole world, the elect and the non-elect alike.

One might ask whether the reading of this narrative proposed above, highlighting the manner in which God's mysterious favoritism affects the relationship between the chosen and the non-chosen brother, finds support in the Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions. As indicated above, some later Jewish and Christian sources bristled against the idea that God acted arbitrarily by attributing Cain's downfall to his human free will and Abel's election to his superior offering. Alternatively, other sources enhance the arbitrariness of God's actions. Thus, there is a line of interpretation found in both Jewish and Christian sources that sees Cain as evil from birth in that he was the offspring of the evil one who had led Adam and Eve astray.¹² In a sense, this ancient reading shares certain commonalities with the interpretations discussed above, which attribute Cain's rejection to the fact that God prefers animal offerings to vegetable ones either for mysteriously arbitrary reasons or for known arbitrary causes, such as Cain's hapless decision to become a farmer after God had cursed the ground in Gen 3:17-19. In all of these interpretations Cain is doomed to failure for simply being who he is. How both Judaism and Christianity deal with the concept of election, particularly with its more arbitrary aspects, is something that will be explored in greater depth toward the end of this book. For now, the reader needs to know that each tradition is complex, and both contain some interpretations that ameliorate the idea that God acts arbitrarily as well as others that heighten God's apparent arbitrariness all the more.

Before proceeding with a more detailed discussion of the other sibling stories, it is worth reflecting on the ways in which the Cain and Abel narrative is unique and what general attributes it shares with these later episodes. Unlike the other three stories of sibling rivalry discussed below, the Cain and Abel story does not contain all the elements of a full-blown theology of election. Certainly, God singles out Abel as the favored sibling, and this favoritism implies that Abel received some type of divine blessing that Cain did not. But the idea that God's special covenant will pass through only one brother's progeny, as occurs in the Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau episodes, is not present here. Without the presence of such a covenantal theology, it may be more accurate to speak

of divine favoring rather than divine election here.¹³ Of course, this narrative necessarily lacks a fully articulated theology of election because Cain's action truncates the possibility for God's plan to be wholly revealed at this time.

Nevertheless, one should not lose sight of the many ways this narrative is indeed linked to the three yet to be discussed sibling stories and thus gives voice to several of the central elements of the biblical concept of election. These include the mysterious divine elevation of the younger sibling over the elder, the fact that such divine favoritism does not signal that the non-chosen is alienated from God, the jealous reaction on the part of the elder sibling(s), the grave danger that such jealousy entails for the one chosen by God, and the fact that violence against the elect gains nothing for the non-elect because it does not eliminate God's propensity to continue to favor some over others. That many of these election tropes are adumbrated here but filled out in the next two episodes and heightened further in the Joseph story indicates that this is an intentional literary strategy to enrich the theme by continually returning to it and deepening it over time. If this is the case, the authors of Genesis then purposely linked the cryptic Cain and Abel tale to these other more developed ones. Having begun the process of unpacking Genesis's extended meditation on election, we now turn to the second story involving two siblings, the much more elaborate set of narratives about Isaac and Ishmael.