ROUTLEDGE INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON BIBLICAL CRITICISM

Cain, Abel, and the Politics of God

An Agambenian reading of Genesis 4:1–16

Julián Andrés González Holguín

ROUTLEDGE

"This is a groundbreaking analysis of the famous biblical sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel, so crucial for the three Abrahamic religious traditions. In critical theoretical dialogue with Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, and Julia Kristeva, González adeptly transforms the classical interpretations of that first instance of homicide. Conscious of the centrality of that biblical saga for our literary and cultural traditions, González engages in a fruitful dialogue with Lord Byron's play *Cain: A Mystery*. As a scholar of Latino heritage, he also holds an enlightening conversation with two of the most celebrated Latin American writers: Jorge Luis Borges and César Vallejo. This is an important contribution to the interpretation of one of the most perplexing and bewildering texts of the Hebrew sacred scriptures."

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"Murder? He probes! González Holguín's book is a significant and sophisticated study of the many 'unsolved mysteries' involved in the first homicide and fratricide in human history narrated in the Hebrew Bible. Drawing from the scholarship of Agamben, Rancière, and Kristeva, González Holguín reads the reception history of this passage – within both biblical scholarship and the larger literary world – and relates Abel's death to today's questions about human rights and immigration. This book is wide-ranging, thought-provoking, and socio-politically relevant. Don't miss it!"

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"*Cain, Abel, and the Politics of God* is a groundbreaking re-interpretation of Gen. 4:1–16. It demonstrates that biblical studies can greatly profit from taking into account literary rewritings and re-interpretations of biblical stories, for it opens endless possibilities for a more complex and critical approach to those stories. In addressing the key issue of othering at the core of Abel and Cain story, Julián Andrés González excels in offering an innovative approach to it; he also illuminates the profound impact that bringing together literary and religious studies in illuminating and addressing social, human, and political pressing issues of our

time as well as convincing us of the urgent necessity of taking a stand, making a commitment in regard to those very issues. This is an exciting and timely study. Cain's figure is no longer that 'other' to be outcast; instead the killing of Abel paves the way to interrogate critically the role of the sovereign: God. In projecting the fate of the immigrant on the cursed Cain, González's study unveils a sovereign power that very much relies on politics of exclusion, othering and devaluation of other lives. It takes a passionate stand for human rights precisely there where those rights remain in the parenthetical, precarious life of homo sacer."

Professor **Francisco Moran**, Department of World Languages and Literatures, Southern Methodist University, USA

"*Cain, Abel, and the Politics of God* succeeds in that most difficult of critical tasks, marrying the rigours of traditional scholarship to the imaginative powers of contemporary method. Marshalling writers from Agamben to Augustine, Philo to Foucault, this book offers a reading of immense richness that despite its complexity never overwhelms, never falters, never brays. González's Agambenian treatment of Gen. 4 is an important comment on the Bible's political and philosophical currency, then, but equally important is its nature as a challenge to the sovereignty of the old disciplinary boundaries in the academic guild."

Christopher Meredith, St. Mary's University, Twickenham, UK

Cain, Abel, and the Politics of God

The Genesis story of Cain's murder of Abel is often told as a simplistic contrast between the innocence of Abel and the evil of Cain. This book subverts that reading of the biblical text by utilizing Giorgio Agamben's concepts of *homo sacer*, the state of exception, and the idea of sovereignty to re-examine this well-known tale of fratricide and bring to the fore its political implications.

Drawing from political theory, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, this book creates a theoretical framework from which to do two things: firstly, to describe and analyze the history of interpretation of Gen. 4:1–16, and secondly to propose an alternative reading of the biblical text that incorporates other texts inside and outside of the biblical canon. This intertextual analysis will highlight the motives of violence, law, divine rule, and the rejected as they emerge in different contexts and will evaluate them in an Agambenian framework.

The unique approach of this book makes it vital reading for any academic with interests in biblical studies and theology and their interactions with politics and ethics.

Julián Andrés González Holguín is an assistant professor of Old Testament at Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, USA. He is a steering committee member of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) "Sacred Texts, Theory and Theological Construction" group; a graduate of Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University; and a Latino migrant scholar raised in Colombia with interests in postcolonial, feminist, and political theory in the interpretation of texts.

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To my wife, Viviana, who never gave up hope,
even when I did

Contents

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Abbreviations

ANET	Ancient Near East Texts
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*
BT	Babylonian Talmud
ESV	English Standard Version
HQG	*Hebrew Questions on Genesis*
KJV	King James Version
MT	Masoretic Text
NAB	New American Bible
NHC	Nag Hammadi Codex
NIV	New International Version
PRE	*Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*
QAG	*Questions and Answers on Genesis*
TN	Targum Neofiti
ThWAT	*Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Altern Testament*. Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Stuttgart, 1970 –
TWAB	*That the Worse Is Wont to Attack the Better*

Introduction

The purpose of this study

Within the framework of the biblical narrative, Gen. 4:1–16 tells the story of the world's first homicide, which is also the first fratricide. But although the culprit is named, from the very beginning the story is much more of a murder mystery than an investigative report because it generates more questions than it provides answers. Among them: What gives Cain and Abel the very idea of making sacrifices – given that sacrifices are neither mandated nor even mentioned before then? Why does God reject Cain's offering and, conversely, what makes Abel's offering acceptable to the deity? How do the brothers learn about God's response? Why does Cain kill Abel? Is his action premeditated or spontaneous? What, if anything, does Cain tell Abel right before the murder? Why does God fail to prevent it from happening? Is what happens to Cain afterwards an unavoidable natural consequence of his contaminating the earth with Abel's blood or a deliberate punishment meted out by Yhwh? (Cain seems to believe that the latter is true but is it accidental that God carefully avoids the first person when announcing Cain's destiny?) Why does the deity go to great lengths, including a promise of sevenfold vengeance and a special mark of untouchability for Cain rather than Abel – in other words, the murderer rather than the victim? The narrative passes over all these matters in silence.

Moreover, those details that the story does provide do not make things any clearer; indeed, they tend to confuse the audience. What is the purpose of the chronological reference in the beginning of Gen. 4:3? Is the implication that the timing was right or that it was wrong? And does it have anything to do with the rejection of Cain's sacrifice? Analogously, are the specifics about Abel's offering – the mention of the "firstlings of his flock" (בכרות צאנו) and "their fat" (חלבהן) meant to explain why the deity favored it? What was God trying to tell Cain after spurning his sacrifice? Why the query about Abel's whereabouts? Is it rhetorical or is God genuinely clueless about what has just transpired? If the former is true, does the deity taunt Cain or give him an opportunity to own up to his crime? Is Cain's terse response an expression of defiance or a cowardly – and pathetically futile – attempt to cover up the murder? Why the graphic depiction of the earth opening its mouth to swallow Abel's blood? Does this make the earth Cain's accomplice? How can a murder be avenged sevenfold – by the deaths of six innocent people in addition to the perpetrator? What is the nature of Cain's mark and how are his

would-be killers – none of whom has even been born yet – supposed to know that it is a sign of untouchability? And why does Cain's story proper end with him starting a family and building a city – which not only suggests that ultimately the murderer fared much better than the victim but also contradicts the statements of both God and Cain that the latter will be a fugitive and a wanderer?

All these questions arise even when the Bible is read in translation; a critical analysis of the story in its original language further compounds the difficulties, mainly due to unusual terminology and syntax. The story begins with Adam and Eve having sex, which results in Eve's pregnancy and the birth of Cain (4:1); all of this is described in standard biblical terms: אשתו ותהר ותלד את־קין והאדם ידע את־חוה (cf., e.g., Gen. 4:17; 1 Sam. 1:19–20). By contrast, Eve's declaration that follows is highly unusual: קניתי איש את־יהוה. Even apart from the forced nature of the connection between the name קין "Cain" and the verb קנה, usually "to acquire," that the sentence seems to draw, the sense of the statement is highly elusive. The subject is obviously the speaker, Eve, but what or whom does she claim to have acquired and in what way? Is Cain the direct object of the sentence, as presupposed by the vast majority of both ancient and modern translations? In that case, why does the text refer to him as איש "man" rather than "child" or "son," and in what sense could his mother "acquire" him with Yhwh? Is Cain's paternity at least in part divine? Or perhaps the איש is actually God and את functions as a direct object marker? Then how exactly could a woman "acquire" the deity? Finally, could the איש be Adam – referred to as such in Gen. 2:23–24 and repeatedly in Gen. 3? But if so, what could Eve mean by saying that she "acquired" her husband?

Following this in Gen. 4:2 is the account of Abel's birth and the description of the brothers' occupations. The expression ותסף ללדת makes it clear that Abel was born after Cain but not whether this birth was the result of another conception. At the very least, the Qal infinitive construct form of the verb ילד "to give birth" leaves open the possibility that the two brothers were twins. Likewise, it is not immediately clear why despite Abel being (at least slightly) younger, his occupation is mentioned first. This may be a subtle suggestion to the reader that God prefers Abel even before the problem with the sacrifices. Yet another stumbling block is the chronological marker – the only one in the entire pericope – that opens verse 3. The phrase ויהי מקץ ימים, literally "and it happened at the edge of days," is ambiguous because elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible the word ימים denotes either an indeterminate period (Gen. 40:4; 1 Kgs. 17:7; Dan. 8:27) or that of a calendar year (1 Sam. 1:3, 21; 27:7; 2 Sam. 14:26; Neh. 13:6). Did Cain wait a long time to make the sacrifice reported in the verse or, conversely, bring it at the conclusion of his very first season as a farmer? In a similar vein, there is no certainty as to whether the rare verb שעה that is used to describe how the deity reacted to Cain's offering – and failed to respond to Cain's – signifies enthusiastic embrace or nothing more than polite attention. Neither is it entirely clear what the narrator means by describing Cain's response to the rejection of his sacrifice as ויפלו פניו, literally "his face fell" (the most common English translation is "he was crestfallen") – for the simple reason that the expression does not occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

Yet even these exegetical difficulties pale in comparison with those besetting God's first address to Cain in Gen. 4:6–7. While the first part of the discourse,

למה חרה לך ולמה נפלו פניך is relatively easy to translate (that is, apart from the echo of the unique ופלו פניו), it still leaves open the issue of whether the deity genuinely struggles to understand why Cain is upset or uses a rhetorical question to tell him that there is nothing to be upset about. In the continuation, however, almost every word and syntactic relationship is ambiguous. Does תיטיב mean "you will do good," "you will do better," or "you will become a better person"? Is the verb נשה used here in the sense of "to forgive," "to accept," or "to bear"? Why is this verb in the infinitive construct form? How is it related to the flanking תיטיב and לא תיטיב – in other words, is it associated only with Cain managing to יטב or also with him failing to do so? What is meant by transgression crouching (lurking? reposing?) at the door (whose door?), and what does it have to do with Cain managing or failing to יטב? Whose desire is towards Cain – Abel's (as suggested by the masculine possessive suffix in תשוקתו but contradicted by the absence of references to Abel since verse 5) or – in a much more bizarre fashion – the transgression's (which better fits syntactically but not grammatically)? In both cases, what does this desire have to do with the rest of the verse? Likewise, over whom will (or should?) Cain have power (תמשל), Abel or the transgression, and how is it relevant? And overall, does the deity try to cause Cain to act, to prevent him from acting, or simply to reassure him?

Also unclear is the meaning of another piece of divine discourse, ארור אתה מן־האדמה in verse 11. There is no doubt that it describes Cain as cursed and that the curse has to do with the earth swallowing his brother's blood, but does the preposition מן, generally "from," signify that the curse emanates from the earth or that the former banishes Cain from the latter?[1] Cain's response likewise begins with an ambiguous statement: גדול עוני מנשא. Since the verb נשא means both "to carry, bear" and "to forgive" and the opening *mem* of מנשא can be either the preposition מ- (in which case the rest of the word is an infinitive absolute, as is suggested by the Masoretic vocalization), or an element of the Piel active participle, the sentence is translatable as "my guilt is too great to bear," "my guilt is too great to forgive," "my guilt is great, I bear it," and even "my guilt is great, he forgives it." And since עון is translatable not only as "guilt" or "iniquity" but also as "punishment" (e.g., 1 Sam. 28:10), there may be as many as eight different ways to understand these three words.

This brief overview suggests that even by the standards of the Hebrew Bible – a corpus of writings that is not well known for its lucidity – Gen. 4:1–16 is a particularly ambiguous and multivalent text.[2] Possible answers to the questions formulated above – and in many cases there are more than two, not to mention that what we are dealing with here is but a representative sample – can come in an astronomical number of combinations. And with the narrator never formulating a moral – or quoting God as formulating one – it is anybody's guess what, if anything, it is supposed to tell us about the deity's nature and *modus operandi*, the human condition, and the interaction between the two parties. It is small wonder then that over the course of two millennia the text in question has been read in a stupendous number of highly diverse ways. The frequent possibility of multiple layers of meaning makes Gen. 4:1–16 and in general the Hebrew Bible fertile ground for diverse interpretations.[3] However, certain interpretive tendencies may

nevertheless be traceable, and one of them is the inability of many exegetes, both traditional and modern, to question the role that God plays in the story as the ultimate sovereign. As we will see, translations of Gen. 4:1–16 into the vernaculars of the ancient world had a profound impact on the development of Christianity and Judaism and in the history of Western civilization. The comparative analysis of ancient interpretations demonstrates how social, political, and theological views were communicated when rendering the Cain and Abel story for new audiences.

This study draws on several modern and post-modern theoretical frameworks, primarily on the political philosophy of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière, as well as the psychological insights of Julia Kristeva, to explore and fill this gap.[4] After outlining, in the second part of this Introduction, first, how this project connects with the current debate about reception history and biblical studies, and second, the main concepts of Agamben, Rancière, and Kristeva that are relevant to my purposes, I will use these concepts in Chapter 1 to examine ancient interpretations of Gen. 4:1–16 from the Septuagint through Augustine. This examination will demonstrate that the predictable assumption of the vast majority of ancient exegetes that the divine behavior in the narrative could not be anything but perfectly justified and benevolent resulted in the persistent portrayal of Cain as the Kristevian stranger, the other. That, in turn, had major political consequences when the Church fathers, and especially Augustine, identified Cain with those who did not fit into the Rancièrian ethical community they sought to create, and especially with the Jews, resulting in the Agambenian inclusive exclusion of the latter by Christian sovereigns. The project uses this theoretical triangle to interrogate Gen. 4:1–16 and its history of interpretation in the context of the contemporary issues of human rights and migration.[5]

Chapter 2 discusses select examples of twentieth- and twenty-first-century English- and Spanish-language scholarship from North America, Europe, South America, and South Africa utilizing a variety of modern and post-modern methodologies. The chapter demonstrates that although the (supposedly) objective, value-neutral approach that Spinoza initiated was instrumental in wresting biblical studies from ecclesiastical control and the concomitant adherence to the main tenets of the ancient exegetical tradition discussed in Chapter 1 of this study, it also brought about widespread reluctance to engage the Bible politically. In consequence, with a few notable exceptions modern exegetes follow their ancient predecessors in not asking difficult questions about divine sovereignty and its ramifications in Gen. 4:1–16. Crowning this trend are the notions of "divine freedom" and "divine inscrutability" that can be traced to Martin Luther's theology. Even the interpreters whose social location differs sharply from that of the white European male majority of modern biblical scholars are held back in this respect by the historical-critical approach; in particular, some feminist exegetes fail to confront fully the androcentrism in the text and its interpretations.

Chapter 3 offers a close reading of four literary pieces that draw upon the Cain and Abel story: *Cain: A Mystery* by George Gordon Byron, "Juan Lopez and John Ward" by Jorge Luis Borges, and "The Eternal Dice" and "I Am Going to Speak about Hope" by César Vallejo. I will show that these authors have gone much further than modern biblical scholars in challenging the biblical God, often along

the lines plumbed by Agamben. This, in turn, enabled them to raise complicated and sensitive issues with regard to the human condition and especially to the ways – and the very possibility – of understanding and helping the other without destroying him or her. Therefore, this chapter offers a localized application of the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 1.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I return to Gen. 4:1–16 proper in the MT to read it from the standpoint of present-day migrants, especially the so-called undocumented immigrants. This reading, informed primarily by Agamben and building upon the insights of Byron, Borges, and Vallejo, will concentrate on God's responsibility for the murder of Abel, the paradoxical reasons that caused Cain to commit this murder, and on Cain's mark as a symbol of ownership and abandonment. I present the resulting interpretation in the context of the contemporary discourse on human rights, especially with regard to the contentious issues of citizenship and humanitarian intervention.

Reception history: exceptional text/text of exception

The borderline between the original text of Gen. 4:1–16 and its reception is a complicated issue to define. Although this project begins with an examination of early Jewish and Christian interpreters, it does not claim that the reception of the Cain and Abel story begins at that moment. Questions about composition, redaction, and the resulting textual and semantic pluriformity seem to be hardly distinguishable from the reception of Gen. 4:1–16.[6] Early textual versions like the Septuagint or receptions[7] like rabbinic, and patristic interpretations that may be classified as part of the early reception seem to be at the same time part of the narrative itself because they functioned as the Cain and Abel story for many of its readers. Labeling these texts as only belonging to the reception of Gen. 4:1–16 would be misleading because it continues to work within the dichotomy text and reception, obscuring that the Masoretic Text (MT)[8] of the tale is also part of the reception. In other words, any oldest imaginable version of Gen. 4:1–16 is at the same time original and reception.[9] The history of the transmission of this biblical tale only amounts to the history of the MT if one asserts the anachronistic position that the MT was the text that ancient rabbis and patristic readers interpreted.[10] Eugene Ulrich shows that the origins of the text belong to a *traditioning process* that developed in irreducible directions not compatible with the notion of a single original *ur*-document. The MT is just one tradition among others that existed in antiquity[11] and to choose one version of Gen. 4:1–16 as the obvious endpoint of production and the beginning of reception is to misunderstand the nature of the text. Since we do not know where a supposedly early Hebrew version begins or ends, it is impossible to tell what came after it and what belongs to its original. Therefore, the imaginary line that Chapter 1 draws to begin the analysis functions as a starting point for the study of the reception history of the Cain and Abel story without making the claim that historically this is the natural and obvious place where the text ends and its reception begins.[12]

The analysis of interpretations in ancient and contemporary times underlines that Gen. 4:1–16 has meant many different things throughout history. In Chapter 2

we will see that the tale is understood in ways that would likely be incomprehensible to ancient readers either during the Second Temple Period or later during the patristic times. However, from the standpoint of current historical-critical approaches, scholars do not agree about the date and authorship of this text, making the borderline between text and reception even more complicated to define. For example, James Kugel, talking about the Pentateuch, distinguishes between a "biblical period" and a period of "the rise of the ancient interpreters,"[13] but he does not define when this textual-historical shift takes place. The border as a solution to the critical distinction between text and reception is at the same time the question to answer.

The tripartite schema of the world behind the text, the world in the text, and the world in front of the text is certainly a helpful theoretical supposition to organize the material for analysis. This Ricoeurian division allows for a coherent and orderly analysis of the history of interpretation of Gen. 4:1–16. Especially in Chapters 1 and 2, I use the *Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia* (BHS), the modern scholarly edition, to compare and contrast the reception of the Cain and Abel story in its Jewish and Christian interpretations. Yet, the distinction simply as it is and defining constitutive boundaries between author, text, and reader makes clear that the political analysis of Gen. 4:1–16 inhabits a hermeneutical and sociocultural situation quite different from that presumed by historical-critical approaches. The Agambenian analysis allows for a reconceptualization of the Cain and Abel story to understand the *Wirkungsgeschichte*[14] of the narrative in its long history of reception. We are interested in the history of the text as reflected in the transmission of its manuscript traditions. I attend carefully to the concept of sovereignty imagined by interpreters in their struggle to understand the role of the deity in the story and how this concept has transpired into regulations that name and deal with the "other" in societies and cultures. Yet, the tripartite division also obscures the borderlines in the schema of three worlds. Although the distinction allows for a basic coherence to read the story's history of interpretation, it also distorts the field of biblical criticism because when modern academic/scholarly readers talk about the text of Gen. 4:1–16 as something distinguishable from either the world behind or in front of the text, the borderline between the worlds is ignored for the sake of methodological clarity. In other words, the methodological tools deployed to study the text and its reception are at the same time participating in the creation of the world under analysis. The three-world schema conceals that this division is a fabrication of the modern field of biblical studies.

Since the focus of the current study is to explore how Gen. 4:1–16 participates in the creation of a Kristevian other who becomes the foundation of what Rancière names the ethical community that in turn deals with the constant presence of the Agambenian *homo sacer*, the analysis does not argue against the claim of some historico-critical perspectives that try to recover a possible author's intention in the hermeneutical project. Neither does it assert that the text itself is entirely constructed by each reading community throughout its history of reception.[15] However, it does show how the border between text and reception is traversed by different readers in different geopolitical situations[16] and how readers in the post-divide[17] era continued to actively shape and hand on the tradition by a

process not only of copying the text, but more important, by a continuous attempt to make Gen. 4:1–16 adaptable and relevant to later generations of readers who did not have a grasp of ancient Hebrew culture.[18]

The border between Gen. 4:1–16 and its reception is and has been a changing *process*. The text was built up over a lengthy and complex span of time including any formation of oral history before the initial written stages. It also continued to grow and transform after any imaginable "original" period during the early Jewish and Christian reception. Currently, in the form of modern translations, critical editions, and creative readings, Gen. 4:1–16 continues to change in communities and cultures. Yet, in order to study it, it is necessary to establish some sort of distinctions. I am interested in examining the world that Gen. 4:1–16 creates in its encounter with reading communities past and present by paying special attention to its connection with the Agambenian idea of sovereignty and current debates in global migration. This demarcation certainly is my own creation and does not exist in any fixed sense, but it does create some hermeneutical effects. In the specific interconnection of these theoretical lines, this book pays attention to what these lines do to Gen. 4:1–16 and it explores the potential consequences of interpreting the biblical text in a particular way in order to comprehend the complex condition of migrants vis-à-vis nation-states in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical framework: Agamben, Rancière, and Kristeva

In order to analyze Gen. 4:1–16 and the ways in which different interpreters deal or dealt with the problem of God's role in the story, this study draws principally on the political theory of Giorgio Agamben as laid out in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.[19] I use the juridico-political concepts that Agamben investigates to explore what others have said about the divine intervention in the lives of Abel and Cain and to plumb the political implications of these readings. In addition, Agamben provides a distinctive approach to the biblical narrative so that the analysis includes the character of God rather than focusing only on human actors and thus deflecting attention from such issues as the arbitrariness of the divine election and the elements of irrationality, unpredictability, and unfairness in the deity's behavior. As Yvonne Sherwood notes, "Agamben's *State of Exception*, a timely extension of his earlier work in *Homo Sacer* [interrogates the] constitutionally and philosophically paradoxical position of the sovereign simultaneously 'inside and outside the juridical order.'"[20] This study follows the trend in various academic disciplines that is working on more nuanced analysis of the relationship between sovereignty, emergency, exception, and divinity. It advances an interdisciplinary perspective in biblical interpretation, looking at Gen. 4:1–16 as a cultural document and exploring the changing shape of its political authority where it gives up its role as a theocratic oracle of divine inscrutability and human sinfulness to become the foundation for political decisions throughout medieval and modern history. Its biblical authority does not disappear but changes its shape.

The absence of crucial details creates problems in ascertaining both the plain meaning of the narrative and its theological import. It is not possible to differentiate between these levels because the theological meaning is tightly wrapped

up in the narration and dialogues. The emphasis on the political analysis is thus connected with the theological since, as we shall see in the next section, there is a political element intermingled with the theological discussion. Therefore, a critical analysis of the story's literary characteristics should be accompanied by that of the social and even cultural elements, such as the notions of community, brotherly love, the exile, the immigrant, and the figure of the father/sovereign in Gen. 4:1–16 and its history of interpretation.

The politically oriented reading of the text under discussion and its history of interpretation elicits a concern about the material conditions of people's everyday lives and the complex ways in which Gen. 4:1–16 may either underscore and justify injustices or provide alternative social models for change. Therefore, my analysis of the history of interpretation is a deliberate effort to read against the grain of the narrative and the religious traditions associated with it. I will devote extra attention to the political nature of the early exegetical tradition and contemporary scholarly-academic readings of Gen. 4:1–16 and implications with regard to the phenomenon of migration and to human rights in general.[21] To quote Jeffrey Stouts, "A debate over the nature of meaning reveals itself as a struggle of what makes literature [in our case, Gen. 4:1–16,] worth caring about and what kind of society critics strive for."[22] In other words, "how we read represents and enacts the kinds of politics we (consciously and unconsciously) practice."[23] What follows is a brief introduction to Agamben's ideas and related critical concepts from Jacques Rancière and Julia Kristeva that I will deploy to analyze the political element in the interpretations of the Cain and Abel story and to offer a fresh view of this well-known but not so well understood story.

Giorgio Agamben's concepts of sovereignty, Homo sacer, *and the state of exception*

"The Greeks," Agamben writes,

> had no single term to express what we mean by the word 'life'. They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoê*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or group.[24]

Although this distinction is almost invisible in modern languages since we use the same word to connote life as a biological entity and life as a political entity, Agamben uses it to elucidate the relationship between politics and *zoê*, which he also calls bare life.

He explains that "Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life."[25] This politicization of bare life creates a split between *bios* and *zoê*. The split that Agamben discusses is not natural but rather is the outcome of the figure of the sovereign. He argues that the originary [sic] activity of the sovereign that makes possible the political-juridical order where people seek good living (*bios*) involves the production of bare life in

an act of exclusion. As I will unpack later, he adds that the exclusion means a "life caught in the sovereign ban . . . that may be killed but not sacrificed."[26]

The peculiar privilege of *zoê* to be the excluded ground of sovereignty arises in part because *zoê*'s relationship to politics parallels "the metaphysical definition of man as the living being who has language (*logos*)" and not only voice (*phonē*). "Voice is the sign of pain and pleasure." Language, however, is "for manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust."[27] In other words, bare life suggests suffering and creaturely existence. However, Agamben notes that a passage from Aristotle's *Politics* portrays the perpetual entanglement of bare life in the political world:

> This [life according to the good] is the greatest end both in common for all men and for each man separately. But men also come together and maintain the political community in view of simple living, because there is probably some kind of good in the mere fact of living [*kata to zēn auto monon*]. If there is no great difficulty as to the way of life [*kata ton bion*], clearly most men will tolerate much suffering and hold on to life [*zoe*] as if it were a kind of serenity [*euēmeria*, beautiful day] and a natural sweetness.[28]

Agamben discovers in this passage that the "natural sweetness" of *zoê* appears again in the *polis*, from which it was supposed to be excluded. Although life according to the definition of the good is to be sought in *bios*, Aristotle argues that there is some kind of good in the mere fact of living (*zoê*). In other words, for Agamben *zoê* is at the same time both captured in and excluded from the political order. This concept is the pivotal, overarching element of the political theory that he develops as a way of understanding the relationship between politics and bare life and as a way of calling into question the sacredness of life as a concept originating in religion. For Agamben, before the relationship became connected with religion it was a legal political term.

The paradox of inclusion and exclusion transforms bare life into the political foundation of the *polis*, to which it belongs by not belonging. It exists as a liminal concept in the juridico-political order that Agamben describes as the state of exception. He argues that the inclusive exclusion of bare life, following Aristotle's formulation, is the "aporia that lies at the foundation of Western politics" to which "24 centuries . . . have brought only provisional and ineffective solutions."[29] How is it possible to seek the "sweetness" of bare life in the political sphere of the *polis* if the founding moment of *bios* at the same time implies the exclusion of bare life? This question expresses the aporia that Agamben discerns at the foundation of politics.

The state of exception into which *zoê* is placed is at the same time where the authority "proves itself not to need law to create law."[30] Since the sovereign is both inside and outside of the juridical order, the state of exception becomes the essence of sovereignty.[31] However, the state of exception is not the chaos that precedes order or a time of emergency in which the sovereign asserts power. It is not that the exception subtracts itself from the rule; "rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception,

first constitutes itself as a rule."[32] In other words, the juridical order withdraws from the state of exception while nevertheless maintaining a relation to it; and the state of exception does not nullify the juridical order but maintains the conditions for the rule of law. An example of the state of exception in the modern world of nation-states where people experience the split between *bios* and *zoê* is the figure of the migrant without proper documents, the person who does not have the legal rights granted by birth or naturalization and thus lives in a kind of limbo or parenthesis. With regard to the migrants, the juridical order has withdrawn itself because it does not recognize their rights associated with citizenship, but at the same time it maintains a relation so that it can declare them to be non-citizens who thus end up living in the liminal space of exception.

Agamben argues that the state of exception "is the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it."[33] In the exception, bare life is not outside of the law, but abandoned by it, banned from it. It is a paradoxical relationship in which bare life remains included in the *polis* but has no rights or access to the law because it exists in a state of exception, that is, as something included only by its exclusion. Bare life thus occupies the same sphere as the sovereign, both inside and outside of law.

Homo sacer (sacred man) is the ancient form of bare life that Agamben discovers in the archaic Roman law, "human life . . . included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)."[34] *Homo sacer* represents the enigma of the sacred that Agamben rethinks to argue that what has been considered a sacred notion is in fact of juridical origin and the first paradigm of the political realm of the West. The sacredness that normally is ascribed to bare human life is not a secularized residue of the belief in the divine origin of life. Agamben challenges Schmitt's assertion that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."[35] The relationship arises from the original ban on bare life that was included, paradoxically by its exclusion, in the juridical order. It is not the product of divine sanction or of a special relation to a transcendent reality. Therefore, *homo sacer* in the religious discourse or in the contemporary discourse of human rights is a mystification that conceals the political nature of sovereignty's relationship to the sacred.

Homo sacer, to reiterate a crucial point, is constituted by "the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice."[36] Thus, he is banned from human law without being "brought into the realm of the divine law."[37] He then lives in a double exception in that it is at the same time a condition of double exclusion and double capture. His life cannot be sacrificed and thus belongs to the divine by not belonging. *Homo sacer* remains in the world as bare life in a state of exception because human and religious law is related to him only by abandoning him. He is therefore exposed to the violent force of sovereign power in the liminal position outside of both human and religious law. Therefore, the sacredness of life and of sovereignty has an intrinsic relationship not to an invisible transcendental reality but to the political sphere in the body of *homo sacer*, the subject whom anyone can kill without committing homicide and who cannot be sacrificed in a religious ceremony.

The body of *homo sacer* then undergirds the original political relation, one that is outside of both human and religious law and remains in the state of exception.

In this relation, bare life becomes the subject of sovereign power, which excludes the person from the juridical order by including him and vice versa. As Agamben puts it, "life is sacred only insofar as it is taken into the sovereign exception, and to have exchanged a juridico-political phenomenon (*homo sacer*'s capacity to be killed but not sacrificed) for a genuinely religious phenomenon is the root of the equivocations that have marked studies both of the sacred and of sovereignty in our time."[38] This is a crucial point to the analysis of Gen. 4:1–16 and the history of its interpretation. The emphasis on the religious character of the story neglects the political dimension that Agamben recognizes behind any study of the sacred.

Although Agamben regards life as sacred, in the spectrum of religious studies he represents the side in which sacrality is divorced from any religious sense. Life is sacred not in the traditional approach of the discourse of human rights, but in the sense of the origin of *homo sacer* as the life that "may be killed by anyone without committing homicide."[39] For him, the semantic slide of sacredness into a religious discourse is a consequence of the overburdening of meaning in which the signifier "sacred" lost its political meaning until it meant nothing except for its religious excess. *Homo sacer* is then a person whom the sovereign declares a criminal and marks as fundamentally different. The judgment ascribes the term "sacred" onto a person and defines that person as valueless rather than most valuable. In this context, life as the sacred functions as a denial of value rather than an affirmation of an intrinsic characteristic that makes life an object of protection. This is the reason that for Agamben, "sacred" is a political and not a religious designation. *Homo sacer*'s life and its contemporary embodiments are sacred not for their positive value but because it is the life about which the sovereign makes decisions regardless of any influence from juridical systems or ethical norms established by religious views.

Agamben asserts that from the perspective of the juridical order, the state of exception is essentially unlocalizable because, as in the case of the migrants, it is not a specific geographical location where people are exposed as creaturely beings, *zoê*.[40] For instance, the state of exception is embodied in the lives of the migrants, who in the twentieth-first century are becoming the paradigmatic example of *homo sacer*. When we understand the state of exception as a geographical location, Agamben argues, then concentration camps are its most gruesome examples. However, for him all humanity in the contemporary world lives in a state of exception – as suggested by the recent debates about the constant spying on the civil population and the use of drones to kill not only "terrorists" in foreign countries but even citizens who are deemed to be dangerous. Since the start of the "war on terror" – which Rancière cites as an example of what he calls "infinite justice" (see next section) – the "terrorist" no longer belongs to a particular land or country.[41] Anybody can be declared a "terrorist" and killing that person will not be considered homicide; any life can be absorbed and eliminated within the discourse on terrorism. As Walter Benjamin asserted long time ago, "the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[42] The recent temporary solution that President Obama offered to "undocumented" residents of the United States (November 2014) is an example of Benjamin's insight: beneficial as it is, Obama's administrative action still maintains the migrants in a state

of exception because it does not offer rights of residency or citizenship. Even if a migrant receives a work permit, s/he still remains in parentheses, included-excluded, because the permit can be arbitrarily revoked at any time.[43]

As mentioned before, the sovereign produces bare life in an act of exclusion, which makes it a "life caught in the sovereign ban . . . that may be killed but not sacrificed."[44] In light of the political dimension in the concept of "sacred," a person who lives in his or her body the split between *bios* and *zoe* cannot appeal to the protection of human law, and he or she is removed from divine law. Thus, it is the life that experiences ultimate violence, one that exceeds the orbits of both human and divine law.[45] Contrary to the theological-normative view of human life as having intrinsic and inviolable value, Agamben argues that humanity is a matter of decision – more specifically, a political decision that decrees what happens to the life of *homo sacer* and by doing so legitimates the law.

The sovereign and *homo sacer* are both outside and inside the law; both live in a state of exception. Nevertheless, this does not mean a non-relation between them but precisely its opposite. Sovereign authority and bare life remain in the state of exception, found the juridical order, but are inaccessible to the order itself. The contemporary discourse on human rights is an example of the structural relationship between sovereignty and bare life. How to inscribe the "human" (bare life) in the juridico-political order if bare life is what is excluded from the political order at its founding moment? This question highlights the paradox of bare life as the politicized life that remains included only by its exclusion. Nevertheless, the sovereign is not subjected to the violence in which he maintains *homo sacer*. In other words, the sovereign's life cannot be sacrificed or submitted to an ordinary legal trial: the juridical concept of impeachment in contemporary democratic nation-states is an example of this idea.

The paradox that Agamben analyzes can be described as the interest of modern society in protecting bare life at all cost. Nevertheless, this interest has a complex relationship with the incidences of massive destruction of human lives at the hands of human beings. For instance, the state that supposedly protects bare life also decides when it is no longer worth living, thereby creating conditions for killing that is not perceived as homicide. This paradox is the consequence of the inclusion of bare life in the mechanisms of power.[46] Under the modern political structure of the nation-state, bare life is bestowed with rights. However, these rights are retained only as long as bare life disappears and the juridical figure of the clean and disciplined citizen is achieved (even though this achievement is never complete). In such a way, bare life is the hidden and excluded foundation of the modern concept of sovereignty.

The interrelated concepts of the sovereign, *homo sacer*, and the state of exception are pivotal to this study's investigation of the political element in Gen. 4:1–16 and the history of its interpretation. As we already know, for Agamben the relation between sacredness and sovereignty is rooted in the juridico-political order rather than being a religious phenomenon. Therefore, his ideas can be instrumental in casting a fresh glance at the intersection between pre-modern, modern, and post-modern readings of the biblical narrative and the political realm. Construing the deity portrayed in the story as the figure of the Agambenian sovereign and the

brothers as *hominis sacri* also looks like a promising way of dealing with the intractable and often troubling text.

In particular, Agamben's ideas may help both uncover the problematic character of God in Gen. 4:1–16 and overcome the problematic treatment of this character by the exegetes who, as will be shown in the next two chapters, operate with the assumption that the divine decisions that shape the destinies of Cain and Abel are appropriate and coherent.[47] On the basis of an Agambenian perspective on the role of God as the sovereign who is inside and outside the law and keeps *hominis sacri* in a state of exception, I will maintain that the story can be fruitfully understood through the liminal concept of radical exclusion. Cain – and, to a lesser extent, Abel – is included only by exclusion; God's relationship to the brothers is that of both ownership *and* abandonment, of mercy *and* justice. Their life belongs to God but at the same time is a life that God abandons. Arguably, the greatest difficulty that the exegetes have encountered in dealing with the text in question is that anybody is a potential Cain, that is to say, a *homo sacer* living in a perpetual state of exception. Most likely not all readers will self-identify as a Cain in potency, bearing the mark of inclusion through exclusion. Yet the analysis of Gen. 4:1–16 from an Agambenian perspective is thus capable of elucidating the complex relationship between violence, sovereignty, and the divine that has largely remained unexplored in the scholarly treatments of the story and the history of its interpretation.

Jacques Rancière's concepts of dissensus *and ethical community*

Rancière proposes a conception of politics that puts *dissensus* at its heart against a view in which conflict can and should be relegated to the past. In contradistinction to the traditional framework of time and space, he approaches politics as event. That is to say, for him it is an interruption or a sporadic moment of rupture rather than a long march toward social justice with a functionalist emphasis on inclusion and political consensus where conflict is supposed either not to exist or to be dealt with swiftly. Rancière denounces the functionalist emphasis because the utopian goal of a society made whole forecloses politics by claiming that everyone has an equal share in the community. Such a claim is an illusion of the ruling order that works to manage the population by thwarting political activity and especially political dissent.

As Rancière points out, "consensus is the reduction of [various groups] into a single people identical with the count of the population and its parts."[48] The reduction is what he calls "consensus democracy," in which the experience of the social order is non-litigious because it is based on the idea of the "proper" and the "improper." This duality, as we shall see later, is the foundation for the underlying hierarchical logic that separates the political from the social and the cultural. In "consensus democracy," the idea of equality is based on the hidden inequality of this social hierarchy. The consensual vision of society, for Rancière, is problematic because it defines the preconditions that determine political choice as objective and univocal. This experience of unified vision can be grounded in ancient social divisions, for example, the division of labor per Gen. 4:2 between

Cain the farmer and Abel the shepherd or, as we shall see later, those operative in different interpretations of Eve's words after Cain's birth. For Rancière, then, politics is the activity that overturns such a reduction of the people to the population and disrupts the monopoly of the governmental structures on allocation of goods to different groups based on the supposed propriety of their place and function in society. This is why *dissensus* is so important to him: it uncovers the logic of inequality and universality under which the population is categorized as "proper" or "improper" and it reveals the arbitrariness of this distribution so that through *dissensus* it is possible to include in politics the non-included and those included in a subordinate fashion.

In Rancière's view, democracy is not one form of politics among others. He equates democracy with politics because a democratic community is made up not only of members of the community (the proper) but also of the excluded, making democracy what he calls "the count of the uncounted." Thus, Rancière makes a distinction between politics and a community of division and exclusion that he calls the "police." What is implied in this word is not necessarily a repressive force but rather a distribution of roles. Rancière claims that the order of Plato's "philosophic" state is the "police" order *par excellence* because the concept of justice in this structure is based on a rigid hierarchical arrangement: a small group of highly educated rulers on top (embodied in the figure of the philosopher-king); a larger group of soldiers and protectors (guardians) on the next rung; and the largest group of farmers and craftsmen at the bottom. Justice in the Platonic *polis* depends on this strict hierarchy, working through the domination and the distribution of the population to hide the inequality that supports the myth of consensus.

In other words, the police order enacts the set of assumptions about who counts in the collectivity and what place in the hierarchy they should occupy – assumptions that at the same time are the foundation of this order. Anyone who is outside of the hierarchy is not part of the *polis* and, in a sense, does not exist. In "consensus democracy," the demand for consensus can be met only by the exclusion of others. Politics, by contrast, is for Rancière the space in which the worlds of the included and excluded become one; this renders *dissensus* the essence of politics. Moreover, *dissensus* has to do not only with the differences between groups and opinions but also with the division of a democratic community in relation to itself.[49] It is the dispute about the frame in which a people makes sense of the world and the socio-political system, a form of structuration that is always litigious, pitting different groups within the system against each other and demonstrating that the hierarchical logic of distribution is contingent.[50] Consensus, on the other hand, reduces the political space, transforming politics into police.

Therefore, when the political core is evacuated, a political community "tends to be transformed into an ethical community, into a community that gathers together a single people in which everyone is supposed to be counted."[51] Yet, the procedure of counting takes place against the problematic presence of the other, the excluded – the one who is not part of the hierarchical logic and cannot be brought in. Because of his or her status as the radical other, the person who is not counted is nevertheless present and thus reveals the dark side of the ethical community. Using Lars von Trier's film *Dogville* as an example of an ethical community,

Rancière unequivocally explains its macabre consequences. By the absolute rejection of the other, who nonetheless remains included, ethical communities create states of exception. These are physical or symbolic places in which the excluded remain included but have no rights. In other words, they are *hominis sacri* – bare lives without the proper status that affords representation in the social order. They have a presence in the community but not political representation in it because they are "unrepresentable."[52] In this sense, they do not exist.

Rancière's ideas thus largely cohere with Agamben's and complement them in providing a way to develop a politically informed reading of Gen. 4:1–16 and a political critique of its interpretations. In particular, these ideas will help me to highlight how the platonic concept of *justice as order* informs the scholarly analysis of the character of God. As we shall see later, the exegetes for the most part tend to follow a functionalist understanding of the distribution of roles in the story, seeing the problem in Cain and in his lack of conformity to the seemingly arbitrary divine order.

Julia Kristeva's critical-psychoanalytic concept of foreignness

In line with Rancière's concept of *dissensus*, Kristeva states that "the foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious – that 'improper' facet of our impossible 'own and proper.'"[53] She pleads in her critical analysis of *foreignness* for a politics directed against integration and/or assimilation, for respect towards the stranger's desire to live differently, underscoring the right to singularity. For her, the paradoxical community of singularity is multinational in scope and heterogeneous to the core, with identity and difference, individuality and commonality being constantly negotiated. In the same way as the foreigner inhabits the modern nation-states, the uncanny also inhabits each individual psyche, asserting the multiplicity of the subject.

The title of Kristeva's book, *Strangers to Ourselves*, summarizes what she sees as the fundamental confrontation with "the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time, I identify."[54] She asks, "How could one tolerate a foreigner if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself?[55] Acknowledging its Freudian basis, Kristeva answers this question using the concept of *das Unheimliche* or "uncanny strangeness," which she defines as "that which *was* familiar and, under certain conditions, emerges."[56] In psychoanalytic terms (following Freud), the *das Unheimliche* represents what should have remained hidden but became known, what had once been familiar but became alienated through repression. This is the foundation from which Kristeva expands her critical use of psychoanalytic theory in order to include the social aspect of her theory. Her goal is the recognition that the right to singularity should make us realize that we are all foreigners once we are conscious of our differences.

Kristeva's analysis of communities in the Western tradition that tried to establish a harmonious structure characterized by consensus shows their continuous failure when they encounter the "other"; as we shall see in the next chapter, this analysis is also applicable to the idealized communities envisioned by theologians

such as Augustine in the *City of God*. Even more important, her treatment of foreignness fills a gap in this study for both the Agambenian concept of *homo sacer* and Rancière's analysis of "police" and "politics." Both insightfully diagnose the problem but offer little in terms of remedy, largely failing to discuss what a better social order might look like. Kristeva proposes an ethics of foreignness, which at the same time implies a different politics. It involves a new type of society "whose solidarity is founded in the consciousness of its unconscious."[57] We are both ourselves and our contradiction. Kristeva's concept of ethics is not in contradiction with Rancière's, because in both cases it implies the ambiguity of the self and the acceptance of the contradiction at the core of human subjectivity. In other words, human subjectivity cannot achieve an ideal state of no contradiction but requires a constant struggle to raise questions. Such consciousness is "far removed from a call to brotherhood, about which one has already ironically pointed out its debt to paternal and divine authority – in order to have brothers there must be a father."[58] Instead "of welcoming the foreigner within a system that obliterates him" – a perceived threat from an uncivilized and primitive culture – modern society should engage in "promoting the togetherness of those foreigners that we all recognize ourselves to be."[59] In this way, the foreigner is not banished to inhabit the Agambenian state of exception or to be an odd man out in the Platonic hierarchical logic that Rancière critiques. The foreigner highlights that societies are divided by such logic. In Kristeva's words, the self in its pre-oedipal stage "projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien double, uncanny and demoniacal."[60] Therefore, confronting what we reject shows that the foreigner can be experienced as either "destruction of the self" or an opening to something new.[61] Such an experience can prove a catastrophic event that requires expurgation or at least has to be disregarded but it can also become familiar and open the way to recognizing the strange in ourselves.

This call to foreignness as a different type of politics is a useful vantage point from which to critique the figure of the father and the notion of brotherhood in the history of interpretation of Gen. 4:1–16. As I will demonstrate, the focus on fraternal envy deflects attention away from the arbitrariness of election and the character of God. At the same time, due to its indebtedness to paternal authority, the concept of brotherhood inevitably brings the role of the divine back into the reading of the narrative. In other words, while historically this concept has worked as a way of ignoring the character of God or shielding the deity from the embarrassment of the story's tragic events, it also allows us to investigate the divine role in them.

Problematization of brotherhood also highlights the exegetes' failure to pay sufficient attention to the concept's relation to the father/sovereign when examining the political consequences of Cain's actions. Yhwh does not seem to assume responsibility for Abel's death (nor does the narrator seem to impute any blame to the deity); but the divine authority, essentially paternal in nature, is from the outset a part of the fraternal relationship between Cain and Abel because this relationship does not exist without the figure of the father. In addition, the androcentric character that Gen. 4:1–16 tends to assume in the readings, which allows the concepts of fatherhood and brotherhood to inform the characterization of God and the relationship between Cain and Abel, has yet to be analyzed. Therefore,

this study employs Kristeva's ideas as a way to uncover the problematic character of brotherhood and fatherhood and their complicity with the construction of othering, using Gen. 4:1–16, complete with its interpretations as a paradigmatic example. By shaping strong identities, these notions inform the construction of positive contemporary social realities among individuals and nations; at the same time, they conceal the problematic character of the "other" who is not related by either blood or solidarity and thus disrupts the social order. This aspect of Kristevian thinking dovetails with Agamben's ideas of sovereignty as inscribed on the bare life of *homo sacer* and with Rancière's concept of ethical community devoid of *dissensus*. This theoretical triangle will serve as a framework of the investigation that begins in the next chapter of the present study.

Notes

1 A third option also syntactically possible is that Cain is cursed more than the ground (cf. Gen. 3:17).

2 I focus the political analysis on the first sixteen verses because this is the pericope in which the main characters are God, Cain, and Abel. Beginning in Gen. 4:17 the narrative shifts to Cain and his family – God is not part of the plot; it deals with Cain's genealogy, and only mentions Adam and Eve when their third son is born. Yet, since the story is part of a larger literary context, I will also address Gen. 3 and 6, mainly in Chapters 3 and 4 of this study. There are connections between Gen. 2–3 and Gen. 4, so where applicable, I will examine the literary relations but there will no comprehensive analysis of the Eden narrative or the rest of the primeval history. Literary-critical exegesis also sees Gen. 4:1–16 as a unit and it is *only* during the beginning of the historical-critical approaches in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that almost unanimously interpreters argued that the narrative was an "ethnological etiology" (Gunkel) reflecting a conflict between Israelites and Kenites. Source criticism has argued that Gen. 4:1 is part of the genealogy of P, but this division is a modern reconstruction of the text. See Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (trans. J. Sutherland Black and Alan Menzies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 316–25. We shall consider Gen. 4:1–16 as a cohesive and single narrative, following in this way the ancient commentators and the literary-critical analysis that begins in the second half of the twentieth century. See Mark W. Scarlata, *Outside of Eden: Cain in the Ancient Versions of Gen. 4:1–16* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 25. From a syntactical point of view, the lack of a *wav consecutive* in Gen. 4:1 demonstrates that this verse is the introduction to a new story even if there is an unusual word order with subject preceding the verb (Westermann, Wenham). This grammatical construction signals a new narrative begins, even though, structurally, thematically, and verbally, Gen. 4 is linked with Gen. 2–3. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Gen. 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 97.

3 The ancient interpreter Ephrem of Syria identifies this characteristic of the text with the following comment: "He [God] has hidden in his word all kind of treasures so that each one of us, wherever we meditate, may be enriched by it . . . Therefore, whoever encounters one of its riches must not think that that alone which he has found is all that is in it, but [rather] that it is this alone that he is capable of finding from the many things in it." (*Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 1.18–19 [McCarthy]).

4 I will also build, to a much lesser extent and mainly in Chapters 3 and 4, on the works of such thinkers as Søren Kierkegaard, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Lévinas, Frantz Fanon, Terry Eagleton, and Slavoj Žižek.

5 The present analysis of the Cain and Abel story uses a Gadamerian framework in which interpretation is not directed toward authorial intention but toward the claim that the biblical text makes on an interpreter who reads from the perspective of a pressing socio-political issue. See next section for an introduction to reception theory and biblical studies in relation to this project.

6 Chapters 1 and 2 will develop the textual and semantic pluriformity of Gen. 4:1–16, paying attention to how readers created their own "text" of the Cain and Abel story. They addressed the ambiguity of the tale but at the same time created new semantic and theological conundrums in their own versions.

7 Even the critical difference between version and redaction, or author-redactor and copyists, is a modern and anachronistic view of a complex process of textual production because both categories of scribes modified the text in which alterations shifted continuously from "literary developments" to "corruptions." In other words, any imaginable aporetic transition from author to copyist was unlikely a definite chronological event. As Jeffrey Tigay has shown, scribes during the process of rewriting the text were always authors and copyists, always changing and transmitting. See "Conflation as Redactional Technique," in *Empirical Models of Biblical Criticism* (ed. Jeffrey H. Tigay; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 53–96.

8 Some textual scholars concede that any search of an "original" version of the biblical text is without direct reach and they use qualifiers to argue that nevertheless it is possible to approach an archetype of the autograph. Yet B. B. Warfield suggests that there were biblical texts whose exact autographic wordings are not within direct reach. See Eldon Jay Epp, "The Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text' in New Testament Textual Criticism," *Harvard Theological Review* 92.3 (1999): 253. Ronald Hendel also argues that at one point, an autograph was the source of any later edition of the biblical text, yet these sources are unrecoverable. See "The Oxford Hebrew Bible: Prologue to a New Critical Edition," *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008): 332. The prominent textual biblical scholar, Emmanuel Tov, in spite of the textual evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls continues to argue for an autograph of the biblical text and claims that the search of this "original text" is the main objective of textual criticism. See *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 189.

9 The Qumran manuscripts are evidence of the synchronic pluriformity and the diachronic diversity of the textual traditions, and pose a constant challenge to claims that might argue for one manuscript as privileged because it is closer to the "original." See Tov for one argument supporting the claim of an original text. He asserts that at any given moment only one version was upheld as authoritative and thus became the source of later versions. See *Textual Criticism*, 189.

10 Tov admits the existence of multiple editions of biblical texts but argues for a paradoxical moment of final origin in which early proto-texts were combined to produce a final authoritative text that was subsequently copied. See *Textual Criticism*, 189. However, calling a text proto-MT only makes sense from the vantage point of later interpreters, ancient or modern, when communities created textual and theological boundaries between groups of texts creating the concept of proto or later texts. In other words, the category of "proto-text" is an essentially contingent and a later development of a complex and not necessarily linear process from early to final authoritative text. This is a retro-projection to make sense of the textual evidence. It is a theological gesture that ascribes authoritative status to a text form developed and selected by means of a highly contingent process of ancient historical circumstances and modern methodological tools in the field of biblical studies. This is a case in which modern considerations shape the concept of the final text and at the same time it determines what the content of the text is.

11 Eugene Ulrich, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hebrew Scriptural Texts," in *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (vol. 1 of *Scripture and the Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 89–99. Together with Qumran, Josephus, SamPent, LXX, Philo, the New Testament, and rabbinic quotations testify to the pluriformity of the text after the so-called post-divide era.

12 The distinction between Gen. 4:1–16's historical context and other historical contexts of the texts in its history of interpretation is one of the basic suppositions of biblical studies in order to create a manageable border and decide what is original and reception. See James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), 447; John J. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*

(Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 13. However, this division still leaves many questions unanswered, such as: How to define what belongs to the original text in its original context? What gets removed, unaltered, or turned at the border with its reception? How different is an original text of Gen. 4:1–16 from any of its early versions in other ancient languages or receptions in later periods? In other words, the identity of the text, what constitutes its essence, and what is marginal and porous is a question that the traditional views of biblical studies do not address. For a current debate on the connection between reception theory and biblical studies, see Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Robert Evans, *Reception History, Tradition and Biblical Interpretation: Gadamer and Jauss in Current Practice* (London: T&T Clark, 2014); Emma England and William John Lyons, eds., *Reception History and Biblical Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2015); James G. Crossley, *The Bible in English Political Discourse Since 1968* (London: T&T Clark, 2014); Katherine Low, *The Bible, Gender, and Reception History: The Case of Job's Wife* (London: T&T Clark, 2013).

13 James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 7–8.

14 This term was popularized by Hans Georg Gadamer in his analysis of hermeneutics as the encounter of horizons. He insists on keeping the contemporary relevance of a text in order not to locate truth in the past and at the same time he argues for the "truth of tradition" or the "voices of the past" in order to avoid a total discontinuity between current and past meanings of a text. See, *Truth and Method* (trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; New York: Continnum, 2006), 285.

15 See Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 61–5 for the analysis of this view as the nominalist perspective in which every manuscript is considered an island.

16 Gadamer argues that the hermeneutical task involves a dialogue between the historical horizon of the text and the historical consciousness of the reader. Both horizons meet in the symbolic borderline between text and reception in order to create meaning. See, *Truth and Method*, 285, 298, 302.

17 This term refers to the rhetoric of a fixed text developed during the rabbinic tradition after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. However, the Qumran community and other now lost textual traditions are examples of how the text was not stabilized or fixed. Even after this event, the text developed into different living traditions, including early Christian communities, Greek-speaking Jews in the Mediterranean world, and the Samaritan community, among others.

18 J. A. Sanders calls this principle the process of resignification, that is, the mechanism by which the text actually means something to any community at all. The text as flexible and ambiguous is capable of meaning something new in each context in which it is read. In other words, the process of handing down the tradition confirms the importance of the text for the past, present, and future of a community. In the process, scribes were constantly updating the tradition and making it relevant to their socio-cultural context. See *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 22.

19 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

20 Yvonne Sherwood, "The God of Abraham and Exceptional States, or the Early Modern Rise of the Whig/Liberal Bible," *JAAR* 76.2 (2008): 315.

21 Politics in biblical studies is now accepted as a scholarly interest. As a post-modern perspective, it affirms that all discourse is politicized. Conventional biblical studies, in the form of historical reconstruction or literary criticism, are no less political even if the authors do not articulate their ideological position or deny that they even have one. See Stephen E. Fowl, "The Ethics of Interpretation, or What's Left Over After the Elimination of Meaning," in *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (ed. David Clines; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 379–98; Daniel Patte, "Acknowledging the Contextual Character of Male, European-American Critical Exegeses: An Andro-critical Perspective," in *Reading from This Place: Vol. 1: Social Location and Biblical*

Interpretation in the United States (eds. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 35–55; Gary A. Phillips, "The Ethics of Reading Deconstructively, or Speaking Face-to-Face: The Samaritan Woman Meets Derrida at the Well," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (eds. Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon; Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), 283–325; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Ken Stone, "Biblical Interpretation as a Technology of the Self: Gay Men and the Ethics of Reading," *Semeia* 77 (1997): 139–55.

22 Jeffrey Stout, "The Relativity of Interpretation," *The Monist* 69 (1986): 112.

23 Eric Thurman, "Politics," in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Andrew Keith Malcom Adam; St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 176.

24 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1.

25 Ibid., 7.

26 Ibid., 83.

27 Ibid., 8.

28 *Politics*, 127 b, 23–31, quoted in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2.

29 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 11.

30 Ibid., 19.

31 Here Agamben follows the jurist Carl Schmitt who formulated the "paradox of sovereignty": the sovereign is "*at the same time* outside and inside the juridical order" because "having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law" (*Homo Sacer*, 15). In other words, the sovereign who is outside the law declares that there is nothing outside the law.

32 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 18.

33 Ibid., 28.

34 Ibid., 8.

35 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (trans. George Schwab; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

36 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 73.

37 Ibid., 82.

38 Ibid., 85.

39 Ibid., 103.

40 Ibid., 19. In this case, I argue that the entire nation-state, acting as the sovereign, becomes the location where the migrants are in the state of exception.

41 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (trans. Steven Corcoran; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 111–14.

42 Quoted in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 41.

43 On February 16, 2015, Judge Andrew S. Hanen, of the Federal District Court of the Southern District of Texas, in Brownsville, ruled against President Obama's immigration actions. The ruling took place one day before undocumented immigrants were to begin applying for work permits and legal protection.

44 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.

45 This is a way to understand Walter Benjamin's concept of "divine violence" in the ninth of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Interpreters disagree on the concept's meaning because Benjamin does not offer a positive criterion for its definition. Agamben defines it as the violence of the sovereign in the state of exception, the zone of indistinction between inside and outside, the included and the excluded (*Homo Sacer*, 66); see also Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 178–205.

46 Michel Foucault refers to this as biopolitics, the condition in which "the subject is neutral, and it is thanks to the sovereign that the subject has the right to be alive or, possibly, the right to be dead: in any case, the lives and deaths of subjects become rights only as a result of the will of the sovereign," in *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College of France, 1975–76* (eds. M. Bertani and A. Fontana, trans. David Macey; New York: Picador, 2003), 240.

47 André Lacocque, *Onslaught Against Innocence: Cain, Abel, and the Yahwist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 72–78.

48 Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 115.
49 Ibid.
50 The social division between masculine and feminine spaces and its corresponding binary pair "public/domestic" is an example of this hierarchical distribution in contemporary societies.
51 Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 115.
52 Agamben uses set theory, as translated by Alain Badiou into political terms, to describe the issue of unrepresentability: "Badiou has membership correspond to presentation, and inclusion correspond to representation (re-presentation). One then says that a term *is a member of* a situation (in political terms, there are single individuals insofar as they belong to society). And one says that a term is *included* in a situation if it is represented in the metastructure (the State) in which the structure of the situation is counted as one term (individuals insofar as they are recodified by the State into classes, for example, or into "electorates"). Badiou defines a term as *normal* when it is both presented and represented (that is, when it both is a member and is included), as *excrescent* when it is represented but not presented (that is, when it is included in a situation without being a member of that situation), and as *singular* when it is presented but not represented (a term that is a member without being included). (*Homo Sacer*, 24) The figure of *homo sacer* represents a singular member of society. It is the person who is present in the society but without any representation or who can lose it at any moment. Migrants are an example of this situation in the twenty-first century.
53 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (trans. Leon S. Roudiez; New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 191.
54 Ibid., 187.
55 Ibid., 182.
56 Ibid., 183.
57 Ibid., 192.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 2–3.
60 Ibid., 183.
61 Ibid., 188.

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1 Cain's evil nature

A story of otherness

Biblical interpretation is almost as old as the Bible itself, and Gen. 4:1–16 is certainly no different in this respect. Remarkably, neither Genesis nor the books included in TaNak and the Protestant Old Testament ever refer to this story that many generations of readers have found so fascinating – to great extent because of its enigmatic character.[1] Things changed, however, with the emergence of the Septuagint and other ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible, which obviously could not avoid dealing with the exegetical conundrums presented by the Cain and Abel story, and soon – as we shall see later in this chapter – Gen. 4:1–16 became the focus of intense scrutiny in both Jewish and Christian traditions. The period that followed the destruction of Jerusalem and the ensuing expulsion of the Jews from much of their land was formative for both the institutionalized Church and the Rabbinic[2] library. As a result, at this time the traditions around Gen. 4:1–16 expanded in every conceivable direction. On the one hand, Church fathers and rabbis seemed to be asking the same questions as contemporary readers do, such as: What is the problem with Cain's offering? Why does God reject it yet have regard for Abel's? On the other hand, the primary concern of the ancient interpreters was the text's appropriation by the communities that no longer had a foothold in the cultural world of the Near East that gave rise to it. In other words, they were not interested in understanding Gen. 4:1–16 from the standpoint of the ancient Israelite writers and their audience. John Byron succinctly explains this idea by stating that, "meaning in ancient interpretation was relevant to the situation of the interpreter and the listener and not necessarily to the historical situation about which the text was written."[3] They were interested in what the narrative had to say to their own times and had no doubt that the story could, and ought to, be read on those terms. Both sets of interpreters were trying to articulate a new doctrine through their reading of the story.

The answers led Christians and Jews down different hermeneutical roads. Both shared the primary theme of the exegetical tradition prior to Augustine, that of moral virtue and vice. At the same time, only Christian exegetes saw the story of Cain and Abel in terms of the relationship between the two communities, sporadically treating the latter as a stand-in for the Church and the former for the Jewish people. This kind of typological approach is best exemplified by Augustine who, as we shall see later, uses Gen. 4:1–16 in *The City of God* to build his argument about the two cities in their earthly manifestation, thus fully developing the

brothers as types. Augustine does not explain the story of Cain and Abel in terms of the socio-historical setting in which it was created and originally transmitted. Rather, he reads it as a message of topical (and utmost) validity, containing teachings about the proper conduct for those inhabiting the city of god and about the divine plan for both communities.[4] Unlike his predecessors, Augustine concentrates on Cain's punishment and his famous mark in order to develop a theology of the Jews that would influence subsequent generations, "shaping medieval ecclesial policies and attitudes toward Jews."[5]

One could say that the exegetical tradition underwent almost as many transformations as there were interpreters. At least two factors were responsible for its flexibility. The first was external: although Cain's "failure" to control himself and spare Abel's life was universally regarded as an explanation for the ubiquity of evil, each successive interpreter had different questions to ask, and in providing the answers, those interpreters (un)intentionally created their own versions of the story, expanding it as they saw fit. The second factor lies within the narrative itself: as briefly described above, many of its features are extremely puzzling; the story poses more questions than it answers, and in attempting to resolve them interpreters through the ages have felt compelled to introduce increasingly far-fetched innovations into their received versions of Gen. 4:1–16.[6] Thus, they developed a vast and complex series of elaborations, which in the Christian tradition were amalgamated in Augustine's reading of Gen. 4:1–16.

In what follows, I shall try to present and unravel the most important of these elaborations, highlighting the question of God's involvement in the story. In other words, in studying the ancient readers I will be primarily interested in determining how their answers to the exegetical problems of Gen. 4:1–16 are related to their view of the deity's role in the narrative.[7]

One result of this focus is that I will address Christian interpretations more often and in greater detail than Jewish readings. Although it is next to impossible to offer any reading of the Cain and Abel story, especially a comprehensive one, without addressing the issue of divine responsibility for what happened – or failed to happen – in it, it was the Church fathers that were primarily interested in the issue and its metaphysical and doctrinal implications. The rabbis, whose theology seems not to place so much emphasis on Gen. 4:1–16, tended to concentrate more on solving its narrative problems, especially on imposing a measure of coherence upon it – something that Christian interpreters could not avoid but were not particularly interested in doing.[8]

There is little doubt that as far as the divine role in Gen. 4:1–16 is concerned ancient interpreters had their work cut out for them. Yhwh is as involved in what takes place in this text as Yhwh was in the developments recounted in the first three chapters of Genesis, yet now the outcome is disastrous, especially in contrast to chapters 1 and 2. Are we talking here about the same omnipotent deity that created the world? Jewish and Christians leaders had to face questions of this type; the ambiguous ways in which God dealt with Cain and Abel needed justification in any comparatively sophisticated interpretation of the story.

The common denominator of the vast majority of responses to the difficulty described here is the tendency to dissolve the issues besetting the characterization

of God into those concerning the characterization of Abel and especially Cain. One might even say that many if not most of the readings discussed below originated in the need to explain away the difficulties of Gen. 4:1–16 in such a way that the problem of God's seeming ineptitude, capriciousness, or malice is circumvented or never presents itself. Thus, ancient interpreters establish an "observable" connection between Cain's nature and his actions; in other words, since the story never explains Cain's motivations, interpreters reconstruct his supposedly evil or at least imperfect character based on what he is reported to be doing. The plot is augmented by educated guesses (or what passes for them) that are read into it but all or almost all of these augmentations concern the two brothers who are thus forcibly moved into the spotlight. Hermeneutics[9] as well as homiletics[10] provide grounds for interpretations in early rabbinic and Christian readings. Cain needed to be the outsider in the primeval family in order to ascribe to him an evil nature. The theoretical alternative of reconstructing the deity's nature based on its actions remains out of the question because assumptions about both are sacrosanct: no matter how it looks, the behavior of God must be benevolent.[11] The traditional assumption is that Cain, not God, should bear the ultimate responsibility for Abel's death because humans can be evil – maybe even *are* evil by nature – while the deity cannot be and is not. Moreover, the locus of human evil can be determined with a high degree of certainty: it resides in the communities for which Cain is a stand-in and which can be expected eventually to become objects of God's vengeful justice. Cain then is as much a victim in the story as is Abel because, as we will discuss later, the lack of detail and the grammatical, syntactical, and linguistic ambiguities of the tale, added to Cain killing Abel, transformed Cain in the "archetypal scapegoat for generations of interpreters."[12] This study challenges this assumption.

Othering Cain: pre-Augustinian interpretations

In this section of the study I will explore the two main branches, Jewish and Christian, of the ancient exegetical tradition around Gen. 4:1–16 that crystallized prior to Augustine.[13] The order in which I present the readings does not reflect any assumptions concerning the vectors of their mutual influence; while I recognize this influence and its contribution to the significant overlap between the traditions of different communities, it is not my intention to examine these matters here. Rather, the presentation of the material will for the most part follow the narrative as it appears in Gen. 4:1–16 and the order of exegetical issues raised above. I will also avoid historical-critical questions, such as those of manuscript evidence, focusing strictly on the questions raised by the text under discussion and the answers provided by its ancient readers.

Who's your daddy?

The emphasis on Cain's strangeness begins with questions about his parentage. The first exegetically difficult passage that a reader encounters in Gen. 4:1–16 is Eve's highly ambiguous declaration that immediately follows the report on Cain's

birth and seems to offer a (somewhat strained) etymology of his name. The problem centers especially on the meaning of the phrase את־יהוה. Ancient translators were bothered by the ambiguity produced by the use of the particle את. In Hebrew, את is commonly the marker of the verb's definite direct object, for example in the same verse האדם ידע את חוה, "And Adam knew Eve." If the same strategy is used for Eve's exclamation about Cain's birth, it could be translated "I have acquired a man, (*who is*) YHWH,"[14] instead of the traditional modern rendering "I have acquired a man (from/with the help of) the Lord."[15]

The Septuagint translates את־יהוה as διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, "through God," connoting a divine intervention of some sort but refraining from any specifics. For subsequent readers, however, even this noncommittal construction proved problematic due to its theological implications regarding the interaction between humanity and the divine. Should "through God" be understood as meaning that God not only made Eve's pregnancy possible but actually was its cause? In other words, is there a hint – especially given the possibility of a sexual innuendo lurking in the preposition "through" – that Eve had intercourse with God? Philo of Alexandria clearly saw this semantic potential, as suggested by his vehement denial that the phrase should be understood instrumentally:

> And therefore we must make our protest against the Mind, which thought the offspring engendered by union with his own possession, called it Cain and said, "I have gotten a man through God." Even in these last words he erred. You may ask how? Because God is the *cause* not the *instrument*, and that which comes into being is brought not into being *through* an instrument, but *by* a cause.[16]

Didymus, following Philo's reading, also argues that the best way to understand Eve's cryptic statement is by modifying the Greek phrase διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ to παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ "from God."[17]

By insisting on a causative reading of διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, Philo and Didymus could simply be trying to prevent the reader from concluding that with regard to sexuality Yhwh is not that different from the male deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon, such as Zeus, known for his escapades not only with goddesses and other supernatural females but also with human women.[18] Yet, it is also possible – the two purposes could, actually, be mutually complementary – that for Philo, ruling out Cain's divine paternity was a way of removing a major obstacle to seeing him as an outsider, a stranger in the Kristevian sense.

Some ancient texts go much farther in this direction by claiming that Cain was actually sired by an evil divine being.[19] According to 1 John 3:12–13, Cain belonged "to the evil one" – that is, the devil. Similarly Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: "Eve . . . had conceived *from Sammael, the angel of the Lord*"; this angel is, *mutatis mutandis*, the Jewish equivalent of Satan in the Christian tradition.[20] The paraphrastic translation thus plays on the basic meaning of the Hebrew verb ידע in the beginning of the verse – "to know." The vast majority of interpretations, both traditional and scholarly, construe it in the sense of "having intercourse," amply attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Yet, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan rejects this

understanding, reading the clause as saying that Adam, its subject, knew about Eve having had sexual intercourse with Sammael – and therefore about Cain's more than questionable paternity.[21] That explains, among other things, why the reports on the birth of Abel and especially Seth (Gen. 5:3) are worded differently from that concerning Cain. The different description of Seth's birth led this rabbinic interpretation to conclude that there was something qualitatively different about the circumstances of Cain's birth. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan makes much of the fact that Seth is described as begotten by Adam "in his likeness, according to his image" (an inverted quotation from Gen. 1:26) but Cain is not:

> When Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he begot *Seth*, who *resembled* his image and likeness. *For before that, Eve had borne Cain who was not from him and who did not resemble him. Abel was killed by Cain, and Cain was banished, and his descendants are not recorded in the book of the genealogy of Adam. But afterwards he begot one who resembled him* and he called his name Seth.[22]

This targumic document usually attributes meaning to things not said in the biblical text.[23] In this case, the Targum states that Cain does not resemble Adam, therefore he was not his son. The expression used to describe the birth of Seth is a key hermeneutical strategy to conclude that Cain was the son of an (evil) divine being and not of Adam. Of course, Cain's descent from the evil aspect of the divine would amply account not only for his actions, especially for the killing of Abel, but also for God's seemingly capricious rejection of his sacrifice. The question of Cain's father was very important for ancient interpreters because of the ambiguity of the Hebrew text and the need to clarify it. Surprisingly, it is the devil that is often identified as the father of Cain, though the devil does not appear in the narrative. But for someone espousing dualistic religious views it would also make Cain an ultimate stranger – the monstrous other.[24] The transformation of the narrative in Gen. 4:1 provides a critical foundation for how the rest of the story will be understood with regards of Cain's nature and actions. This rendering already signals that Cain is severed from Adam's genealogy. The Targum is then making Cain a half-caste. He is not completely angelic and without a doubt he is not human either, but a real monster in all senses of the word.[25] By depicting him as a monster, the path is paved for ancient interpreters to conclude that Cain's actions were the result of a man condemned from his birth.

A milder version of this concept can be found in the Armenian/Georgian recension (Arm/Georg. 21.3a) of *Life of Adam and Eve*, a Pseudepigraphic composition of Jewish origin usually dated to the first century of the common era. It remarks that "Cain's body at his birth 'was like the colour of the stars,' a depiction which associates Cain with the angels."[26] This conjecture may have to do with the enigmatic presence of the word אִישׁ – here understood as referring to Cain in Eve's statement that followed his birth: in some biblical texts, such as Gen. 18:2; 32:25, the term is used of angels.[27] There is no clear statement that Cain was fathered by a supernatural being, much less an evil one, but there is a hint of him being born fully grown because as soon as that happened "he plucked up the grass of the earth

near his mother's hut."[28] Moreover, what he does right after birth not only foreshadows his occupation as farmer reported in Gen. 4:2 but also implies that he is the "one who plucks up the fruit-bearing tree, and not he who plants it" – in other words, a personification of "the destructive forces in humanity."[29]

All these interpretations suggest much more detail about Cain's birth than what the MT says. The ambiguity of the text created potential problems for its ancient interpreters. When they tried to clear it up, they created even more confusion and interpreters struggled with the question of what kind of child Cain was. The non-canonical interpretations concluded that Cain was not the son of Adam and created a more sinister retelling of his origins with creative expansions.

Finally, *The Secret Book of John*, a Gnostic document, offers a highly noteworthy twist on the theme of Cain's parentage. Following a widespread trend in Gnosticism, it assumes that the divine being active in the Hebrew Bible is not the ultimate deity – the Invisible Spirit – but rather an inferior god, whose name is Yaldabaoth and whose main characteristic is ignorance:

> The Chief Ruler saw the virgin who stood by Adam, and that the luminous Reflection of life had appeared in her. And Yaldabaoth was full of ignorance. And when the Providence of the All noticed it, she sent some (angelic powers) and they snatched life out of Eve. And the Chief Ruler defiled her and begot in her two sons; the first and the second (are) Eloim and Yave . . . The one is righteous, but the other is unrighteous . . . These he called with the names Cain and Abel with a view to deceive.[30]

In this passage, the divine is directly involved in Eve's pregnancy. Yaldabaoth defiles her, and both Cain and Abel are born as a result. Strikingly, their actual, hidden names – Eloim and Yave – correspond to the two main terms for God in the Hebrew Bible, יהוה and אלהים. The pattern comes, of course, from the Jewish tradition, attested since the rabbinic times, according to which the two names correspond to two main aspects of God – the measure of grace and the measure of judgment, respectively. But the association – nay, identification – of these aspects with Abel and Cain results in a profoundly Kristevian deconstruction of Cain's supposed strangeness. Instead of coming from outside, the "unrighteous" figure turns out to be present deep inside – in the deity itself.

Are we brothers?

Cain's strangeness continues to be addressed by its connection with brotherhood. Another exegetical difficulty is the lack of detail related to Abel's birth. We have seen that the story was expanded on Eve's proclamation about Cain's birth. In Abel, the occasion for its expansion is her silence about Abel's birth and the ambiguous phrase that connects his birth with Cain's. Its description does not include a statement of Adam having sexual intercourse with Eve as there is one with Cain (4:1) and Seth ("He *again* knew," 4:25). The terse depiction in 4:2a coupled with the report of Seth's birth suggest that Eve was pregnant only twice. Interpreters were bothered by the ambiguous expression

ותסף ללדת (Gen. 4:2a) because it leaves open the possibility that Cain and Abel were twins.

Rabbinic writers saw this semantic potential and addressed it by interpreting the particle את that appears in three occasions in Gen. 4:1–2: "and she gave birth את Cain . . . and she continued to give birth את his brother, את Abel."[31] According to *Genesis Rabbah* 22:3, the repetition of the particle means that "only two entered the bed, and seven left it: Cain and his twin sister, Abel and his two twin sisters." The different description of Abel's birth with the double particle את led this rabbinic interpretation to conclude that Cain and Abel are not brothers. But in fact, this interpretation creates a bigger family: Cain and Abel are not only twin brothers but they also have twin sisters.

The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan goes further in this direction, introducing an element into the narrative to make clear that Cain and Abel are not brothers: "Adam knew his wife Eve who had conceived from *Sammael, the angel of the Lord*. Then, from Adam her husband she bore his twin sister and Abel." This has been understood as the rejection of Adam as the father of Cain, but it also asserts that there is a difference between Cain and Abel. Cain is the descendent of an angelic being and thus not Abel's brother who is the first biological son of Adam and Eve. The same idea is behind the 1 John 3:12 reference to Cain, "who *was from the evil one* and murdered his brother." 1 John 3 is more explicit in the connection between Cain and the Devil. The expression ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ is the equivalent of the expression τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου ("children of the devil") of 1 John 3:10, who are the antithesis of the τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ ("children of God") of the same verse.[32]

A milder version of this concept comes from the *Book of Jubilees*, a Pseudepigraphic composition of Jewish origin. It paraphrases Gen. 4:1–2 in order to introduce chronological markers for the birth of Cain and Abel. Cain was born on the third week of the second jubilee and Abel one week later (cf. *Jub* 4:1). This addition makes it impossible to conclude that Cain and Abel were twins. The omission of the word "brother" in this interpretation, a word that appears seven times in Gen. 4 and only once in *Jubilees*, suggests the length to which this work goes to stress the separation between Cain and Abel.[33]

However, the expression ותסף ללדת can also be read as "she continued to bear" – a clever way to read the verb in order to assert that Eve had one pregnancy and two sons. This is the case of *PRE* that reads the verb תסף not as "she again," but as "she continued" (*PRE* 21). The earliest extant tradition attesting this translation comes from Philo, who compares the names of Cain and Abel in order to establish the division between the brothers according to their meaning:

> Wherefore nature separated him from his twin, and made the good man worthy of immortality, resolving him into a voice interceding with God; but the wicked man it gave over to destruction.[34]

Philo was aware of a twin tradition; however, for him it was not a problem because he separates Cain and Abel on the basis of the brothers' nature. Although the MT leaves out details about their names, Philo, as well as other ancient interpreters, were happy to fill in those gaps. For Philo, even Cain's name is connected with his

greedy and evil nature, revealing what kind of individual he grew up to be. Cain becomes the Kristevian other who is strangely connected with his brother as twin but also as his evil opposite and is therefore destined for destruction.

Farmers against shepherds?

Whereas the MT merely describes the occupations of the brothers as a way to introduce their sacrifices, ancient interpreters saw in the subtle change of order, first Abel and then Cain, another opportunity to expand the narrative creatively. Abel's occupation precedes Cain's and it may suggest to the reader that God preferred Abel even before the mysterious controversy over the offering that was to follow. Shepherds are positively portrayed in the story of Joseph (Gen. 47:3), in the story of King David (1 Sam. 16:11), the book of Isaiah gives to Cyrus the title and portrays him as carrying out Yhwh's purposes, and the psalmist even calls Yhwh the divine shepherd (Ps 23). On the other hand, Cain's profession as farmer seems to be connected with Adam's occupation when he and Eve were removed from the Garden. To be a farmer is to inherit and embody the curse on the land that God gave to Adam and Eve. Adam works the soil and he is later cursed from it and expelled from the Edenic place. Cain gives the impression of perpetuating the curse already placed on humanity. However, the story does not clarify why or how the brothers choose their professions. Again the lack of detail about Abel's profession, added to the meaning of his name and the way of his birth, gave interpreters the opportunity to expand the narrative.

Philo connects Abel's profession as foreshadowing the office of kingship. Abel, as the good shepherd, works with living things, taking care of them. But Cain, who works the soil, is not suited to any leadership position. His life is dedicated to labor with inanimate things.

> Why does (Scripture) first describe the work of the younger man Abel, saying, "He became a shepherd of flocks, and Cain tilled the ground"? 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 in order. For one of them labors and takes care of living beings even though they are irrational, gladly taking the pastoral work which is preparatory to rulership and kingship. But the other occupies himself with earthly and inanimate things.[35]

Philo disparages Cain's profession as further evidence of his character traits. Cain embodies those who find pleasure in earthly inanimate things in order to fulfill their desires. For Philo, Abel takes care of other living beings and gives himself to them "even though they are irrational," and by doing so he prepares for a future royal life.[36] But Cain is only looking at "himself" and does not share with his brother the sense of leadership. Cain only looks for his own immediate benefit.

In a similar vein, Josephus in *Antiquities* explains the occupation of the brothers to accuse Cain and to make clear why his offering is rejected. As did Philo, so also Josephus expands upon the narrative to include the character traits of the

brothers. Abel is a lover of justice but Cain is a lover of insatiable desire for his own benefit. Josephus actually makes Cain the inventor of farming and portrays Cain as violating God's natural order:

> Now the brothers took pleasure in different pursuits. Abel, the younger, had respect for justice, and believing that God was with him in all his actions, paid heed to virtue; he led the life of a shepherd. Cain, on the contrary, was thoroughly depraved and had an eye only to gain: he was the first person to think of plowing the soil, and he slew his brother for the following reason. The brothers having decided to sacrifice to God, Cain brought fruits of the tilled earth and of the trees; Abel came with milk and the firstlings of his flock. This was the offering which found more favor with God, who is honored by things that grow spontaneously and in accordance with natural laws, and not by the products forced from nature by the ingenuity of grasping man.[37]

Rather than understanding Cain's chosen profession as simply that of a farmer, Josephus views it as an insight with which to scrutinize Cain's scheming mind. Josephus makes it clear that behind Cain's profession there is a predisposition to take and to force from the ground that which would please him. By contrast, Abel's profession reflects and reinforces his fundamental difference. He prepares for a future life and pays attention to living things.

It's the thought that counts

Unlike *The Life of Adam and Eve*, the very first thing that Cain does in the Bible is make a sacrifice – and even the most unprepared and unsophisticated reader of the Bible is bound to ask why this act ended in disappointment, with God preferring Abel's offering to Cain's. One readily available explanation is that this was a capricious act, one that was not only unfair towards both brothers but also ultimately resulted in Abel's murder. In *Contra Galileos*, Emperor Julian suggested that God appeared to act rather capriciously in the way Abel's offering was accepted over that of Cain's.[38] The deity's seeming capriciousness about the rejection and acceptance of the brothers' sacrifice creates a theological problem.[39] In a bid to forestall such interpretations, ancient readers routinely latch onto the doubtless distinctive and possibly contrasting descriptions of the two offerings: Cain brings "from the fruit of the earth," and Abel "of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions" (with no descriptive terms applied in the first case).[40] We have discussed the Jewish traditions that regard Cain's origins as satanic; however, there is no correlation in the MT between Cain's origins and God's rejection of his offering. The first time humans offer something to the deity it is rendered with minimal detail and little explanation of the motivation of Cain and Abel and the decision-making process of the deity. The laconic description of the offerings and God's acceptance of only one bothered ancient interpreters who, confronted with the terse Hebrew text, set out to render a meaningful interpretation of the text. They attempted to shed light on God's actions and the tragic consequences using syntactical and linguistic choices and presenting varying interpretations regarding

each character in the tale in order to address the question: Why did God reject Cain and his offering?

Philo "characterizes Cain as keeping the firstlings of his husbandry and offering 'merely the fruits of a later time.'"[41] Likewise, in rabbinic exegesis, Cain is criticized because he eats the first figs and gives to God the late figs.[42] For Josephus, by contrast, the evidence of Cain being wicked and motivated by gain is that he gives to God from the fruit of the tilled earth and of the trees at the end of his first year as a farmer whereas according to Pentateuchal regulations, this offering can only be performed in the third year and eaten in the fifth (Lev. 19: 23–25).[43] While on their own each of these interpretations may sound convincing – especially to those who share the interpreters' presumption that the deity cannot possibly be at fault – their combination suggests severe, persistent bias. Whatever Cain does is wrong by definition.

Even the Septuagint, whose non-paraphrastic nature severely limits its method of imposing meaning upon the narrative, joins the fray by attempting to create a sharper distinction between the offerings of Cain and Abel. The Hebrew text uses the word מנחה "offering/gift" for what both brothers did.[44] The Septuagint, on the other hand, uses two different terms. In the case of Cain's offering, the Greek word is θυσία ("sacrifice") whereas for Abel's it is δῶρον ("gift").[45] What makes the distinction remarkable is that this is the only instance in which the Septuagint translates מנחה in Genesis as "sacrifice"; in the other ten cases, it is rendered "offering/gift."[46] Since in the Hebrew Bible only part of the offering is actually burned on the altar, this choice of terminology may imply that Cain wanted to have something for himself whereas Abel handed over all he had.[47] To put it in a different way, Cain got greedy and God took note.[48] Philo not only follows the Septuagint but sees in the distinction an opportunity to berate Cain:

> What is the difference 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.[49]

Philo's argument is a bit odd since he chooses to describe the difference between gift and sacrifice only in terms of animal offering. In other words, Cain's offering is not part of the argument because he offers the fruits of the land and not an animal to the deity. If pushed, Philo's argument breaks down because it does not include Cain's offering. However, Philo seems not to be concerned with this problem in his argument. For him, Cain is in any instance a greedy person who seeks his own benefit. Philo's interpretation is a solution of the theological problem of divine capriciousness. The responsibility of the rejection falls completely on Cain's shoulders and the deity is not deficient in the decision.

Furthermore, the Septuagint implicitly evaluates Cain's sacrifice by describing God's reaction to it as προσέσχεν and to Abel's offering as ἐπεῖδεν. The LXX uses ἐπεῖδεν in Exodus 2:25 where God "looked upon" the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt and then God "took notice of them"[50] (ἐγνώσθη αὐτοῖς). This combination

of verbs connects the notion of divine protection with revelation/protection. The LXX implies that as God was watching over or visiting the Israelites in Egypt, the deity was only protecting Abel.[51] To quote Joel Lohr, "[since] the translator uses different Greek words for the same Hebrew term [שעה] . . . 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."[52] Hayward also notes that in the Pentateuch, ἐπεῖδεν is used four times, all connected with God's vision.[53] He goes on to say, "This verb, then indicating God's oversight, providence and care, is also associated with the vision of God; and its use in LXX Gen. 4:4 opens the possibility that in some sense the Almighty appeared to Abel, while Cain had no such experience."[54] Still, this does not explain what the nature of Cain's sacrifice is; yet whatever it is, God did not accept it let alone consider it. In addition, it increases the theological difficulty of the meaning of God's protection of Abel and divine capriciousness. If the LXX suggests by the use of ἐφοράω that God regards Abel's offering and appears/protects Abel, the problem is that Abel, the chosen one, is murdered by his brother. The ambiguity of protection and rejection, inclusion and exclusion is what Agamben explores in the concept of *homo sacer*: the life that can be killed without committing homicide.

Ancient interpreters also see a reference to Cain's greed in the highly ambiguous Gen. 4:7aα: הלוא אם־תיטיב שאת. According to the Septuagint, here God tells Cain: "Have you not sinned if you brought it rightly, but did not rightly divide?" Here the Greek translators deviate significantly from their Hebrew counterpart – which does not seem to lend itself to such construal due to absence of anything that can be understood as the verb "to divide"[55] – in order to ascribe to Cain an incorrect and presumably self-serving cultic manipulation, perhaps on a par with the abuses described in 1 Samuel 2:12–17.[56] Under Philo's hand, the technical problem implied by the Septuagint unfolds into a disruption of cosmic proportions:

> What is the meaning of the words "Not that thou dost not offer rightly, but that thou dost not divide rightly"? First of all, correct division and incorrect division are nothing else than order. And through order equally are made the whole world and its parts. Wherefore the creator of the world, when He began to order refractory and unordered, and passive substance, made use of cutting and division. For in the midst of the universe, He placed the heavy things and those that naturally bear downwards, (namely) earth and water; but air and fire He placed above, for they ascend through their lightness. But He separated, and marked off the pure nature, (namely) heaven, and surrounded and enclosed the universe by it, that it might be invisible to all, containing within itself all things equally. But the fact that animals and plants come into being from moist and dry seeds – what else is this than a cutting and separative division? Accordingly, it is necessary to imitate this order in all things in the world and especially in returning thanks for those things for which we are required to make a corresponding return to him who gives them to us. In the second place, to give thanks to God is right in itself specifically, but it is blameworthy that He should not first receive them nor receive the first of the

> new products. For 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.[57]

Philo uses the Septuagint interpretation of Gen. 4:7aα to extend his critique on Cain's offering. The problem begins with Cain not bringing an offering from the firstfruits of the land. But for Philo, "division" symbolizes cosmic order, the way the deity "equally . . . made the whole world and its parts." Cain's failure to divide properly is additional evidence of his inclination to take for himself the best part and to be ungrateful to God. In other words, Cain's mind was "divided" against God. Augustine used this idea in his description of Cain's problem with the offering (*City of God* 15.7.1). Irenaeus used it to establish Cain as a type of the Jews who slew Jesus (*Adversus Haereses* 4.18.3) and Ambrose added that the Jews, as impious men, are not rightly discerning the natures between God the Father and Jesus the Son and thus are censured with the same greed of Cain's division of the offering (*Sacrament of Incarnation* 2.6).

Yet the chronological reference ויהי מקץ ימים in Gen. 4:3 provides another opportunity to impugn the motives of Cain's sacrifice. English translations usually render it as "after days" or "after a year,"[58] or "in the course of time,"[59] reflecting the ambiguity of the phrase.[60] The Septuagint translates it as "it came to pass after some days" (καὶ ἐγένετο μεθ' ἡμέρας), and based on this translation Philo enhances his critique of the quality of Cain's offering by questioning its timing. For him, Cain procrastinated:

> Why did Cain after some days offer firstfruits of offerings, while Abel (brought an offering) from the first-born and fat ones, not after some days? 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 first-born and elder animals without any delay at all or rejection by his Father.[61]

Philo insists on reading the chronological reference in question as applying only to Cain's sacrifice in order to create further contrast with Abel's offering that supposedly followed without delay. The application of the chronological marker only to Cain's sacrifice adds one more element of Cain's crime: his was not only the wrong or the ill-divided offering, Cain also brought it at the wrong time, "after some days." Though Josephus does not integrate the chronological phrase in his interpretation, he does add in the description of Cain offering the "fruit of the trees."[62] As mentioned before, this expansion may be connected with the regulations in Leviticus 19:23–25, which restricts fruit offerings for three years. According to Thomas Franxman, if Josephus understood "after days" as referring to the first agricultural year, then the expansion of the offering to include the produce of trees would mean that Cain was transgressing the law.[63] Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and PRE express the same idea by specifying the produce that Cain sacrificed and

the exact date when the offering was made: "After a certain time, *on the fourteenth of Nissan*, Cain brought of the produce of the land, *of the seed of flax*, as an offering *of the first fruits before* the Lord." Since it would be unlikely for flax of the new crop to produce seed by the fourteenth of Nissan (late March or early April) the implication is that Cain waited at least six months to share with God what had been harvested the previous year.[64] Likewise, in the theological debate between the brothers that the Targum adds to the biblical narrative Abel says, "Because the fruit of my deeds was better than yours and *more prompt* than yours, my offering was accepted with favor." However, the targumic emphasis on Cain offering *of the first fruits* implies that he did not bring the leftovers. The problem seems to be that Cain should have brought an offering similar to his brother, a lamb, because the time for the offering of the produce of the land was wrong. But unlike Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, PRE accuses Cain of bringing leftovers from his dinner. Yet, there is nothing in the Hebrew text to require this construal – as we see in Origen's application of the phrase ויהי מקץ ימים to both Cain and Abel in order to demonstrate that the latter was also a sinner. Even though the biblical text provides fodder for interpretations, it is theological agendas that drive them. For Origen, it is important to underscore "that all have in themselves an image of Adam's transgression *ex semine*."[65] By contrast, Philo, Josephus, and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan seek to portray Cain as someone who is reluctant to share and therefore cannot be an integral part of the community – in other words, they portray him as a foreigner.

Say what?

The vexing ambiguity of God's address to Cain in Gen. 4:6–7, especially of the latter verse, did not, of course escape the attention of the ancient exegetes, who struggled mightily with the fragment.[66] Philo, in particular, notices the ambiguity regarding the object of "you [sc. Cain] will rule over him/it" (v. 7bβ)[67] and invests substantial effort in a categorical denial that Abel may be the referent:

> Why does He seem to give the good man into the hand of the evil man, saying, "To thee is his return?" He does not give him into his hand, but the sense is quite the contrary, for He speaks not of the pious man but of an act already done. And He says to him, "The return and reference of this impiety is to thee. Do not therefore blame necessity, but thine own character, so that in this place He represents it as voluntary. But the words, 'thou shalt rule over him,' again have reference to an act." In this first place thou didst begin to act impiously, and then another wrong follows a great and impious lawlessness. And so He considers and proves that this is the beginning of every voluntary wrongdoing.[68]

Although Philo's reasoning is not entirely clear (which raises questions about Augustine using him as a paradigmatic allegorical interpreter of the story),[69] he seems to insist that since God had no discernible reason to give Cain (the "wicked man") power over Abel ("what is good"), the reference – grammatical

incongruity notwithstanding – must be to sin pursuing the sinner. In other words, God's point here is that having once started sinning, it becomes increasingly difficult to stop. That, however, raises further questions. If Cain is evil by nature (which, as we have seen, seems to be Philo's opinion elsewhere) and therefore incorrigible, the sermon that Philo discerns here would be completely lost on him. And if he is capable of returning to the path of righteousness (with the wrongly selected, apportioned, and timed sacrifice being an isolated mistake rather than a part of a pattern), then what would be wrong with the deity promising him that in such case he would regain the leadership position that befits him as the firstborn son?

It is in trying to deal with this set of questions that Jewish and Christian exegetes take markedly different, indeed diametrically opposite, paths, theological rather than hermeneutical. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, which agrees with Philo's construal of Gen. 4:7bβ but not with his reasoning, explains the text by paraphrasing God's entire address to Cain as follows:

> If you perform *your deeds* well *your guilt will be forgiven you*. But if you do not perform *your deeds* well *in this world your sin will be retained for the day of great judgment*. Sin crouches at the gates *of your heart, but in your hand I have placed power over the evil inclination*. Its desire will be towards you, but you will have dominion over it, *whether to be innocent or to sin*.

The gist of this interpretation is that no matter how strong and inherent Cain's inclination towards evil might be he still has power over it. The past transgression – the poorly performed sacrifice – does not deprive him of the choice between deploying this power or succumbing to the sin that lurks at his door. Most important, the choice is strictly Cain's, and by implication, what he does next cannot possibly be a part of a divine plan of any kind. The Targum then provides two important developments of the ambiguous Hebrew story. First, it is an apologetic against the notion of divine capriciousness. God's rejection of Cain's offering is not an indiscriminate decision but a response to Cain's offense in performing the offering. He is under a natural law that God has embedded into the fabric of creation for all humanity to obey.[70] Therefore, Cain remains the only one accountable for his deeds. Second and more important, the Targum asserts that within Cain there is a tension between good and evil proclivities. He has the agency to master evil and is not exempted from making the right choice. The effect of these two theological perspectives is to redirect the reader's attention to transforming the tale into a moralizing story that excuses God of any capriciousness and entirely places the responsibility on Cain for each and every one of his choices. In other words, there is no indication that Cain's diabolic heritage explained in Gen. 4:1 had any influence on his ability to choose right from wrong. On the contrary, the slightest possibility that his satanic lineage ultimately influenced Cain's act of murder increases the Targum's theological position of God's overgenerous mercy and forgiveness at the conclusion of Gen. 4:1–16.

Unlike both Philo and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Irenaeus reads Gen. 4:7bβ as referring to Abel because he sees no problem with the subjugation of the just by

the unjust. In his mind, such subjugation serves to confirm the righteousness of the former:

> [These act] as Cain [did, who], when he was counselled by God to keep quiet, because he had not made an equitable division of that share to which his brother was entitled, but with envy and malice thought that he could domineer over him, not only did not acquiesce, but even added sin to sin, indicating his state of mind by his action. For what he had planned, that did he also put in practice: he tyrannized over and slew him; God subjecting the just to the unjust, that the former might be proved as the just one by the things which he suffered, and the latter detected as the unjust by those which he perpetrated.[71]
>
> (*Adversus Haereses* 3.23.4)

Like Philo, Irenaeus draws the connection between Cain's actions and his (supposedly) evil character, but in his interpretation, Cain had no choice whatsoever because Abel's death, establishing his righteousness as well as his brother's wickedness not only had been planned by the deity all along but also predicted by it in Gen. 4:7bβ. Abel thus must suffer precisely because he is God's chosen one; his election brings death, not life. Ephrem incorporates Irenaeus's interpretation with an expansion to assert that Abel follows Cain willingly to his death and at the same time Cain is unable to resist sin and is taken by it:

> But if you do not do well sin is crouching at the first door. Abel will listen to you through his obedience, for he will go with you to the plain. There you will be ruled over by sin, that is, you shall be completely filled with it.[72]
>
> (Ephrem, *Commentary on Gen*. 3.4.1–3)

The portrait of Abel as willing to fulfill God's plan for the chosen, that is Abel's death, comes close to the sacrificial logic in the Qur'an's description of the story. In Ephrem, Abel is the obedient servant who accepts his fate; the Qur'an extends this idea to include the transaction of guilt and sin from Abel to Cain:

> [Prophet], tell them the truth about the story of Adam's two sons: each of them offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one and not the other. One said, 'I will kill you,' but the other said, 'God only accepts the sacrifice of those who are mindful of Him. If you raise your hand to kill me, I will not raise mine to kill you. I fear God, the Lord of all worlds, and I would rather you were burdened with my sins as well as yours and became an inhabitant of the Fire: such is the evildoers' reward.' But his soul prompted him to kill his brother: he killed him and became one of the losers.
>
> (5:27–30)[73]

In other words, Cain's desire to kill his brother is shared by Abel, who actively participates in the same desire. The dialogue suggests that Abel provokes Cain to kill him so that Abel can cast all his sins on his brother. The victim desires the

aggression because it opens the door to paradise and at the same time sends the perpetrator to hell.

The pattern brings to mind Agamben's idea of abandonment as the primary state of the *homo sacer*. Irenaeus consequently exemplifies the movement of patristic – in contradistinction to rabbinic – exegesis towards the conceptualization of God as Agambenian sovereign who establishes the juridico-political order through inclusive exclusion of Abel's bare life.

Not accidentally, this movement – which, as we shall see in the second part of this chapter, comes to fruition in Augustine's writing – goes hand in hand with growing antagonism towards the Jews. The latter trend seems to be operative in Irenaeus's hint that by his sacrifice Cain somehow cheated Abel rather than God: "he does not assign to his neighbor [Abel] that fellowship with him which is right and proper, nor is under the fear of God"[74] (*Adversus Haereses* 4.18.3). For Augustine, the identification of Abel with Christianity and Cain with Judaism – his older brother of questionable, possibly demonic parentage (John 8:31–47) – will be a given.

Inherent in the divergent ways in which ancient exegetes read Gen. 4:7 is their understanding of the cause of Abel's death. Church fathers and rabbis agree that Cain's wicked nature plays a role, but while the latter emphasize Cain's inability or unwillingness to control his evil inclination, the former highlight the deity's employment of this inclination for its own purposes. In both cases, God comes out blameless, but for vastly different reasons. In Jewish interpretation, the deity did all it could to prevent the killing; for Christians, it was Yhwh's prerogative[75] as a sovereign who can create law precisely because he is outside the law to decide who dies and who becomes a murderer. But what exactly happens between the two brothers?

The killing field and the gap filling

The narrative constantly and abruptly moves from one scene to the next. In previous sections we discussed how the story quickly shifts from an ambiguous birth narrative to a description of the brothers' activities and the matter of the sacrifice. Now, after the offering, the text suddenly locates the brothers in the field but the terse narrative does not include what Cain says to Abel. The MT only tells us, "Cain said to his brother Abel" (ויאמר קין אל הבל אחיו), and immediately includes the image of the brothers in the field. In contrast to דבר (to speak), the use of אמר (to say) is usually introduced before the beginning of a speech, as in the introductory formula כה אמר יהוה ("thus says the Lord") in the prophetic books. אמר also appears six other times in Gen. 4:1–16 as the introduction of a direct speech.[76] This gap in the text bothered ancient interpreters, who saw here another opportunity to expand the story.

Since at least the time when the Septuagint came into being, readers have tried, to the best of their ability, to fill the apparent gap in Gen. 4:8 by reading a discourse, or even a conversation, into the text. The Septuagint adds a bland invitation to go to the field because in the continuation of the verse this is where the crime takes place.[77] Other interpreters exploited the use of the verb "to say"

(אמר) in order to insert a conversation between the brothers as the preamble to the murder.[78] Philo introduces additional elements by claiming, for example, that Cain draws Abel into a dispute in order to "gain mastery over him by plausible sophistries that have the appearance of truth"[79] and that the invitation to the field is a "figure of a contest to be fought out." The dispute, according to Philo, is about the brothers' theological views (or lack thereof), with Abel referring all things to God and Cain referring all things to himself (ibid.). The killing happens because Cain is so much in love with himself that he escalates until he has either forced the opponent to give in or "completely destroyed them."[80] This characterization adds another layer to Philo's denigration of Cain's character that we repeatedly noted above, but it also dramatically raises the stakes by making Abel a courageous, or at least dogged, defender of the worldview that Philo shared and Cain an aggressive follower of the opposing philosophy trying to foist it on everyone, by force if need be.

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan follows the same path by ascribing to the brothers diametrically opposite views about the creation of the world, the divine government, and judgment. Especially relevant here is the emphasis on God's mercy as the cause of creation and the faithfulness of Abel in his view of the way God governs the world.[81] Above all, the document portrays Abel as someone who ended up dead because he staunchly defended the righteousness of God and Cain's crime as caused by lack of such belief:

> When the two of them had gone outside Cain spoke up and said to Abel, "I see the world as created with mercy, but it is not governed according to the fruit of good deeds, and there is partiality in judgment. Therefore your offering was accepted with favor, but my offering was not accepted from me with favor." Abel answered and said to Cain, "The world was created with mercy, it is governed according to the fruit of good deeds, and there is no partiality in judgment. Because the fruit of my deeds was better than yours and more prompt than yours my offering was accepted with favor." Cain answered and said to Abel, "There is not judgment, there is no judge, there is no other world, there is no gift of good reward for the righteous, and no punishment for the wicked." Abel answered and said to Cain, "There is judgment, there is a judge, there is another world, there is the gift of good reward for the righteous, and there is punishment for the wicked." Concerning these matters they were quarreling in the open country. *And Cain rose up against Abel his brother* and drove a stone into his forehead *and killed him*.
>
> (biblical text in italics)

This long expansion on the succinct Hebrew narrative is, for all practical purposes, a frontal attack on those readers of this narrative who might have doubts about God's treatment of the brothers. In other words, the Targum not only explains Gen. 4:8 but also provides a fuller explanation of the entire story. In a highly potent rhetorical move, the Targum asserts that those who entertain such doubts are, in fact, Cains who are critical of the deity but not of their own deeds; moreover, this is precisely the attitude that caused Cain to kill Abel.[82] Once again,

Cain is portrayed as evil and the murder is the consequence of Cain's flawed character traits. On the other hand, Abel's are always considered good. The problem is not with the offering but with the individual. The gap in Gen. 4:8 provides the opportunity to modify the narrative and to introduce theological issues in the mouth of the characters. The Targum moves away from the LXX's emphasis on cultic transgression and underlines Cain's heterodox beliefs.[83] The Achilles heel of this maneuver, brilliant as it might be, is Abel's fate, especially as contrasted with Cain's: the staunch proponent of what the text apparently considers correct theology dies childless while the opponent who murdered him lives on and begets a long line of descendants. Perhaps for this reason, the text has both Cain and Abel mention reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked right after "another world." As a way to forestall the horrible consequences of being chosen but dead, Abel describes a system of retribution that extends to the next world. Abel's apologetic theme of his future restitution circumvents the seeming capriciousness of the deity. The silent and helpless Abel, who is a victim at the hand of his brother, becomes the martyr for the cause of correct doctrine.[84] The ambiguous Hebrew narrative becomes a tale about orthodoxy, the importance of good deeds, and the primacy of faith in a deity who is just and merciful. But the deity for whom Abel is willing to die is ambiguously and (in)directly responsible for his death. Be that as it may, the fact that the issue of judgment is raised in the targumic tradition is testimony to the problematic character of the story for ancient readers as well as to the effort that the exegetes invested in addressing the issues that it presented, the seemingly ambiguous capriciousness of the deity. As we will see later in the Augustinian reading of the story, the community that these exegetes envisioned as "the city of God" needed a deity whose acts and speeches were unambiguous and who had a clear understanding of justice, the same thing that the targumic tradition tries to accomplish with its readers by inserting a dialogue between the brothers that makes clear that the deity is appropriately described by Abel's speech. Once again, Cain's role in the Targum is to be everything his brother is not. Cain represents those who question the foundational principles by which Judaism believes God rules the world. His character edges closer to atheism and rejects divine justice. The brothers are no longer just examples of good and evil, but archetypes of two kinds of people: the heretic and the believer. It is precisely this paradoxical union of opposites, the love in the violent death of Abel and the oppressive mercy in the unfolding life of Cain,[85] that Agamben develops in the concept of *homo sacer*, the person who can be killed without that killing being considered a homicide.

Of brothers and keepers

The plain sense of Gen. 4:9, "Where is Abel your brother?" is that Yhwh does not know about what has just transpired between Cain and Abel. However, ancient interpreters saw in this rhetorical question another potential stumbling block because it suggests the possibility that the deity does not know the whereabouts of Abel and only realizes it with the statement in 4:10 asking: "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground."

Philo sees this as a problem and seeks to resolve it by shifting attention from the deity to Cain:

> Why does He who knows all ask the fratricide, "Where is Abel, thy brother?"? He wishes that man himself of his own will shall confess, in order that he may not pretend that all things seem to come about through necessity. For he who killed through necessity would confess that he acted unwillingly; for that which is not in our power is not to be blamed. But he who sins of his own free will denies it, for sinners are obliged to repent. Accordingly he (Moses) inserts in all parts of his legislation that the Deity is not the cause of evil.[86]

For Philo, it is unthinkable that God who "knows all things" would be unaware of the killing; therefore, he must be asking Cain about Abel's whereabouts in order to expose the latter for who he really is – a fratricide. Since Cain's answer is evasive, the murder must have been premeditated because in the case of an "unwilling" act the question would have elicited an equally unwilling confession. Even apart from the questionable psychological assumptions underlying this syllogism, an unintended corollary of the assumption of Yhwh's omniscience is that the deity was a witness to a murder in progress and either failed or chose not to stop it. Moreover, if Cain killed Abel intentionally, an omniscient God must have been privy to this intention – and yet chose to do nothing in order to prevent it from being carried out. That renders Philo's other postulate – "Deity himself is never the cause of evil" – woefully inadequate due to its implication that a bystander, even an omnipotent one, does not bear any responsibility.

In addition, Philo's interpretation portrays God as not particularly interested in rehabilitating Cain, only in goading him into branding himself as a deliberate killer. For Philo, the goal of the entire process is an unrelenting smear of Cain. Ambrose avoids this pitfall by regarding the question in Gen. 4:9 as an honest opportunity for Cain to repent and thereby earn a reduction in his punishment. Echoing the words of the deity to Adam, "Where are you?", God's question to Cain shows compassion instead of indicating divine ignorance or calculated speech to condemn Cain:

> A profounder meaning may be seen here in God's exhortation that sinners do penance, for confession of guilt leads to a lessening of punishment. Hence, in the civil courts, those who deny their guilt are put on the rack, whereas an admission of guilt tends to mercy on the part of the judge. To confess his guilt – not to evade his guilt, but to admit it – indicates that the sinner humbly awaits his sentence. Admission of guilt placates the judge, whereas denial arouses his opposition.[87]

This reading of God's question to Cain circumvents the apparent problem in the lapse of God's control over the world. In this case, Ambrose is not reading it as a rhetorical question, but as God giving Cain an opportunity to repent and receive forgiveness.

Another way in which ancient readers tried to avoid the problem of ambiguous divine intervention in human affairs is by claiming that Cain hoped to keep the

murder hidden from God. Josephus maintains that after killing Abel, Cain "hid his corpse, thinking to escape detection."[88] In this interpretation, God is aware of Cain's act but Cain is embarrassed to find out that God knows about it. Cain is perplexed to discover that he was not able to hide the evil deed and blurts out, "Am I my brother's keeper?" In other words, he is not only wicked but also ignorant about God's omniscience or too obtuse to realize its implications:

> Cain, in embarrassment, having nothing to reply to God, at first declared that he too was perplexed at not seeing his brother, and then, enraged at the insistent pressure and strict inquiries of God, said that he was not his brother's guardian to keep watch over his person and actions.[89]

Ancient exegesis also leaves open the possibility that by answering God's question with a question – "Am I my brother's keeper?" – Cain took a defiant stance vis-à-vis God. Both Philo and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan ascribe their presumed theological positions to Abel and those they reject to Cain. In neither case is Cain said to deny the existence of God but his bold assertion as per Targum Pseudo-Jonathan that "there is not judgment, there is no judge, there is no other world, there is no gift of good reward for the righteous, and no punishment for the wicked" comes extremely close. In a similar vein, Philo maintains that "it is an atheistic belief not to hold that the divine eye penetrates all things and sees all things at one time."[90] From this perspective, God is not ignorant about Cain's intentions and deeds, nor is Cain ignorant about God's omniscience. Instead, Cain simply does not care about what God knows or thinks about him and does not believe God cares about what he does and will not hold him accountable for his brother's life.

This drastic separation between the brothers helped ancient interpreters to view them as representatives of two different views of God and the human condition. It was a popular interpretation that received it most systematic presentation in Augustine's use of the Cain and Abel story, as we will see later in the *City of God*. The plain sense of the question in Gen. 4:9 received a skillful transformation in order to retain God's status as omniscient and to vilify of Cain. God was not ignorant of Cain's action and Abel's whereabouts; instead, Cain was ignorant to believe he could somehow outsmart God.

One interpretation that ancient readers hardly ever consider is that what stands behind Cain's words in Gen. 4:9 is not callous criminality, naïve attempt at cover-up, or atheistic defiance but rather confusion or bewilderment: "I *am* my brother's keeper?"[91] One of the very few possible exceptions is the comment in the Midrash that Cain's mark made him "an example to penitents" (*Genesis Rabbah* 22:13), presupposing that he was genuinely contrite about killing Abel. This exegetical trajectory will receive further development in Byron's *Cain*, which I analyze in a later chapter.

Who cursed whom?

The ambiguous ארור אתה מן־האדמה in Gen. 4:11 was the subject of much debate in antiquity. This verse is the beginning of the sentence scene in which God declares

the punishment for Abel's murder. Yet, the sentence hardly measures up to the crime.[92] The terse narrative depicted the death of Abel, the ambiguous dialogue between Cain and God that most ancient readers see as Cain lying to God. God then pronounces a curse but in spite of the curse, Cain remains alive, marries, raises a family, and builds a city. The seeming contradictory terms of the curse, at least suggesting justice for Abel, bothered early interpreters who were disappointed with Cain's possible impunity and God's possible lack of appropriate understanding of punishment. They developed ways to increase the severity of the sentence beyond the ambiguous Hebrew version.

In Targum Neofiti therefore, God addresses Cain twice by name in the pronouncement of the curse (vv. 11–12). These additions appear to be unnecessary as the MT clearly says that Cain is being cursed; the exegetical problem is to understand Cain's curse in relation to the earth. However, the inclusion of Cain's name may be to emphasize that the recipient of the curse is the older brother: "And now, Cain, you will be cursed from the earth that opened its mouth to receive the blood of your brother from your hands. When you work the earth it will not again yield the fruits of the harvest to you. An exile and a wanderer you will be, Cain, on the earth." The same addition appears in TN Gen. 3:14, which renders the MT as "cursed are you, O serpent." The Targum seems to underscore the gravity of the events in 3:14 and 4:11–12 by putting the perpetrator's name in God's mouth.

This similarity of the language of Gen. 4:11 to the curse of the serpent in Gen. 3:14 led John Chrysostom to conclude that Cain represented the serpent in Gen. 4:

> You see, since Cain perpetrated practically the same evil as the serpent, which like an instrument served the devil's purposes, and as the serpent introduced mortality by means of deceit, in like manner Cain deceived his brother, led him out into the open country, raised his hand in armed assault against him and committed murder. Hence, as God said to the serpent, "Cursed are you beyond all the wild animals of the earth," so too was Cain when he committed the same evil as the serpent.[93]

Chrysostom seems to suggest that the Cain and Abel story is another version of the mythical explanation for the beginning of the human world with the introduction of mortality. It parallels interpretations of Gen. 3 in two ways, namely, a being who is the instrument of the devil, and the deceiving of a human being to act according to individual desires. In this case the curse surpasses the transgression in Gen. 3 because Cain brings the curse on himself. Yet, this interpretation does not address the ambiguous concept "from (more than) the ground" (מן־האדמה). In connection with Gen. 3, this phrase means that Cain receives a punishment greater than the curse on the ground or the serpent, using "from" (מן) as a comparative meaning "more than." However, it may also mean that the ground is being cursed in regard or in addition to Cain.

Pseudo-Philo tries to clarify exactly this point and he "seems to suggest that the curse imposed on the earth is the prohibition to swallow any more blood"[94]:

> "I commanded the earth and it gave me Adam, and two sons were born to him, and the older rose up and killed the younger, and the earth hastened to

> drink up his blood. And I expelled Cain and cursed the earth and spoke to Zion, saying: 'You shall no more drink up blood.'"
>
> (Pseudo-Philo, *L.A.B* 16:2 [Jacobson])

From this angle, it appears that the earth has been complicit in covering up Abel's murder so that God had to make sure that this does not happen in the future. Philo, by contrast, has the earth curse Cain by interpreting "from (מן, ἀπό) the earth" as "ἐν or ἐπί (upon) the earth":

> Why does he (Cain) become accursed upon the earth? The earth is the last of the parts of the universe. Accordingly, if this curses him, it is understandable that appropriate curses will be laid upon him by the other elements as well, namely by springs, rivers, sea, air, winds, fire, light, the sun, the moon, the stars and the whole heaven together. For if inanimate and terrestrial nature opposes and revolts against wrongdoing, will not purer natures do so still more? But he with whom the parts of the universe wage war – what hope of salvation will he any longer have? I do not know.[95]

This interpretation deftly uses the ancient concept of the four elements, each of which has its own temperament, to underline the enormity of Cain's crime. Arguing *a fortiori*, he points out that if even the earth, the most inert of the elements, curses Cain, other components of nature – fountains, rivers, seas, air, land, fire, light, sun, moon, and stars – must be at war with him as well so that he cannot be sure about his safety or future. In other words, not only does the land refuse to yield its produce to Cain, but actually the entire creation seeks revenge for Abel's blood. Cain's strangeness thus acquires cosmic proportions – something that God merely concedes (or, perhaps, ratifies?) by pronouncing him a fugitive and a wanderer.

Striking as it is, the grand picture drawn by Philo founders, however, on a simple question: How, in the face of such truly universal rejection, does Cain manage to settle down, build a home, and have a family? Did the deity protect him not only from would-be human murderers but also from hostile elements – and if yes, why? Curiously but perhaps not accidentally, ancient exegetes do not raise the possibility that it was the deity that cursed Cain by barring the earth from responding to Cain's efforts to till it.[96]

Probably in an attempt to patch up the incongruity between the fringe status assigned to Cain and his actual achievement, the Septuagint renders נע ונד in Gen. 4:12 as "groaning and shaking" rather than the "fugitive and wanderer" of the vast majority of translations, ancient and modern alike. In this way, it removes the nomadic lifestyle from the picture, describing a physical or mental condition instead of a spatial location.[97] Instead of expressing exclusion and a fugitive life, the LXX stresses an audible groaning and a visible bodily trembling. This ancient translation attempts to rectify the less rigorous and ambiguous Hebrew version. Cain's punishment is an observable affliction so that anybody would know what he had done to his brother just by observing his groaning and shaking. The maneuver of the Greek translators, perhaps also meant to provide the reason for Cain's exclamation גדול עוני מנשא, which the Septuagint construes as "my iniquity

is too great to be forgiven," suggests that awareness of the theological problems that beset Cain's punishment as reported in Gen. 4 dates back well before the turn of the eras. The emphasis on wandering seems to exacerbate the issue of justice for Abel when the rootless life promised to Cain does not actually happen. As we will see in the modern history of interpretation, some biblical scholars build on the LXX's insight to suggest in addition that a life of groaning and shaking is a more exacting sentence than capital punishment, as per the regulations of *lex talionis*.

Crime and punishment

The strategy of absolving God from responsibility for Abel's murder by piling blame on Cain the stranger – consistently pursued, as we have just seen, by ancient interpreters of Gen. 4:1–16 – suffers a complete breakdown when in verse 15 God acts (as opposed to speaking) for the first time since showing preference for Abel's sacrifice over Cain's in verses 4–5. Unexpectedly – especially against the background of multiple instances of harsh and violent divine retribution elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible – Yhwh does not avenge Abel's death by killing Cain or subjecting him to some other kind of punishment. Instead, the deity responds to Cain's complaint about being left exposed and vulnerable to violence – a hutzpah of the highest order in this situation – by granting him apparently lifelong protection from hostile humans (and, following Philo's reading quoted in the previous section, possibly from the wrath of the elements as well).[98] As a result, Cain is left not only alive and well but also safe – to breed new monsters, to build a community around his heretical, possibly atheistic beliefs, and – who knows – maybe to plot against the future Abels.[99] In a certain sense, at least two out of Yhwh's three promises to Abraham as per Gen. 12:1–3 come true for Cain: he has a land of his own and numerous progeny. Even if Cain is right in claiming that it is God, rather than the earth's refusal to cooperate, that renders him "a fugitive and a wanderer" (Gen. 4:14), from the standpoint of his persistent othering in ancient interpretations all that this achieves is Cain's return to his native element – the space outside. In other words, it is a case of punishing a fish by tossing it in the water.[100] In the words of Jon Levenson, "That Abel should have died a tragic death neither avenged nor reversed struck in the craw of the ongoing Jewish and Christian tradition. How could the God of Justice have failed to counteract an injustice of such magnitude?"[101] The retelling of the story by ancient interpreters was a way of demanding vengeance from God that the text does not emphasize. The ambiguous leniency of the deity was redrafted with a more vengeful outcome.

Since in this particular case there is no opportunity to blame what happens on Cain and since blaming God remains out of the question, the only compensatory mechanism that remains open to ancient exegetes is Abel's imagined exaltation. This is what takes place, for example, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, traditionally ascribed to Paul but more likely coming from his anonymous imitator:

> By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.
>
> (NIV 11:4)

In addition to sharing the assumption of many an ancient exegete that Abel's sacrifice was better than Cain's and even claiming that Yhwh specifically said so (a detail that does not appear in the biblical text), the verse can be interpreted as saying that despite dying Abel lives on and even acts as a spokesman for faith. Another plausible interpretation is, of course, that it is Abel's example that continues to speak to the faithful, but that is less likely in view of other texts, both Christian and Jewish, that envision Abel's posthumous existence. For example, 1 John 3:12–15 insists that as a murderer Cain had "no eternal life in him" (NIV), implying that Abel – whose righteousness the epistle contrasts to Cain's evil – did. In the Jewish tradition, the Testament of Abraham goes much further by having the patriarch report a vision of Abel dispensing reward and retribution in the afterlife:

> And Abraham asked the Commander-in-chief Michael, "What are these things which we see? And the Commander-in-chief said, "These things which you see, pious Abraham, are judgment and recompense." . . . And Abraham said, "My Lord Commander-in-chief, who is this all-wondrous judge? . . . The Commander-in-chief said, "Do you see, all-pious Abraham, the frightful man who is seated on the throne? This is the son of Adam, the first-formed, who is called Abel, whom Cain the wicked killed. And he sits here to judge the entire creation, examining both righteous and sinners."
>
> (A 12:15; 13:1–3)[102]

However, by reading Abel's exaltation into Gen. 4 (which does not mention him, directly or obliquely, after verse 11) in order to counter the impression that no justice for him was served, ancient exegetes create what is arguably an even more consequential paradox: Abel's election becomes a function of his murder by Cain. This paradox finds its ultimate expression in the midrashic passage according to which God favored Abel's sacrifice – which, let us not forget, is the only thing he does in the entire biblical narrative – because he was already persecuted by Cain:

> R. Yosé b. R Yudan in the same of R. Yosé b. R. Nehorai says, "It is always the case that the Holy One, blessed be he, demands an accounting for the blood of those who have been pursued from the hand of the pursuer. "Abel was pursued by Cain, and God sought [an accounting for] the pursued: 'And the Lord looked [favorably] upon Abel and his meal offering.'
>
> (Gen. 4:4) (*Leviticus Rabbah* 27:2.2:A-B)[103]

The midrash interprets Abel's chosenness as a manifestation of divine justice, reversing the order of events in the Hebrew version in a bid to neutralize its problematic theological potential. The result is a polar opposite of this presumed intent: *Leviticus Rabbah* makes it disturbingly clear that for divine justice to happen, the deity must first set the stage for injustice.[104] God needs Cain to exalt Abel – which, among other things makes the former a recipient of the third promise that God gives Abraham, that others would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3).[105] Along similar lines, the tradition of the Christian church long condemned the

Jews as deicides for their alleged complicity, if not initiative, in Jesus's death on the cross, yet it is precisely this death upon which Jesus's soteriological role – and therefore, Christians' salvation – hinges.

Synopsis

A common denominator of almost all ancient interpretations of Gen. 4:1–16 reviewed above is their consistent effort to avoid the thorny theological question of divine capriciousness. They try to absolve God of any fault, blaming everything that happens on Cain, more precisely on his otherness. Yet just like any other agenda-driven reasoning, this exegetical trend ultimately falters on Yhwh's failure to do anything about the monstrous – and murderous – presence in the biblical story.

From here, Christian – but not Jewish – tradition in the waning centuries of the ancient era took a new turn. It identified the locus of divine sovereignty precisely in God's prerogative to act arbitrarily, for example, in predestining Cain to kill Abel. And, building upon the trend that manifests itself already in Irenaeus's construal of Gen. 4:7bβ as well as in visions of Abel's posthumous exaltation (see the previous section), it interpreted his murder as indispensable in creating the ideal community of faithful and Cain's continued presence on the fringe in maintaining this community.[106] In order to trace this drastic – and, as far as the Jews are concerned, ominous – twist, we shall now turn to the Augustinian reading of the story.

The tale of two cities: Augustinian interpretation of Genesis 4:1–16

Augustine's oeuvre and especially his *City of God* occupy pride of place in the history of Christian thought. Yet when it comes to the interpretation of the Cain and Abel story, he is dependent in many respects upon the earlier Jewish and Christian interpretations discussed in the previous part of this chapter. Thus, he draws upon a wealth of earlier readers, from the Septuagint to Philo and Josephus, to postulate that Cain was evil by nature – one of "those who live with a heart not upright but perverted" (XV, 7, 439).[107] In particular, his claim that "Cain's was the diabolic envy that the wicked feel for the good simply because they are good, while they themselves are evil" (XV, 5, 601) brings to mind the Irenaeus quotation, as well as 1 John 3:12–13:

> Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.
>
> (NIV)

Augustine's overall understanding of God's address to Cain in Gen. 4:6–7 is likewise anything but original. In line with the rabbinic view that Cain had a choice of mastering his evil inclination or submitting to it, he spends almost a whole chapter

(XV, 7) arguing that despite Cain's inherent wickedness God exhorted him to do good or at least to desist from evil. Specifically, he joins Philo and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan in responding "heaven forbid" to the suggestion that the referent of Gen. 4:7bβ may be Abel rather than Cain's sin (XV, 7, 443). Augustine differs only in construing the Septuagint text of Gen. 4:7aα – "Have you not sinned if you brought it rightly, but did not rightly divide?" – as saying that although there was nothing wrong with Cain's offering per se, he must have made it with a wrong intention: "he gave something of his to God but gave himself only to himself, as is done by all who do not pursue God's will but their own" (XV, 7, 439).[108] Augustine's acknowledgment that the "admonition or warning that God offered to Cain . . . is not clear" (XV, 7, 437) might also sound refreshing were it not for the fact that it does not prevent him from offering a definitive and authoritative reading.

What is more, some of the interpretations that Augustine inherited from the preceding exegetical tradition come into conflict with his own theology. He does not regard Cain's actions as manifestations of his uniquely wicked inherent nature because to him Cain is evil as a result of humanity's overall fallen condition, going back to the "fall" of his parents. And it is a major plank of his theology that the role of each brother in the biblical story, and therefore Cain's ability to desist from the planned murder, is predestined by divine grace – in which case admonishing him was a waste of time and effort.[109]

Despite all this, Augustine's treatment of Gen. 4:1–16 does represent a milestone in the history of its interpretation for several interconnected reasons, primarily because he accommodated the exegetical patterns developed by his Jewish and Christian predecessors in a comprehensive typological reading. Ricardo Quinones points out that through Augustine's "synthesis of these earlier elements in a whole which is considerably more than the sum of its parts . . . the diverse and contradictory interpretations of his predecessors were welded together in a firm and systematic pattern which was to dominate the Church's thinking on the subject for the next thirteen centuries and more."[110] With him, Christian ideas on Gen. 4:1–16, initially fluid in a continual process of action, reaction, and synthesis, became hardened and began to degenerate into mere permutations of conventional theories with scarcely any major innovations.[111] That includes Augustine's theology of Jews and Judaism – even though the development of a Christian theology of Judaism is not his primary interest.[112] Instrumental in justifying the continued existence of the Jews as a part the divine plan, Augustine's reading of Cain helped shape the stance of medieval and early modern church on the relationship between the two communities.[113]

Even more important for the purpose of the present study, Augustine's typology of Cain and Abel is explicitly political in its content and even terminology. Each of the two brothers stands for a city (*civitas*, a Latin equivalent of the Greek term *polis*), Abel for the "city of God" and Cain for the "city of men." This, of course, opens wide the Augustinian understanding of Gen. 4:1–16 – and through it, the entire continuum of the story's ancient interpretations – to Agambenian analysis, especially with regard to his understanding of sovereignty as rooted in inclusive exclusion of bare life represented by *homo sacer*. Additionally, since Augustine

describes the "city of God" as an ideal, perfectly homogeneous collective, Rancière's concept of an ethical community appears relevant. But before engaging in critical examination, we should briefly survey Augustine's characterization of the two contrasting cities.

The origins

According to Augustine's outline, Book XI of *City of God* is where he first undertakes the task "to discuss the origin, course, and final merited ends of the two cities, by which I mean the earthly and the heavenly. As I have said, they are interwoven, as it were, and blended together in this transitory age" (XI, 1, 427 [David S. Wiesen, LCL]). For him, it is important to establish as much as possible the marked contrast between the two communities. The city of men and the city of God are two different places with different origins. Augustine asserts that the beginnings of "these two cities had their first origin in a parting of the ways among the angels" (XI, 1, 427). Angels form the greater part of the city of God "because they have known no pilgrimage in this world" (XI, 9, 457). Augustine argues, based on Job 38:7, that the angels were created on the fourth day because that is when God established the luminaries. At the same time, he cites Gen. 1:3, where God separates light from darkness, as a proof text for the distinction that he makes between good and evil angels (XI, 9, 463). If an angel turns away from God, the celestial being turns into an impure spirit, darkness in itself (ibid.). For Augustine, it is important to underscore that evil is the consequence of the free will of angels who are evil by their own choice (XI, 13, 479); in his theology, evil is a perversion of something that initially was good.[114] Those angels that fell away from God did so because they were delighted in their own power, as though "they themselves were their own Good" (XII, 1, 5 [Phillip Levine, LCL]).

However, if the fall of what Augustine calls the "rational or intellectual being" (XII, 1, 5) is the consequence of an evil will, the question is, what is the cause of that evil will? Augustine argues that all things created by God are good but subject to change because they were made not out of his being but out of nothing (XII, 1, 5). A search for the "efficient cause" of the evil choice would be futile; "we find none" because nothing causes an evil will, since it is the evil will itself which causes the evil act (XII, 6, 25). This reasoning does not apply to will for the good. In this case, says Augustine, since angels were themselves created, it follows that their will must also be created (XII, 9, 39). That is to say, in some sense God creates the good will because if the good angels were at first without this good will, and produced it by themselves without the operation of God, then they themselves would have improved upon God's original creation (ibid.) – something that for Augustine is unthinkable. Therefore, there is no symmetry in the wills, except in one respect: despite arguing that the evil will is not a divine creation, only the good one, Augustine seems to imply that God has already assigned specific ends to both.[115]

Augustine's discussion of the angels establishes the framework in which the polar opposites unfold further because the two diverse and mutually opposed groups of angels who by their own choice follow diverging paths give rise to

the "two classes . . . of human society" (XIV, 1, 261), which he labels "the city of God" and "the city of men." The difference between the two cities thus has to do with the character of their founders' – and therefore of their inhabitants' – relationship with the deity. Those who fall away from the felicity brought by the supreme divine being have chosen pride, self-elevation, empty cleverness, and the spirit of faction instead of the unity of love (XII, 1, 5); consequently, it is angels who became "arrogant, deceitful, and full of spite" (ibid.) that begin to populate the community that on Earth is called the city of men.

The binary opposition of "spirit of faction" and "unity of love" is exceedingly consequential, especially for the purposes of the present study. By describing the city of men as rooted in self-love, "carried even to the point of contempt for God" (XIV, 28, 405 [Phillip Levine, LCL]), Augustine makes it a locus of radical *dissensus* from the divine. The city of God is, by contrast, defined by love of the deity, "carried even to the point of contempt of self" (ibid.) – in other words, by total submission to, and unity with God.[116] The better-known description – "one [is] city of men who choose to live carnally, and another of those who choose to live spiritually" (XIV, 1, 261) – is derivative from those cited above.[117] Since the deity is incorporeal, consensus with it of necessity would be associated with the spirit and *dissensus* with the flesh – with major consequences as to the role of life (especially Agambenian "bare life") and death that will be discussed in the next section of the study. In the city of God, there is no room for disagreement among its members and the authority of the sovereign is never challenged. By contrast, the city of men is defined "by lust for domination and the acquisition of empire; it is confident in its own strength and its own values."[118]

In Rancièrian terms, the signifiers "the city of God" and "the city of men" that Augustine painstakingly tries to present as polar opposites, correspond, respectively, to the ethical and political communities. According to Rancière, the ethical community is the one whose political core has been evacuated: "consensus is the reduction of [various peoples] into a single people identical with the count of the population and its parts."[119] Ethical community is by definition based on radical exclusion, which is precisely what we see in Augustine: the city of men can be defined as a community of those who do not fit in the city of God. But who exactly fits and who does not? What are the criteria and who applies them? The use that Augustine makes of the Cain and Abel story in developing the two-city schema is most instructive in this respect.

The destinies

Book XV of *City of God* begins what Augustine refers to as the history of the two cities and for all intents and purposes amounts to an extended commentary on the Bible. In a brief introduction (XV, 1, 411 [Phillip Levine, LCL]), Augustine establishes his interpretive authority by mentioning the existence of other opinions but never actually quoting them on the grounds that only his view lines up with the scripture while others come from idle, excessively curious, and not very bright people. He claims to ground his authority in the Bible and dismisses other voices because they do not listen – the implication being that they are not listening

to him. Augustine demands absolute "understanding" of his conclusions, that is, absolute acceptance, or better still, obedience. In a sense, this is an extension of the way in which he understands the dichotomy of the two cities that he describes. Since belonging to the heavenly community as per Augustine means being a part of consensus, the dissenters who do not accept Augustine's reading of the biblical text and whatever truths he claims to find there of this city are not a part of this community and therefore by definition are not worthy of attention.

Augustine's tale of the two cities begins "from the moment when the two human beings first produced offspring" (XV, 1, 413). Cain and Abel were their first – and therefore paradigmatic – citizens; in a different place, Augustine explicitly uses the Greek term "archetype" to characterize them (XV, 5, 427). Cain "belonged to the city of men" while Abel "belonged to the City of God" (XV, 1, 413). The division of humanity into two communities can thus be traced to the dawn of time, and the source of this division is God's decision to make one of them "a vessel to be honoured and another to be despised" (XV, 1, 415; likewise XV, 21, 541). In other words, the brothers were "predestined by grace and chosen by grace, one by grace an alien below and by grace a citizen above" (XV, 1, 413–414; likewise XV, 15, 497 concerning Seth). Following this paradigm, all humans fall into two diametrically opposed, irreconcilable groups, "one of which is predestined to reign with God for all eternity, the other doomed to undergo eternal punishment with the Devil" (XV, 1, 595). The defining feature of predestination according to Augustine is that it appears entirely arbitrary: he does not offer any explanation as to why it was Abel rather than Cain who was predestined for the city of God; at most he cites "the profoundly hidden yet just dispensation that is known to him alone" (XV, 6, 435). In other words, implicit in Augustine's interpretation is the "paradox of sovereignty" that Agamben discusses following Schmitt: the deity is "*at the same time* outside and inside the juridical order."[120] In establishing the constraints that no human, starting with Cain and Abel, can possibly escape (such as the laws of nature, including those governing sexual reproduction: XV, 3, 598) Augustine's deity acts with no constraints whatsoever. It thus exposes itself as the Agambenian sovereign to a much greater extent than the God of the pre-Augustinian interpretations, the God that felt the need to justify each and every divine action – and, as we have seen, often stumbled on this rocky road.

The arbitrary inclusion of Abel in the city of God and the exclusion of Cain from it is closely associated with the dichotomy of *zoê* and *bios* that plays such an important role in Agamben's thought. From the outset, Augustine describes the citizens of the earthly city represented by Cain as "carnal," in other words as what Agamben calls "bare life," without any attribute or predicate, and those of the heavenly city, represented by Abel, as "spiritual" (XV, 1, 413). Moreover, it is the spiritual that is described as "good," in contradistinction to the supposed "evilness" of the bare life (ibid.) that is "justly condemned, [and does not] merit . . . happiness" (XV, 3, 423); put differently, the city of God is described as the abode of *bios* – "the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group."[121]

This is precisely what Agamben calls politicization of life. Augustine requires the exclusion of life as *zoê* in order to create an ethical entity that he calls the city of God – a community inhabited by life as *bios*, that is, life which has been

constituted as worth living. The split is typified for him by the brothers featured in Gen. 4:1–16. Since Cain is animal life, he is evil and excluded forever from the city of God; he is included in the political order only by his exclusion. Abel, on the other hand, is endowed, through sovereign divine intervention, with spiritual attributes that allow him to attain the qualified "life" that will finally grant him a place in this city when he is no longer *zoê*.

Herein lies a major paradox that may serve as a clue to what transpires between Cain and Abel. Augustine freely acknowledges that, "everyone, arising as he does from a condemned stock, is first inevitably evil and carnal through Adam" (XV, 1, 413); the honored vessel and the despised one are made "out of the same lump" (XV, 1, 415).[122] What comes first "is not the spiritual [element] . . . but the animal and then the spiritual" (XV, 1, 413). And since the carnal aspect of the self cannot be fully eliminated as long as the person is alive – no matter how spiritual he or she might be – animal life (*zoê*), supposedly left out by those predestined to join the heavenly community, appears again as what is hidden inside. Augustine uses the language of concealment when he describes the city of God as the place where "a particular man changes for the better . . . and . . . hide[s] his former name under the later one" (XV, 1, 415). The inclusive exclusion of bare life thus, in a sense, places all of humanity in the state of exception: no one can be sure in which city he or she is actually living, and uncertainty and fear reign supreme.[123] Liminality becomes the very definition of life; Augustine captures this parenthetical condition by consistently referring to those who are ultimately headed to the city of God as "sojourners" in this world.

The only way to leave *zoê* behind once and for all is to leave this world behind; good life (*bios*) thus becomes synonymous with death, and it is the sovereign power – in Augustine's case, that of God – that creates this paradoxical situation by making the inclusive exclusion of bare life its foundation. Indeed, it is legitimate to ask whether absolute conformity and obedience and total self-contempt that define the city of God according to Augustine are qualitatively different from death. The latter erases the individual; the former erases the individuality. The preservation of the city of God is arbitrarily grounded in the relation of the individual's fear of non-conformity to the community's moral estimates of obedience and self-contempt, rendering the morality of love of one's neighbor in the city of God dependent on how much or how little dangerousness to the community is an individual's condition, emotion, and disposition. In other words, anything that differentiates the individual from the moral standards of the heavenly city is called evil.

Augustine's description of predestination as caused by grace (e.g., XV, 1, 415), designed perhaps to counteract this impression, creates further complications because a corollary of this description is that the citizens of both the city of God and the city of men are in the sovereign's eternal debt. In other words, attaining *bios* and joining the ideal humanity that lives in the city of God does not remove the sense of guilt associated with being left behind in this state as *zoê* – which, according to Augustine, is also an effect of grace. The comprehensive state of exception is thus extended even beyond the grave, undergirded this time by guilt.

With all the above in mind, it becomes possible to unravel Augustine's cryptic comment that "a wonderful mystery was conveyed in [Abel's] slaying" (XV, 17,

511). Augustine believes that the murder committed by Cain was not of the same kind as numerous other instances of fratricide in mythology and historical accounts (between which he does not make any distinction), such as the killing of Remus by Romulus in Rome's foundational legend (XV, 5, 427, 429). In all these instances, murder is the outcome of competition for earthly possessions, but this could not possibly be the case in Gen. 4:1–16 because Abel, being predestined for the heavenly city, "did not want power in the city that was being founded by his brother. Cain's envy was rather of that diabolical sort that the wicked feel for the good just because they are good, not wicked like themselves" (XV, 5, 429). Therefore, by predestining Cain for the city of men and Abel for the city of God the deity also predestined the latter to be persecuted by the former: "Abel, who came next and was slain by his older brother, was the first to foreshadow in a way the City of God during its sojourn on earth – that it was destined to suffer unjust persecutions from wicked and, as it were, earth-born men, that is, from those who are enamoured of their earthly origin and delight in the earthly happiness of the earthly city" (XV, 15, 495).

This interpretation – closely following that of Irenaeus but also seemingly contradicting Augustine's own painstaking construal of the discourse in Gen. 4:6–7 as God's honest, even desperate attempt to prevent the murder from happening (XV, 7, 435–47) – fully comports with the Agambenian notion of sovereign exception that permeates Augustine's account of the two cities. Abel had to die because that is the only way of attaining *bios* and entering the city of God; in a sense, he had to be grateful to both Cain for killing him and to God for letting it happen. At the same time, by contributing to Cain's guilt and Abel's indebtedness to the deity, Yhwh's status as the sovereign is confirmed and further strengthened.

In one respect an Augustinian understanding of Gen. 4:1–16 seems not to fit Agamben's political theory. As reflected even in the title of his book, Agamben sees the quintessence of bare life that the sovereign includes in the political order only by its inclusion in the archaic Roman legal concept of *homo sacer* – a person who can be killed without incurring liability but cannot be sacrificed. In the biblical story as interpreted by Augustine, Cain is clearly the bare life in the state of exception; yet, far from declaring an open season on him God threatens anyone who kills him with a (rather enigmatic) sevenfold vengeance and even conspicuously marks Cain. However, the mark of Cain plays in the ambiguity of protection and abandonment that fits exactly into the description of the *homo sacer* as someone who lives in the same liminal space in relation to the sovereign power. In addition, Abel, the one who is included in the city of God, is killed without major consequences for the slayer: there is no indication of even an eye-for-an-eye vengeance for him. In order to start looking at the correlation between Cain and Abel in the concept of *homo sacer*, we need to place Augustine's concept of the two cities in the context of his historical situation.

The mark of Cain

Augustine does not see much of a problem in Cain enjoying the opportunities that he denied to Abel by killing him – to have children and to build a city. Since Abel was just a sojourner in this world, heading for the heavenly community, he had no

interest in such matters. Indeed, both engaging in sexual activities and building an earthly city would be out of character for him (see, e.g., XV, 1, 415, and note the emphasis on sexuality as characteristic for the city of men in XV, 17, 515).

This solution to the theological conundrum of apparent lack of justice for Abel is expressive of Augustine's fundamentally binary view of the two cities, going back to the dichotomy of light and darkness at creation and the corresponding split between angelic communities. To cite Johannes van Oort, "Augustine, in his eschatological way of thinking, is definitely concerned with the antithesis between the city of God and the earthly city, not with a neutral area between the two cities."[124] As a result, Augustine's description of the two cities runs into difficulties once it leaves their celestial origins and reaches the temporal realm because in this realm, the members of both communities live together and their polarity, central to his thought, is blurred. He does occasionally admit that the two cities are intermingled (XI, 1; XIX, 27): even though the citizens of the heavenly city are distinct from those of the earthly city, at times the former must be engaged in worldly affairs. Therefore, making use of the goods produced by the city of men does not disqualify a person from the city of God (e.g., XV, 4, 425–27).[125] Yet, by and large Augustine sees only one way of interaction between the two communities, namely, persecution of those headed for the city of God by those stuck in the city of men (e.g., XV, 5, 429–31).

This pattern reflects the status of the Christian church in the first three centuries of its existence as a barely tolerated and occasionally suppressed minority – truly a stranger, due to its monotheism, in a world dominated by polytheistic religions. However, already prior to Augustine the situation began to change, and in his lifetime the change continued to gain momentum: in the Roman Empire, Christians became a religious majority in control of most if not all levels of power, and their church was for all intents and purposes officially established. In Augustinian terms, the city of God – or at least the community of those headed there – was established on Earth. Abel did, after all, build a city – or, to be more precise, took over Cain's. Under such conditions (which Augustine either neglects or consciously declines to consider) what happens to those who do not fit – given that the city of God, built upon the type of love that "makes a single mind out of many" (XV, 3, 423) requires harmonious obedience of mutual affection (ibid.) and does not tolerate *dissensus*.

It is possible to argue, of course, that the ideal Augustinian community where "love" erases distinctions between genders, classes, ethnicities, and races and a single law rules the entire human flock, supposedly happy in its pasture, is essentially cosmopolitan by nature. However, when established in the city of men the truly "including" or inclusive community of the city of God faces the problem of borders that make communities contingent. Kristeva argues that cosmopolitan universalism, of which the city of God could be an example, has a repressed and corrosive aspect that "if not spoken and expended, might well become a leaven of arbitrariness, terror, and totalitarianism."[126] She insightfully raises the issue "as to whether cosmopolitanism is anything but a religious reality, without ever being capable of becoming a political reality" because in this community the excluded has no status: it simply does not exist.[127] In the borderlines, the ethical community

becomes constricting and abusive because the hospitality that characterizes it "when all is said and done force[s] the [foreigner] . . . and every wandering person to become a Christian."[128] This religious hospitality turned into dogmatism, according to Kristeva, reaches its golden age precisely in the fourth and fifth centuries, spanned by Augustine's life, "and while displaying that breadth of mind that endowed it with its early seduction and strength, Christian cosmopolitanism bore in its womb the ostracism that excluded the other belief and ended up with the Inquisition."[129]

The mention of the Inquisition in this context is telling because it is precisely the plight of the Jews – its main target – under Christian domination that provides the best historical demonstration of what happens when those who consider themselves predestined for the city of God (or at least hope they are) gain ascendancy in the temporal realm. Mired in abiding uncertainty about their citizenship status in the city of God, they need to believe they are persecuted, to constantly create their own Cains in order to reassure themselves that they are indeed the elected ones.[130] Their love for one another is built upon the fear of the other and the Cains, and the preservation of the city of God makes the commandment of love one's neighbor secondary and irrelevant. Of course, from the Christian standpoint the condition of the Jews through almost the entire history of the two communities' uneasy relationship bore an uncanny resemblance to that of Cain in Gen. 4:1–16 as interpreted by ancient exegetes. Having (supposedly) killed the righteous (and meek) one, who was exalted as a result, they were exiled from their homeland but remained a constant presence on the spatial and social fringes of the Christian world, stubbornly antagonistic to its beliefs. Augustine, in particular, followed his mentor Ambrose, who already in *Against Faustus* is typologically linking the Jewish people to Cain and regarding circumcision – one of the primary vehicles of Jewish identification and self-identification – as the equivalent of Cain's mark.[131] In *City of God*, Cain is the "symbol of the Jews who slew Christ, shepherd of the flock of men, who was foreshadowed in Abel, shepherd of the flock of sheep" (XV, 7, 447; on Abel – and Seth – as foreshadowing Jesus, see also XV, 18, 517).

The typological parallel Augustine drew reverberated with increased vigor through the Middle Ages and well into modern times. In the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III wrote in a letter that

> The Lord made Cain a wanderer and a fugitive over the earth, but set a mark upon him, making his head to shake, lest any finding him should slay him. Thus the Jews, against whom the blood of Jesus Christ calls out, although they *ought not be killed*, lest the Christian people forget the Divine Law, yet as wanderers ought they to remain upon the earth, until their countenance be filled with shame and they seek the same of Jesus Christ, the Lord.[132]

At the time of the Reformation, Calvin commented on Matthew 23:35:

> Though Abel was not killed by the Jews, Christ imputes his death to them because there was an affinity of wickedness between them and Cain; otherwise there would have been no consistency in speaking of the righteous

> blood that had been shed from the beginning of the world unto this generation. So Cain is made the chief and principal designer of the Jewish people because ever since they began to slay prophets they followed in the steps of him whom they imitated.[133]

In the eighteenth century, John Wesley marvels in his discussion of Deuteronomy 28 that "a people so incorporated [as the Jews], should be so universally disperst! And that a people scattered in all nations, should not mix with any, but like Cain, be fugitives and vagabonds, and *yet so marked as to be known*."[134] And in the nineteenth century, John Nelson Darby, an influential figure in evangelical eschatology, asserted, "Cain himself is a striking type of the state of Jews."[135] The official church policy concerning the status of the Jews in Christian countries closely corresponded to this persistent theological trend almost as long as ecclesiastical authorities had any say in the matter. Jews were to be kept in a permanent state of exception. Their survival, both physical and as a distinctive religious community, was deemed necessary but only in a condition that approached Agamben's definition of bare life – excluded from the juridico-political order but helping maintain the identity of the Christian population included in it.[136]

All the aforesaid helps explain why the figure of *homo sacer* does fit the situation of Cain and Abel in Augustine's interpretation of Gen. 4:1–16. The Agambenian political theory is applicable to the biblical tale. Agamben wrote that "the sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact *originally* expresses precisely both life's subjection to a power over death and life's irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment."[137] The quotation makes it clear that for Agamben, *homo sacer* signifies, primarily if not exclusively, the point where sovereignty originates. Yet, once established it also has to be maintained; therefore, the bare life whose inclusive exclusion constitutes sovereignty's foundation needs to be preserved. The bare life of *homo sacer* – or, for that matter, any individual or group whose existence – can be terminated without any consequences for its killer and would obviously be no more than a blip on the historical screen. Therefore, it is a fitting paradigm for the *continuum* of exclusion that emerges from Augustine's reading of the Cain and Abel story, that was enacted by European Christendom in its treatment of the Jews, and that is practiced by today's nation-states with regard to migrants.[138] I will return to this topic – as well as to the issue of suffering as moral authority to inflict suffering – in the last chapter of this book. For now, we turn to the interpretations of Gen. 4:1–16 in modern scholarship and its approach to the questions that we have analyzed in the ancient readings of the story.

Notes

1 There is, however, a brief reference in Wisdom of Solomon – a part of the Catholic canon (10:3).
2 The term refers to the literature composed by the rabbis in about the third through tenth century C.E. It consists of the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmudin, and various Midrashim. For a general overview and references to the various rabbinic and other ancient Jewish and Christians commentaries dealing with Cain

and Abel, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin; 7 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 1:100–8; Victor Aptowitzer, *Kain Und Abel in Der Agada Den Apokryphen, Der Hellenistischen, Christlichen Und Muhammedanischen Literatur* (Wien, Leipzig: R. Löwit, 1922).

3 John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry: Vol. 14 of Themes in Biblical Narrative Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Boston: Brill, 2011), 5.

4 On the issue of the development of Augustine's ideas about the biblical narrative in his typological reading, I am following Lisa Anne Unterseher, "The Mark of Cain and the Jews: Augustine's Theology of Jews and Judaism" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 2000). She asserts (pp. 20, 126) that Augustine's position in *City of God* retains the same elements that he had formulated earlier in his theological writings about the place of Jewish people in the divine plan of salvation.

5 Unterseher, *The Mark of Cain*, 20.

6 Following Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 52–65, "far-reaching innovations" still work under the assumption of an "original" version of the text. Gen. 4:1–16 as well as the entire HB is according to Breed irreducible to a single textual source. Its complexity and diverse textual evidence can be ignored only by the use of the name "original" that establishes a hierarchy for the evaluation of texts in terms of their universal worth following a platonic understanding of the ontology of textual identity and difference overlooking the singularity of each textual witness.

7 For a careful analysis of how the interpretive traditions derived from Gen. 4:1–16 exerted significant influence on Jewish and Christian authors who knew versions of the Cain and Abel story, see Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*. I am indebted to this work for its detailed description of early sources that I consulted in order to develop my analysis of the ancient view of the deity's role in the narrative.

8 Although *commentaries* did exist in ancient times in, for example, Philo's writings and some of the Dead Sea Scrolls *pesharim*, interpreters also used a rather popular way of commenting on texts which did not follow the usual structure of cite a verse and offer and explanation, but rather explained via retelling especially when the text was difficult. This might involve resolving lexical or grammatical difficulties or in incorporating rabbinic teachings. The targumists take liberty in an attempt to make texts more relevant to the culture by including haggadic expansions reflecting particular religious and theological views. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Targum Neophiti are examples of a retelling of the story of Cain and Abel. In these works the commentator inserts explanations of absent details in the narrative, making explicit the motivations of Cain to act as he did. In this way, the Targum were designed to justify questionable items, for example why it was not possible for God to stop the killing of Abel.

9 The term refers to indications in the biblical text that served as triggers or pegs for its interpretation in rabbinic, Christian, and later Islamic readings. About rabbinic hermeneutic techniques and rules, see Hermann Strack and Gunter Stemberger, eds., *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. Markus Bockmuehl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

10 The term refers to the didactic and philosophical function of interpretation with an emphasis on educating, comforting, and stimulating its audience to certain behavior or ways of life.

11 This issue will be addressed in the analysis of contemporary poems that revisit this biblical narrative without constraints from traditional Christian views on God and the brothers.

12 Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition*, 37.

13 Some Gnostic materials will be discussed as well. Pre-modern exegesis of Gen. 4:1–16 also includes medieval Muslim interpretations, which lie beyond the scope of the present study, except for a single reference in this chapter.

14 This translation could mean either that Eve had acquired a divine being as man (as sexual partner, which would repeat the assertion of the first part of the verse where Adam acquires Eve as sexual partner), or that she had acquired Yhwh as offspring.

In both cases, Cain is considered to be of mixed nature, of human and angelic origin. Gnostic interpretations exploited this universe of meaning, making Eve the mother of two divine beings. See James McConkey Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 112; Gerard Luttikhuizen, "Gnostic Ideas About Eve's Children and the Salvation of Humanity," in *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christians Traditions* (ed. Gerard Luttikhuizen; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 203–18. Targum Onqelos and Neofiti use מן קדם יוי, "from before Yhwh," to make clear that the Lord is not understood in apposition to "a man." The targumic use of "from before" eliminates the anthropomorphic description of God and works as a literary device to place a distance between Yhwh and human beings (cf. Michael Klein, "The Preposition 'qdm' ('before'): A Pseudo-Anti-Anthropomorphism in the Targums," *JTS NS* 30 (1979): 502–7; J. Ribera, "La expresion aramaica 'mn qdm' y su traducción," *Aula Orientalis* 1 (1983): 114–15). Targum Neofiti changes the verb into the passive form יתיבה לי, "there has been given to me," in order to obtain an unambiguous and safe translation that avoids risks: "Behold, there has been given to me a son from before the Lord."

15 There is no further biblical evidence for the construction את־יהוה to mean "with the help of the Lord." Dillmann uses עם as a synonym for את. He argues that both are interchangeable. See August Dillmann, *Genesis: Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (trans. W. B. Stevenson; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), 1:183. However, Westermann notes that in the cases Dillmann cites, "with" is used of God helping man and never the reverse. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 290–1. Another claim is that a *Vorlage* previous to the MT contained מאת as in Joshua 11:20. See Karl Budde, *Die Biblische Irgeschichte (Gen. 1–12,5)* (Giessen: Ricker, 1883), 214–16. Nevertheless, E. Nestlé argues that there is no textual evidence for changing את and uses as a closer parallel Gen. 40:14 where אתך is rendered "from you." See "The Septuagint Rendering of Gen. 4:1," *AJT* 9 (1905): 519.

16 Philo, *On the Cherubim*, 124–5 (Colson, LCL).

17 Albert Geljon, "Philonic Elements in Didymus the Blind's Exegesis of the Story of Cain and Abel," *Vigilae Christianae* 61 (2007): 286.

18 Luttikhuizen, "Gnostic Ideas About Eve's Children," 209.

19 See Jacques van Ruiten, "Eve's Pain in Childbearing? Interpretations of Gen. 3.16a in Biblical and Early Jewish Texts," in *Eve's Children*, 3–26; Florentino García Martínez, "Eve's Children in the Targumin," in *Eve's Children*, 27–46; Lieve M. Teugels, "The Twin Sisters of Cain and Abel," in *Eve's Children*, 47–56; Marcel Poorthuis, "Eve's Demonic Offspring, a Jewish Motif in German Literature," in *Eve's Children*, 57–76.

20 Martínez, "Eve's Children in the Targumin," 31.

21 Other examples include: Tertullian, *On Patience*, 5:15. He explicitly asserts that Eve was made pregnant by the seed of the devil. The *Gospel of Philip*, a gnostic gospel of probably the third century C.E., goes even further by asserting that the cause of Cain's inclination to murder is his mother's adultery with the Serpent, an allusion to the animal in Gen. 3 as a personification of Satan. Finally, the same connection is made by *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer*, probably a rabbinic pseudepigrapha of the first half of the ninth century C.E. This work says that a woman "produces and brings forth . . . what seed she receives." In Eve's case, she first conceived from Sammael, who comes riding on the serpent, and afterwards from her husband. See Robert Hayward, "Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan," *JJS* 42 (1991): 223–4; Miguel Pérez Fernandéz, *Los Capítulos de Rabbí Eliezer* (Valencia: Biblioteca Midrásica 1, 1984), 31–6; James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 147.

22 *The Aramaic Bible: Volume 1B: Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, trans. Michael Maher (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 36.

23 This is an example of how some ancient interpreters arrived at their conclusions not by way of exegesis of something said in the biblical text, but by exegesis of what is not

said in it, in short of an omission in the text. Gen. 5:3 narrates the birth of Seth, "Adam begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, and called his name Seth." Since this phrase is absent from Gen. 4:1, the targumic interpreter concluded that Cain, unlike Seth, was not born in Adam's likeness, and was not his offspring, opening the door to assign to Cain a demonic origin.

24 The origin of evil is a problem in post-biblical literature, especially for the groups adhering to monotheistic faith. On the one hand, God is perceived as a good creator, not as the origin of evil. As a consequence, humankind is responsible for their actions. Usually this ability to choose is ascribed to a metaphysical principle or ontological nature. Therefore, tension between a monotheistic worldview and the acknowledgment of an ontological nature undergirding humans' ability to choose characterizes much of post-biblical literature in both Judaism and Christianity. So by attributing the origin of evil to Eve's children, the reappropriations of Gen. 4:1–16 in antiquity explained evil as coming with the second generation of humans. However, the rewritten accounts did not resolve the ambiguity entirely because even if Cain is held responsible for the introduction of evil in the world, this still does not answer what or who induced Cain to do such a thing as killing his brother. In other words, even in the monotheistic framework of the origin of evil, the non-human seems to be included in the explanation and Eve's demonic offspring still does not explain why Cain killed Abel. Since Abel's murder is the (un)intentional consequence of God's unexplained rejection of Cain's sacrifice and his subsequent anger, God becomes complicit in Cain's act of fratricide. This is the case of the circumstances of Cain's birth in the *Hyposthasis of the Archons*, NHC II, 4. This is Gnostic interpretation from the Nag Hammadi library, probably from the early part of the third century. Here Eve is raped by the archontic powers, the three rules of the universe. Cain is portrayed as the monstrous other who is the result of a gang rape of Eve. See, "Hypostasis of the Archons" by Bentley Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7* (New York: Brill, 1989), 220–59. In the rabbinic tradition, the motif of Eve's evil children was not developed in the same way as in Gnostic documents. However, the emphasis substantially changed with Kabbalistic writings. See Joseph Dan, ed., *The Early Kabbalah* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 165–82.

25 The motif of being born of earthly and angelic parents can be connected to messianic aspirations. In Christian theology, the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary uses the same symbolism of earthly and angelic sources for his birth. This perhaps suggests a blurring of the distinction between the divine and the demonic or between the demonic and messianic births. There is an uncanny connection between both that renders the familiar unfamiliar and vice versa. The topic of a female figure made pregnant by an angelic visitor seems to run through directly from Eve to Mary. Actually, the demonic birth of the Antichrist – descending from Cain – as a perversion of the Virgin Birth of Christ is explored in Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of Human Fascinations With the Evil* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

26 Johannes Tromp, "Cain and Abel in the Greek and Armenian/Georgian Recensions of the 'Life of Adam and Eve'," in *Literature on Adam and Eve: Collected Essays* (eds. G. Anderson, M. Stone, and J. Tromp; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 290. *PRE* 21 makes a similar assertion: "And she saw this likeness that it was not of the earthly beings, but of the heavenly beings, and she prophesied and said: 'I have gotten a man with the Lord.'" In Gerald Friedlander, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, The Judaic Studies Library, 6 (New York: Varda Books, 1981), 151. James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 157, interprets the text of the PRE as giving to "man" the meaning of "angel:" "It is this spectacle that causes her to opine, I guess I have acquired a "man" (that is, an angelic being) from some *angel of* the Lord."

27 Targum Pseudo-Jonathan adds דה מלאכא ית לגברא קניתי, "I have acquired *as man the angel of* the Lord," which shows a clear relation between איש, "man," and "angel." Some modern interpreters connect Eve's declaration with Gen. 2:23, where the Hebrew texts say "from man (איש) [Eve] was taken." This suggests that her cry is triumphant and Eve considers herself a creatress, at the same level as God. However, ancient

interpreters moved in a different direction. See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magness Press, Hebrew University, 1989), 201.

28 Tromp, "Cain and Abel in the Greek and Armenian/Georgian Recension," 288–9.

29 Ibid., 289.

30 Quoted in Luttikhuizen, "Gnostic Ideas About Eve's Children," 207–8. The "Providence of the All" is Yaldabaoth's mother Sophia (Wisdom), one of the primary Gnostic deities.

31 See previous section "Who's your Daddy?" for a description of the function of this particle in Gen. 4:12.

32 Scholars are divided as to how they interpret the expression, either in the ethical sense, as does Georg Strecker, *The Johanine Letters*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 105 or as in the targumic tradition of a biological connection with angelic beings, as does R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Yale University Press, 1982), 442–3.

33 Jacques Van Ruiten, *Primeval History Interpreted: The Rewriting of Genesis 1–11 in the Book of Jubilees* (JSJSup 66; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 137.

34 Philo, *QAG*, 1.78 (Marcus, LCL).

35 Ibid., 1.59.

36 The merit of shepherding and its connection with leadership is developed in *Life of Moses* and in the essay *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain*.

37 Josephus, *Antiquities*, 1.53–54 (Thackeray).

38 John G. Cook, *The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (STAC, 23; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 267–9.

39 James Kugel, "Cain and Abel in Fact and Fable: Genesis 4:1–16," in *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying The Bible in Judaism and Christianity* (eds. Roger Brooks and John Joseph Collins; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 175; Angela Y. Kim, "Cain and Abel in the Light of Envy: A Study in the History of Interpretation of Envy in Genesis 4:1–16," *JSP* (2001): 65–6; Alan Crown, "Samaritan Midrash," in *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism* (eds. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery Peck; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 2: 765–6.

40 Jack P. Lewis in "The Offering of Abel (Gen. 4:4): A History of Interpretation," *JETS* 37 (1994): 481–96, comprehensively reviews the perception of Abel's offering in antiquity. A discussion of modern takes on the topic can be found in Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 104.

41 Lewis, "The Offering of Abel," 491.

42 Ibid., 483.

43 Ibid., 484.

44 In the book of Leviticus, this word refers to a vegetable or grain offering and is distinguished from expiatory sacrifices which usually required blood. However, מנחה could also be offered with a blood sacrifice (e.g., Exod. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:1–12). Other biblical texts use the word to denote "tribute" (e.g., 2 Sam. 8:2, 6; 2 Kgs. 17:3; Hos. 10:6), suggesting the word's usage in non-cultic settings of a gift or expression of respect in addition to the cultic sense of a sacrifice or an offering. In Genesis, it is only in Gen. 4 that the term is used beyond the sphere of human relationships (cf. Gen. 32:14, 19, 21; 33:10; 43:11, 15, 25). However, even in Gen. 4, there is no clear denotation of a cultic setting attached to the term as in the previous examples from Leviticus and Exodus. The term seems to be used in its general term of "tribute, gift" because the narrative does not include any prescribed cultic regulation or altar. The ambiguity centers on whether the gift is to honor the deity or to appease the deity, or both.

45 See Tom Thatcher, "Cain and Abel in Early Christian Tradition: A Case Study in the Use of the Old Testament in the New," *CBQ* 72 (2010): 732–51.

46 John William Wevers, *LXX: Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis*, Septuagint and Cognate Studies 35 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 52. This is an example of the major role that ancient translations played in the crystallization of the hermeneutical traditions

around Gen. 4:1–16. The change of wording also suggests that ancient translators were troubled by the portrayal of God in the story and tried to shift blame to Cain by lexical means.

47 Robert Hayward, "What Did Cain Do Wrong? Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Genesis 4:3–6," in *The Exegetical Encounter Between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity* (eds. Emmanoueala Grypeou and Helen Spurling; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 102–3.

48 Many ancient interpreters were heirs to the LXX tradition and preserved the distinction in terminology. A fragment of *Jubilees* contains both θυσία and δῶρον as does 1 Clement 4:1–2. Jerome kept the distinction in *Hebrew Questions on Genesis* rendering מנחה with *munus* ("gift") for Abel's offering and *sacrificium* ("sacrifice") for Cain's.

49 Philo, *QAG*, 1.62 (Marcus, LCL).

50 NRSV.

51 The use of ἐφοράω suggests the LXX's understanding of the verse as God's protection of only one brother. LXX Gen. 16:13 uses the same sense of protection when God saves Hagar's life in the desert and she says, "You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees" (NRSV) (Σὺ ὁ θεὸς ὁ ἐπιδών με). Probably Josephus noticed this nuance of the LXX, considering his interpretation of Abel who "had respect for justice and, believing that *God was with him* in all his actions, paid heed to virtue" (δικαιοσύνης ἐπεμελεῖτο καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ πραττομένοις παρεῖναι τὸν θεὸν νομίζων ἀρετῆς προενόει, *Ant*. 1.53).

52 Joel. N. Lohr, "Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain: Genesis 4:1–16 in the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the New Testament," *CBQ* 71 (2009): 488.

53 Hayward, "What Did Cain Do Wrong?," 103.

54 Ibid., 103.

55 See Scarlata, *Outside of Eden*, 85–6 for an explanation of why LXX uses this verb.

56 Note the word חלב in 1 Sam. 2:15–16 and especially חטאת in v. 17. See also Wevers, *LXX*, 54–6. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan does not share the Septuagint's construal of the sentence, translating instead: "If you perform your deeds well your guilt will be forgiven you."

57 Philo, *QAG*, 1.64 (Marcus, LCL).

58 This meaning is considered plausible in connection with Leviticus 25:20, 1 Samuel 1:21, and 2 Samuel 14:26.

59 NRSV.

60 The phrase is open to many interpretations. In other texts, it is usually followed by more detail expressing a precise period of time (e.g., Gen. 8:6, 41:1; Exod. 12:41; Deut. 9:11).

61 Philo, *QAG*, 1.60 (Marcus, LCL).

62 Josephus, *Antiquities*, 1.54 (Thackeray).

63 *Genesis and the "Jewish Antiquities" of Flavious Josephus*, BeO 35 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), 67.

64 The calendric link to Passover – which traditionally begins on the fifteenth of Nissan – may also be significant. In particular, the festival's close association with the firstborn, including their death and redemption (Exod. 12:29; 13:1–2, 11–15), may be meant to remind the audience of Cain's status in the family.

65 Johannes Bartholdy Glenthøj, *Cain and Abel in Syriac and Greek Writers (4th-6th Centuries)* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 21.

66 In the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbis included Gen. 4:7 as one of the fives verses in the Torah whose meaning is undecided, see *B. Yoma*, 52a-b.

67 The ambiguity about the pronoun is also evident in modern English translation. KJV reads: "Unto thee shall be *his* desire and thou shall rule over *him*." NRSV reads: "*its* desire is for you, but you must master *it*."

68 Philo, *QAG*, 1.66 (Marcus, LCL).

69 Philo's mode of interpretation was popular among early Christian readers like Augustine, who also used the LXX Gen. 4 to condemn Cain.

70 Cf. TN Deut. 30:11–14.

71 www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.xxiv.html

72 Quoted in Andrew Louth, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 1–11* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 105.
73 *The Qur'an* (trans. Muhammad Abdel Haleem; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 70.
74 www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.vi.xix.html
75 As we will see in the next chapter, modern academic biblical interpretation will further develop this idea of divine prerogative, which will be called divine freedom or inscrutability.
76 Gen. 4:1, 6, 8 (four times), 13, 15.
77 This was the assumption adopted by many translators in antiquity. The Samaritan Pentateuch, the Peshitta, and the Vulgate followed the Septuagint with some variation of an invitation to Abel to go to the field with his brother. See Wevers, *LXX*, 56. NRSV, a modern translation into English also follows this emendation and translates the text: "Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.'" The direct speech suggests that Cain's murder was premeditated. The invitation can be read as Cain's desire to find a secluded place, far from any aid, to kill his brother.
78 Jerome is one of the ancient interpreters who is critical of the LXX translation. In his commentary on Genesis, he asserts that the addition "Let us go out into the field" is superfluous (*HQG*, 7). Ironically, his own translation includes *egrediamur foras*. See *Outside of Eden*, 115.
79 Philo, *TWAB* I (Colson, LCL).
80 Ibid.
81 Interestingly, Agamben critiques the concept of divine mercy, showing that the inclusion in it also implies abandonment. The presidential pardon is a contemporary form of the concept of mercy. It is what remains in modern democracies from the time of the monarchs. Yet, associated with the concept of presidential pardon is a killing. For instance, every thanksgiving season, the strange ritual of the presidential pardon of a turkey is the beginning of the killing and eating of many turkeys at homes all around the United States. In Gabriel García Márquez, *Crónica de Una Muerte Anunciada* (New York: Vintage Book, 2003), the Catholic bishop who arrives in the town of Santiago Nazar blesses the people from the boat in which he is approaching the town. This blessing is at the same time the beginning of the killing of many animals for the festivities and implicitly the blessing for the killing of Santiago. We will return to this concept later, in the examination of modern interpretations of the story. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 29.
82 For an analysis of Targum Neophiti, see James Kugel, "Cain and Abel in Fact and Fable," in *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament: Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity* (eds. Roger Brooks and John Joseph Collins; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 177–9.
83 This despite the fact that the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan goes to great lengths in verses 3–5 to explain the cultic deficiencies of Cain's sacrifice.
84 1 John 3:12 uses the Greek verb σφάζω ("to slay, slaughter") to describe Cain's killing of his brother. This verb only appears again eight times in the book of Revelation where it refers to Christ as the lamb being slain (Rev 5:6, 9, 12; 13:8), or to martyrs (Rev 6:9; 18:24), and two additional references not directly relevant. The use of σφάζω in 1 John and Revelation suggests that the New Testament writers understood Abel as a martyr for faith (cf. Matt 23:35; Heb 12:24). In other words, Abel's death may have sacrificial implications and Cain kills his brother as an offering to the deity.
85 We will discuss this concept in the analysis of the mark of Cain in a later chapter.
86 Philo, *QAG*, 1.68 (Marcus, LCL).
87 Saint Ambrose, *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel* (trans. John J. Savage; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1961), 428. See also Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis 3.6.1; 3.7.1* quoted in Louth, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 107.
88 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 1.55 (H. ST. J. Thackeray, LCL).
89 Ibid.
90 Philo, *QAG*, 1.69 (Marcus, LCL).

91 The LXX Gen. 4:9 uses a μή particle which accentuates Cain's rhetorical question with a slightly more defiant tone. The question in MT Gen. 4:9 is formed with an interrogative particle that does not imply a negative response, leaving open the possibility that Cain was genuinely confused after killing his brother.
92 According to Mosaic regulations, the punishment for murder is the death penalty (Exod. 21:12). However, rather than suffer death, Cain is cursed "from the earth."
93 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* (trans. Robert C. Hill; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 26.
94 Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum: With Latin Text and English Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1:556.
95 Philo, *QAG*, 1.71 (Marcus, LCL).
96 Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities*, 1.55–59) says that Cain is accursed, but his curse is related to Cain's descendants and his condition as exile, not to the earth not producing as a result of Cain tilling it. Philo (*QAG*, 1. 67) considers the ground to be polluted by Abel's blood and its produce capable of contaminating people with the stain of blood. Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses*, 1, 6, 5) follows the typological reading of Gen. 4:1–16 and considers Cain as a type of man, a material one. Irenaeus also points out that God pronounces no curse against Adam, but against the ground (*Adversus Haereses*, 3, 23, 3), which could establish a parallel for why the deity does not curse Cain. Irenaeus says that God transfers the curse to the earth and Adam's punishment is to have to till it. Perhaps this is the reason ancient interpreters do not see Cain as cursed in relation to the ground. It was its tilling with his sweat and his return to the dust from whence Cain was taken that was the actual curse.
97 See Susan Brayford, *Genesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 254.
98 Since after Abel's death the only humans left besides Cain are Adam and Eve, his concern about would-be killers implies that he expects to live at least another two decades or so.
99 The biblical text does not specify who "Mrs. Cain" was, but in terms of both Jewish and Christian interpretive tradition the only suitable candidate around the time of Abel's murder would be Lilith – a deadly female demon identified with the woman mentioned in Gen. 1:27–28 (who for this purpose is distinguished from Eve and said to have been Adam's first consort who abandoned him or was banished; see, e.g., Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (3rd edn.; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 221–54). Obscure as it is, Gen. 4:23–24 can be construed as evidence that violent tendencies not only continued to run in Cain's family but even increased exponentially.
100 At this point, it is also necessary to ask whether justice would have been served if God had killed Cain or, say, afflicted him with disease. For the vast majority of today's readers, the biblical narratives where Yhwh does mete out ostensibly deserved punishment, for example those of the flood (Gen. 6–8) or Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19) are not particularly satisfying, much less inspiring.
101 Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 76.
102 "Testament of Abraham," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (trans. E. P. Sanders, ed. James H. Charlesworth; Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1983), 1: 889–90.
103 Jacob Neusner, *The Later Midrash Compilations: Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, and Pesiqta deRab Kahana: Vol. 3 of The Judaism Behind the Texts: The Generative Premises of Rabbinic Literature* (eds. Jacob Neusner et al.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1994), 164.
104 This is the problem of the concept of infinite justice that Rancière relates with the *ethical community*. In contemporary nation-states, it is another way to politically justify war. The military operation after 9/11 was initially called "Operation Infinite Justice" but was changed to "Operation Enduring Freedom."
105 The same disturbing meaning may lurk in Gen. 4:25: "Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, 'God has appointed me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.'" Does all of humankind (technically speaking, Cain's line must have perished in the flood) stem in a certain sense from the murder of Abel?

106 The ethical community is not only impossible to achieve but at the same time requires the exclusion of others. This is the basic idea of Rancière's analysis of the ethical community vis-à-vis the political community.
107 Unless indicated otherwise, all the subsequent quotations in this chapter are from Augustine, *City of God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). The Roman numeral signifies the book, the first Arabic numeral the chapters, and the second, the page of the English translation by Philip Levine: LCL 414.
108 Augustine's refusal to follow the path of speculating that Cain's sacrifice must have been wrongly timed or involved a wrong kind of produce may have to do with the realization that at this point in the biblical account the brothers had no way of knowing that offerings to God should be made at all, much less what should be offered and when: the commandments pertaining to it are not promulgated until much later. Indeed, one might ask – and Augustine's Christian audience doubtless did ask – whether sacrifice (in the sense of cultic practice), which for them was primarily associated with polytheistic religions of the Greco-Roman world and secondarily with the Jews, was commendable at all.
109 This understanding likely drives Irenaeus's interpretation of Gen. 4:7, making Augustine's reluctance to take this path even more remarkable. On the question of predestination as a kind of determinism in Augustine's concept of grace, see James Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1980).
110 Ricardo J. Quinones, *The Changes of Cain: Violence and the Lost Brother in Cain and Abel Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 24.
111 John Martin Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 69.
112 Unterseher, *The Mark of Cain*, 4, 159.
113 Ibid., 4, 127.
114 Augustine seems to imply that all angels were created good, including the devil. William Babcock asserts that "at the core of Augustine's account is his insistence that all the angels were created good in nature . . . even the devil, who according to scripture *sinned from the beginning* (1 Jn 3:8), was not created evil; he sinned from the beginning of this own primal pride, his own turn away from god and to himself, but not from his first creation," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for The 21st Century: Vol. 1: The City of God [De Civitate Dei]* (ed. Boniface Ramsey; Hyde Park: New City Press, 2012), xxiv.
115 For a discussion of the idea that God provides grace for the good even though God does not give the same grace to all, see James Patout Burns, "Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil," in *The Ethics of St. Augustine* (ed. William Babcock; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 67–85.
116 Gerald O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 159, aptly characterizes the city of God as "a community where consensus and recognition of authority prevails."
117 In *City of God*, Augustine does not clarify what exactly he means by "flesh." In later works, directed against Manichaeism and Pelagianism, he explains that the term refers not to "body" as such but rather to "disordered desire." That, of course, ties the dichotomy of spirit and flesh even closer to that of consensus and *dissensus*.
118 O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God*, 159.
119 Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 115.
120 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 15.
121 Ibid., 1.
122 Concerning Augustine's negative view of humanity's default condition, see, e.g., Stephen J. Duffy, "Anthropology," in *Augustine Through the Ages* (eds. Allan D. Fitzgerald et al.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 24–31; James Wetzel, "Sin," in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 800–2.
123 Notable in this respect is Rancière's comment concerning the "simple misfortune that befalls every human being for being an animal" (*Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 113).

Zoê is guilty not in the sense of transgression but in the originary sense that indicates what Agamben calls "being-in-debt" (*Homo Sacer*, 22).

124 Johannes van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon: A Study into Augustine's City of God and the Sources of His Doctrine of the Two Cities* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 153.

125 For more on this, see Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Michael Root, "Augustine on the Church," in *T&T Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology* (eds. Chad Pecknold and Tarmo Toom; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 54–74.

126 Kristeva, *Strangers*, 61.

127 Ibid.

128 Ibid., 87.

129 Ibid.

130 Since on earth the boundaries between both communities are blurred, in other words, since there never can be a clear and well-defined community, boundaries can only come into being inasmuch as they create radical exclusions. What is more, since the members of the city of God see themselves as persecuted, it is no wonder that the exclusion constantly falls into violence and murder. That is to say, the community of the chosen killing the other, the Cains, is what unites the community, and the killing has to be carried out again and again.

131 Saint Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 428. See David Nirenberg, "The Birth of the Pariah: Jews, Christian Dualism, and Social Science," *Social Research* 70 (2003): 201–36; Stephen D. Benin, "Sacrifice as Education in Augustine and Chrysostom," *Church History* 52 (1983): 7–20. Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* (22:12–13) discusses several descriptions of Cain's mark, including a horn, a dog to accompany him, and blackness – which probably had more to do with the binary opposition of black and white than with racial prejudice. Targum Yerushalmi (Gen. 4:15) suggests a letter of the tetragrammaton inscribed on Cain's head – making him a kind of slave or even a domestic animal branded with its owner's name.

132 Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century* (New York: Hermon, 1966), 126–7 (emphasis mine).

133 Jean Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke (and the Epistles of James and Jude)* (trans. A. W. Morrison; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:65. For an additional discussion of Calvin's views on the Jews, see Jack Hughes Robinson, *John Calvin and the Jews* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

134 John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament* (Salem: Schmul, 1975; first published 1765), 1:671 (emphasis mine).

135 John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* (Kingston-on-Thames: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, 1948–1949), 1:15.

136 The insistence of Innocent III that the Jews should not be killed illustrates this policy as well as its inefficacy in preventing grassroots violence against Jewish communities and forced conversions, both of which were often instigated by low-level churchmen and condoned by powers that be, both temporal and ecclesiastical. Another foundation of the church's stance vis-à-vis the Jews, also articulated by Augustine, was the role that they played in the Christian eschatological expectations. Since the topic is not directly related to the purposes of this study, I will refrain from discussing it here.

137 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83 (emphasis mine).

138 In this respect, it should be noted that while some of the Nazi practices towards the Jews were a culmination of the trends that go back to Augustine (for Agamben the concentration camps of the World War II period were the ultimate expression of the inclusive exclusion of humans in their animal state), by making Jews true *hominis sacri*, whose killing not only was not punished but was actually promoted and organized by the state, the Nazis also radically broke with the Christian tradition. This is what made it possible for Martin Niemöller to turn Augustinian theology against them. Preaching on Matthew 23:34–39, he admitted that the Jews' condition as fugitives

and exiles was due to their culpability in Jesus's crucifixion but insisted that "we know full well that there is no charter which would empower us to supplement God's curse with our hatred. Even Cain receives God's mark, that no one may kill him; and Jesus's command, 'Love your enemies!' leaves no room for exceptions," in *Here Stand I!* (trans. Jane Lymburn; Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1937), 195. As far as migrants are concerned, while excluding them, modern nation-states usually do not condone their killing, and although the rhetorical ideal is putting a complete end to (unauthorized) migration – that is, to the existence of migrants – these states also need them for a host of economic, social, political, and even psychological reasons.

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2 God's intervention

A story of othering

The analysis of ancient interpretations of the Cain and Abel story offered in the previous chapter of the study demonstrates the impossibility of splitting the sacred from the political: the notions of the sacred and the sovereign (and, as we will soon see, the family) are fundamentally connected. Brief as it is, the story of Cain and Abel is full of gaps and ambiguities, many of which expose divine intervention, or lack thereof, as problematic, but also can be – and has been – used by the exegetes to offer what they see as solutions to these problems. Most of the ancient texts that I have discussed avoid emphasis on divine responsibility, choosing to other Cain in order to keep God out of critical scrutiny. Yet, in Augustinian interpretation, the figure of the sovereign whose intervention has profound implications in the lives of Cain and Abel emerges in its full stature, exposing what his predecessors tried to conceal or suppress.

As we saw in the discussion of Augustine's *City of God*, the absolute realization of the heavenly community is possible only through the construction and constant maintenance of "walls" and "borders" that separate those who deserve divine grace (the city of God) from those who do not (the city of men), the citizens enjoying *bios* from bare lives outside. This is another way of saying that the existence of the ideal subject, the citizen of the city of God, depends on the existence of the "other" who does not belong and who lives in parentheses. Deployment in the analysis of the ancient interpretation of Gen. 4:1–16 demonstrates the connection between the story's interpretation and political, social, and religious problems, such as the relationship between the Christian and Jewish communities and the status of the Jews in Christian-dominated states. These tools make it possible to verify the role of interpretations and appropriations of the biblical story in justifying the exclusion of the other – in our case not only on the basis of their religious beliefs but also their gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigration status, or political views.

The present chapter extends the analysis to modern interpretations, but instead of leaving behind the ancient exegetes, it juxtaposes the two sets of readers, tracing continuities and divergences between them. As we shall see later, the strategies of both portraying Cain as a stranger and affirming God's sovereignty – couched in the more apposite phraseology of "divine freedom" – can be found in the modern field of biblical studies, although not all exegetes employ them.

The number of studies and commentaries that discuss Gen. 4:1–16 is stupendous, making it all but impossible to discuss and analyze them in an exhaustive manner. Accordingly, I will address only a few interpretations selected by language (English or Spanish), geopolitical location, and methodological approaches. I hope that by using this categorization I can present a sample of different perspectives on the narrative and investigate how modern interpreters deal with the problems that it presents. The analysis that I develop can be represented as a triangle connecting God, Cain, and Abel. Traditionally, Gen. 4:1–16 is known as the story of Cain and Abel, but I argue that already this designation misses the point because it excludes the character of God in the story. That is not to say that I am the first to point out this fact, but I am not aware of any other study that has placed the issue in question at the very heart of its critical enterprise.[1] What sort of ideas do modern scholarly interpreters develop in the interpretation of Gen. 4:1–16? What sort of theological terms do they use in addressing the character of God? How do they deal with the problem of choice and exclusion? What rationale do such readers use to understand the deity's intervention in the lives of the two brothers? How do they understand the killing of Abel and what happens to Cain as a result? What is the meaning assigned to the mark? What does it supposedly represent? How might one counteract the marginalizing tendencies of the kyriocentric interpretation of the story that never questions God's intervention? How might one subvert the story's kyrio-centric dynamics and connect its reading with contemporary problems of otherness and migration? Using post-modern critical frameworks, primarily Agamben's, the present chapter aims to answer these questions.

Michel Foucault once noted that "history is the discourse of power," which accounted, in his view, for the preoccupation with the "history of sovereignty."[2] Foucault's insight applies to the biblical narrative, and in our case specifically to Gen. 4:1–16, since the divine sovereign is involved in the lives of the brothers and their family – in a pattern that will remain in place throughout both Jewish and Christian canons. It also applies, as we have already seen, to the history of the pericope's interpretation. In the modern world, after the rise of biblical criticism, early social activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton were already interested in the Bible precisely because of the role it played in the political agenda of their time. In the words of Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, "Stanton's engagement of the Bible from an early feminist viewpoint . . . represented the firm belief that an alternative history could only be written when the sovereignty in the text, interpretation, and institution was challenged head on."[3] The emphasis on challenging patriarchal ideology is of primary importance in feminist biblical scholarship. Yet, feminist exegetes consulted for this study rarely discuss Gen. 4:1–16 although it includes a woman who speaks briefly at the beginning of the story (and again at the end of the chapter) and presents ample opportunities for challenging the androcentric view of family and human relations that emphasizes brotherhood and jealousy and gives prominence to the role of the sovereign/father.[4] Even more important, their rare engagements with the narrative often avoid raising the questions of the deity's role in it and therefore of androcentric sovereignty and concomitant inclusion. The same trend is present when Gen. 4:1–16 is read from the

perspective of liberation theology in Itumeleng Mosala's biblical hermeneutics. The main reason, as will be amply demonstrated in the present chapter, is that the exegetes remain in the thrall of a version of the historical-critical paradigm[5] that fails to establish connections between the methodologies, its outcomes once it is applied to a biblical text, and the realities of current socio-political problems, which I will now briefly introduce.

The political character of biblical interpretation

Already in the seventeenth century, Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza raised the question of the political in biblical interpretation. His assertion that "Scripture leaves reason absolutely free and has nothing in common with Philosophy; but the latter as well as the former stands on its own proper footing"[6] became one of the major principles of modern liberty by establishing "the fact that we are not governed by interpreters of divine law, nor intellectually answerable to alleged divine revelations."[7] In his theoretical approach to the problem of political sovereignty, Spinoza deals with the claims of religion, in his case specifically of the Christian church, to be the foundation of political legitimacy and order. He critiques the widespread use of scripture in exalting modern nation-states as examples of a "new Israel."[8] The far-reaching consequences of such a critique do not escape him:

> the highest secret of a monarchical regime, and its interest altogether, is to have human beings deceived and to cover up the dread by which they have to be restrained by the showy name of Religion – so that they would fight for their servitude as though for their salvation and would not deem it shameful, but the greatest glory, to spend blood and soul for the vanity of one human being – in a free republic, on the other hand, nothing can be devised or attempted more unhappily.[9]

For Spinoza, the primary motivation in reducing the reach of scriptural authority to "the conduct of life and true virtue" is his awareness that historically, the claim to divine chosenness has had bloody, often lethal consequences.[10] If religion is not confined to private spiritual obedience and personal salvation, it tends to sow discord and propagate hatred under the guise of zealous faith and ardent enthusiasm for the divine.[11] Apart from "conduct and virtue," claims Spinoza, the Bible has little to do with the modern world; it is "completely distinct from natural knowledge . . . and each occupies its realm without any conflict with the other, and neither has to serve as handmaid to the other."[12]

With this distinction, Spinoza strips the Bible of any usefulness in modern politics, broadly conceived. Yet, his reading also provoked the discomfort of the religious leaders of his time. In this, he reverses centuries of explicit and implicit use of biblical interpretation – such as Ambrosian and Augustinian reading of Cain and Abel as typologically foreshadowing the Jewish and Christian communities, respectively – to inform and justify the existing juridico-political order in such crucial matters as who is included and who is not. Spinoza then rethinks and exhaustively explains the Bible in a radically new way: historically.

He devotes an entire chapter of the *Treatise* to reconceptualization of the Hebrews (ancient Israel) as the chosen people, reducing the concept to that of a geographic area where the community could live securely.[13] Likewise, the commandments revealed to Moses are reinterpreted in the *Treatise* as particular statutes of the long-gone Hebrew state that pertain only to its residents and are not mandatory for anyone else.[14] Therefore, the political message of the biblical narratives and admonitions applies only to the ancient people of God and is irrelevant as an authority in modern times.

At the core of this challenge to the Bible as a unique foundation of Western civilization and the blueprint for a godly community is his vision of a pluralistic society that lives free of prejudices, hatred, and savagery. His interest in undermining the scriptural authority pitted him, in particular, against the ecclesiastical authorities of the day and their political patrons who were in tandem "enforcing religious and intellectual conformity."[15] As Lewis Feuer asserts, the *Treatise* was "designed to terminate the influence of theology on politics." He observes that Spinoza "carried the polemical warfare into his opponents' citadel of biblical texts. Scriptural criticism and interpretation provided Spinoza with the grounds for the dismissal of Calvinist claims of hegemony."[16]

The historical-critical approach to the Bible pioneered by Spinoza in the *Treatise* gave rise to modern biblical exegesis as a scholarly discipline; it is by no means accidental that he also worked on a Hebrew grammar, aiming to "provide the grammatical basis for implementing the revolutionary exegetical demands of the *Treatise*."[17] With him, the stress shifted from what the Bible can tell its modern readers to what its ancient authors had to say, raising such issues as the composition of the Pentateuch and the dating of its individual pericopes.[18] In other words, a major outcome of Spinoza's criticism was a radical separation of biblical studies from topical political discussion: exegesis began to confine itself to the search for ancient historical meaning.[19]

In its own time, Spinoza's emphasis on "scientific" historical and critical analysis, with objectivity and value neutrality as major epistemological premises guiding the study of the Bible, was nothing short of subversive, and therefore instrumental in undermining the theocratic pillars of the pre-modern political state that began to transform as a result into modern nation-state. Yet, while it technically proclaimed itself a state of all its citizens, the latter still practiced overt and covert marginalization of religious, ethnic, and racial minorities (with the Jews identified, consecutively or currently, as all of the above), women, queer and colonized populations. Supposedly value-neutral, scientifically objective interpretations of the Bible offered by modern scholars – almost all of whom until a few decades ago were white male Europeans, mostly Protestant Christians – either tacitly assumed this marginalization or more or less explicitly justified and supported it. In the words of Susanne Scholz,

> a sustained and strong opposition to historical criticism as an adequate methodology for biblical exegesis has come prominently from scholars marginalized by ethnicity, race, or continental location. Asian American, African American, and Hispanic diasporic scholars . . . view historical criticism as a

> Eurocentric tool that facilitated Western imperialistic practices and distanced the academic field of biblical studies form the issues of our time.[20]

Powerful economic, political, social, and ideological changes on the global scale that have taken place since World War II are imposing a new interpretive responsibility on critical biblical scholarship.[21] Yet even today, a decade and a half into the twenty-first century, it seems mostly disconnected from these changes, to a substantial extent due to radical detachment from contemporary political issues that Spinoza and his followers built into the foundation of the modern exegetical project.[22] The African feminist exegete Musa Dube rejects this detachment, arguing that it has left political and economic structures of exploitation and oppression unchallenged. In her opinion, "to divorce biblical interpretation from current international relations, or to discuss it primarily as an ancient text, becomes another western ideological stance that hides its direct impact on the postcolonial world and maintains its imperial domination of Two-Third World countries."[23] Dube affirms the significant role of the Bible in shaping society and insists that to ignore the Bible's relationship with the theory and practice of injustice and exclusion perpetuates acceptance of the societal status quo by the Bible's readers, especially in the West. Likewise, the mission statement of the Institute for Signifying Scripture at the School of Religion of Claremont Graduate University headed by Vincent Wimbush asserts that, "insofar as 'scriptures' for good and ill have to do with the dynamics of the making and re-making of worlds . . . with the quest and uses of power, they are too important to be left within any one discursive-political domain."[24]

The reluctance of modern exegetes to engage the Bible politically[25] is not just a matter of missing a substantial layer of meaning; the consequences of this reluctance can be deadly. "The Bible," writes Mieke Bal, "of all books, is the most dangerous one, the one that has been endowed with the power to kill."[26] Spinoza's project thus badly needs re-evaluation because the Bible is part of the cultural production that continually informs the symbolic texture of the modern society. This does not mean handing the Bible back to ecclesiastical powers that be (of the kind that existed before and during Spinoza's time) to be used as a sole source of authority as mediated by these powers. There is no question that the analytical instruments whose basic design goes back to Spinoza should be retained; but they also should be fine-tuned in such a way that they become responsive to the sociopolitical contexts of the twentieth-first century. Thus, the cultural-contextual analysis developed by the present study brings together Spinoza-inspired rejection of the Bible's political authority with the Agambenian notion of the intrinsic connection between the sacred and the political in order to address contemporary questions about sovereignty, othering, and migration.[27]

Reading a conflict/conflicting readings

As made clear by the opening section of this study and further confirmed by the overview of ancient exegesis in this chapter Gen. 4:1–16 bristles with exegetical challenges and therefore gives rise to a multitude of divergent and even clashing

readings. For the sake of clarity and brevity, this section focuses on modern interpretations that deal with the characterization of Cain and Abel, the reason for their offerings, the rejection of Cain's, the killing of Abel, and the meaning of Cain's mark. The organization of the material follows the structure of Youjin Chung's 2011 article, expanding this structure when needed.[28]

Thanksgiving or arrogance?

Although the interpreters for the most part see the continuity[29] between the third and fourth chapters of Genesis in terms of "sin" or "transgression," it is difficult to deny that there is also a dynamic of progress.[30] The primeval human family seems to advance culturally and technologically as the second generation diversifies the mode of production (while in Gen. 3:17–19 Adam is charged with – or sentenced to – tilling the ground, in 4:2 Abel branches out into animal husbandry) and later Cain's descendants give rise to various crafts and even arts (4:21–22). The text presents these developments from a decidedly androcentric perspective. There is no indication that Adam and Eve had daughters – which is why the exegetes, including this one, usually refer to Gen. 4:1–16 as the story of two men, Cain and Abel. Female characters are not mentioned either in the story about the sons of Adam and Eve, despite the essential role of women in (pro)creation, generational continuity, and the maintenance of the family. The dichotomy of herding and farming as the primitive but essential ways of life is likewise androcentric since it excludes the economically vital activities of women. Even the genealogies in Gen. 4 trace the development of humanity through the male line, and Eve is only mentioned on two occasions that, as we shall see later, suggest the disruption of the patriarchal order. Rather than pointing out this imbalance or trying to compensate for it, many of the modern interpretations exacerbate it by portraying Eve as a failure or at best as a helpless victim or, conversely, by highlighting her supposed narcissism and sinfulness.

Eve's first cameo in Gen. 4 is in verses 1–2a where she gives birth to Cain and Abel, accompanying the first parturition with a brief statement (v. 1bβ) that etymologizes Cain's name but also seems to say something highly ambiguous about her relationship with Yhwh (to quote von Rad, "every word of this little sentence is difficult").[31] Some interpreters, ancient and modern alike, see it as expressive of Eve's humble gratitude to God for facilitating Cain's birth – and maybe even her pregnancy in the first place. T. A. Perry, by drawing parallels with Jacob's blessing of Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen. 48:14), goes so far as to argue that Eve assigns to God the crucial role of a surrogate parent who confers the prerogatives of birthright.[32] The implication is that she touts the deity as a father figure – one that, as we will soon see, is both ubiquitous and problematic in modern readings of the story.

More frequently, however, Eve's pronouncement is seen as inappropriately boastful, even arrogant. For example, Umberto Cassuto notes that although the primary meaning of the verb קנה is doubtless "to acquire, buy," in some instances "to create" looks like a better option and translates, accordingly, "I have created a man equally with the Lord."[33] Cassuto's conclusion is that "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"; put differently, here Eve arrogates to herself a godly or quasi-godly rank – clearly an expression of unwarranted self-confidence.[34] Likewise André LaCocque: "Eve proclaims that she has brought forth the איש (man) as intended by the Creator in the first place. By this, she comes with an exorbitant claim: her son is not only 'promising', he is the very achievement of Yhwh's creation."[35] LaCocque regards Eve's posture throughout Gen. 4 as profoundly narcissistic because the chapter is framed by her pronouncements in which she takes upon herself the role of an interpreter.[36] This means that Eve sees the entire drama that unfolds between the male protagonists, especially between God and Cain, as revolving around her.[37]

LaCocque's reading brings to mind the so-called love triangle that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick investigates in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.[38] She argues that in this literary pattern, where two men are in competition over a woman, the power of hostility between the men equals the power with which each of them relates to the woman, who thus becomes the object and the prize of the male desire. In LaCocque's interpretation, that is precisely how Eve sees herself: she internalizes the desires of the men in her life and enjoys being a trophy in a competition. His reading consequently has Eve affirm, through self-objectification, the androcentric attitudes that, as shown above, dominate Gen. 4; as Catherine McKinnon asserts, "Narcissism insures that woman identifies with that image of herself that man holds up."[39] By painting Eve as narcissistic and willingly passive, LaCocque indirectly, perhaps even unconsciously, reinforces the image of God – a participant in the competition that she allegedly enjoys and ultimately its winner – as supremely masculine, active, and creative.

Following the same androcentric line in understanding Eve's attitude is the interpretation of John Sailhamer. He asserts that Eve's words in Gen. 4:1 resemble those spoken by Sarah when she attempted to fulfill God's promise of progeny to Abraham through her handmaiden Hagar: "Just as Sarah tried to bring about the fulfillment of God's promised 'seed' on her own, so also Eve's words give expression to her confidence in her ability to fulfill the promise of 3.15."[40] Here, Eve's confidence in her powers of (pro)creation is considered an error in judgment that leads to failure. Specifically, the promise that God gives in Gen. 3:15 concerning her offspring fails to materialize (neither Cain – as she allegedly expected – nor Abel crushes the head of the snake) because she fails to understand that only the deity can decide when and how to fulfill its promises.

In this interpretation, Eve suffers for overstepping the bounds of her position as subordinate to the (masculine) divine; she disregards the "proper" place assigned to her in the social hierarchy that Rancière sees as a major problem of an ethical community. Eve's affirmation of her primary role in (pro)creation is inconsistent with the patriarchal order that defines the preconditions determining the political structure as objective and univocal. In Rancière's ethical community, Eve would be the element that disrupts the logic of the sovereignty and allocates the power of (pro)creation to women who heretofore do not have any role in the creative process. Her conflicting stance in relation to the sovereign is considered a problem, which is why Sailhamer sees her as returning by the end of chapter 4 to her

"proper" place: "As her words suggest, her attitude has shifted from one of rivalry with God ("*I* have begotten/created a man," 4:1) to one of gratitude for God's good gifts: "*God* has granted [שת] me another child [זרע, "seed"]."[41] Sailhamer's reading upholds the female gender stereotype of passivity by praising Eve for ultimately abandoning resistance to God and becoming little more than a receptacle of the male deity's creative activity. Having learned the consequences of underappreciating divine favor, she accepts subordination to divine control over her and her family. Eve is back to her "proper" place and function in society. This fits in well with Sailhamer's deeply traditional view that the deity had nothing to do with the split between Eve's sons, Abel's death, and Cain's exile. According to him, the problem is strictly Cain's lack of a pure heart in worship and his subsequent jealousy towards Abel.[42]

Ilana Pardes, in a rare feminist analysis of Gen. 4:1–16, asserts that in contrast to what happens in chapters 2–3, here Eve becomes a subject of naming. By asserting that her bearing of a son proves that she possesses a creative power equal to God's, Eve is "defining herself as a creatress [and calls] . . . into question the . . . biblical tenet with respect to (pro)creation – God's position as the one and only creator."[43] Eve furthers the family and by doing so the entire human race. Whereas in chapters 1–3 of Genesis (pro)creation is credited to male characters – especially striking in this respect is the spectacle of Adam giving birth to Eve with the male deity taking upon itself the traditionally female role of a midwife – in chapter 4, Eve reverses the vector of the creative process and thus (re)claims a role in it.[44] She brings her own "man" into the world and thereby initiates the "man out of woman" pattern that other women continue in 4:17, 20, 22, 25.

Pardes notes the change of the tone at the end of Gen. 4 – Eve refrains from underlining any participation in the birth of Seth and attributes it solely to God – but rejects the idea that here she is subordinated again to the patriarchal order: "Eve's acknowledgement of God's power . . . does not entail an acceptance of Adam's rule."[45] Eve still treats procreation as a transaction between God and herself, as the meaning of the name "Seth" implies: "God has provided me with another offspring in place of Abel" (4:25). Perhaps, says Pardes, Eve's modesty is the outcome of her first encounter with death.[46] It seems then that God's arbitrary disfavor towards Cain and the latter's exile as a result of Abel's murder is the consequence of Eve considering herself equal with the androcentric divine male who is portrayed in Gen. 1–2 as the sole cause of creation (or, more precisely, she could construe God's unexplainable behavior Gen. 4:1–16 as an attempt to get even). Having learned firsthand how much trouble the deity might cause and what the consequences for her family might be she assumes a decisively less assertive stance in responding to the birth of Seth.[47] Yet, this does not necessarily mean that Eve accepts God's authority; in this, she displays a trait that is common for many biblical characters: the capacity to transgress boundaries. The cultural interdiction not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a literary strategy that sets the stage for the disobedience of subsequent protagonist in the biblical tales. Eve, not Adam, is the protagonist of Gen. 3. This is important because like many of heroes in the book of Genesis, she is curious, seeks knowledge, and tests limits. She is quintessentially human and evinces the traits of other male protagonists in

Genesis.[48] With her words – by either openly flaunting her capacity to procreate or wisely choosing what to say – Eve disrupts or at least uncovers the hidden hierarchy of the primeval social order: (male) deity – man – woman.

Pardes's suggestion that the male deity may have disregarded Cain's offering and failed to prevent Abel's murder – or worse, deliberately provoked it – breaks in many respects with the preceding exegetical tradition that, as we already know, assumed God's righteousness in dealing with Eve and her family. Yet, already by allowing that "the tragedy that befalls Eve's sons is meant . . . as a retributive deflation *of her hubris*," and thereby hinting that the divine response to Eve's words, no matter how violent, may have been appropriate, Pardes reconciles with this tradition.[49] And while admitting that the divine behavior in Gen. 4 is a part of a pattern she still sees those on the receiving end of this behavior, including Eve, as "sinners" and a lull in it as "reconciliation": "Interestingly, not unlike other stories which pertain to this list (e.g., the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, and the Flood), destruction is followed by re-creation, or rather, the punishment is followed by a certain *reconciliation* between God and the 'sinner': the first woman receives another son and renders unto God what is his."[50]

Pardes does add that in her opinion, "this by no means implies that the killing of Abel and the banishment of Cain are Eve's fault."[51] At this point, one might expect a clear statement that blaming Eve would be a case of blaming the victim: someone who occupies the lowest rung of the social structure cannot be faulted for failing to please the one on top.[52] Instead, Pardes falls back on historical-critical reasoning, citing "an indication of the complex interweaving" of Yahwistic texts in the story, a move that raises questions about the consistency of her feminist approach. Pardes's reading is based on a systematic analysis of gender relations and a critique of relationships, norms, and expectations that limit or subordinate Eve's thought, actions, and expression. Yet, her willingness to dodge the issue of the deity's behavior by invoking the text's allegedly composite character seems to continue the trend of looking away from what God is doing in the story that we have traced in ancient interpretations of Gen. 4:1–16 and therefore to join them in promoting androcentric notions of power and control. Instead of fully embracing Eve rather than (male) God, Pardes assumes a value-neutral stance that is in no way conducive to feminist critique of the dynamics of power and control operative in the divine intervention in the lives of Eve and her sons. As a result, Pardes misses a chance to hold up Eve as subverting the cycle of violence and thereby demonstrating that, as argued by Foucault, absolute power is an illusion.[53] The diachronic perspective with no interest in connecting the text with current issues, a typical approach of modern biblical scholarship that goes back all the way to Spinoza, entraps and blunts the feminist reading.[54] An alternative reading "could only be written when the sovereignty in the text, interpretation, and institution [of modern biblical studies is] challenged head on."[55]

The same seems to be the case with Dianne Bergant's analysis of the pericope. While highlighting the androcentric point of view in the story about human beginnings, she says that the tale is meant to demonstrate divine "preference for the younger son" and thereby to justify David's accession to the kingship despite not being a part of Saul's royal line.[56] This interpretation is a good example of a

historical perspective making it possible to read a biblical narrative in terms of political partisanship without reading it politically. Bergant unravels Gen. 4:1–16 as supporting the claims of the Davidic dynasty to power by asserting the deity's freedom to be biased towards the "lesser ones" – a pattern that is traceable elsewhere in the Enneateuch, from Isaac through Solomon.[57] The point that Bergant makes is exceedingly important, but she never asks what kind of a political figure this makes God, especially in view of Schmitt and Agamben's concept of a sovereign as one who becomes able to make law by placing himself outside the law.[58] Neither does she ask why the supposed divine freedom benefits only the "insiders" of the patriarchal system but never redeems the limitations imposed on the marginalized women – and whether it might have anything to do with the divine sovereign being male. Even if God has a bias towards the younger child whom the world regards as of little account, as is the case when Jesse considers it out of the question that David could be selected for the throne (1 Sam. 16:11), that child still has to be a boy, not a girl – likewise with Saul's two daughters, Merab and Michal, who never count as possible successors. As we shall see later, Bergant's stance on divine freedom also applies to related concepts of divine mystery and incomprehensibility.

In sum, as far as Gen. 4:1bβ is concerned modern interpretations of Gen. 4:1–16 make a decisive step away from the pre-modern exegetical tradition. While the latter tried to parse Eve's words primarily for the sake of othering Cain – especially by questioning his paternity, the former use these words to characterize Eve, with many interpreters reading them as challenging her – and, by extension, any woman's – "proper" subordinate position in the hierarchy of (pro)creation. From here, the interpretive trajectory bifurcates: Eve gives birth not only to three sons but also to two divergent exegetical trends. Some readers choose to uphold the story's patriarchal discourse by denouncing her alleged hubris in 4:1 and applauding what is seen as an expression of her contrition in verse 25. Others side with Eve rather than the deity, but historical-critical conventions prevent them from fully realizing the option of questioning and destabilizing the notion of the deity as the ultimate androcentric authority and the God – man – woman hierarchy in the narrative.

Shepherd or farmer?

As I have repeatedly mentioned above, the most consequential *crux interpretum* in Gen. 4:1–16 is God's preference of Abel's sacrifice to Cain's. The narrator makes the divine choice exceedingly clear in a few words but never says anything about the motive(s) behind it – or, for that matter, about the means whereby it was communicated to the brothers. Though ancient interpreters found a connection between Cain's satanic origin and God's refusal of his offering, the text does not have a correlation between the origin of the elder son and the divine rejection of his offering. Ambiguity reigns supreme, and since everything that happens next – including even the birth of Seth, who is introduced as Abel's substitute – stems from this momentous decision, neither ancient nor modern exegetes can avoid speculating about it in order to render a meaningful version of the Hebrew text which potentially addresses the question that readers want to answer: Why did God reject Cain's offering?

For Hermann Gunkel, a quintessential modern scholar in the historical-critical mold, the answer is all too obvious. Based on the division of labor between the brothers, he concludes that "the narrative maintains that Yahweh loves the shepherd and animal sacrifice, but wants nothing to do with the farmer and fruit offerings."[59] Gunkel's interpretation seems to be in line with the curse of the earth as a consequence of Adam disobeying God by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:17–19). It does not, however, take into consideration that it was Yhwh who appointed Adam (Gen. 2:6, 16), and later Noah (Gen. 9:20), as a farmer, and that while Cain, in essence, obediently remains in the trade that was divinely ordained for his family, it is Abel who boldly – one might even say defiantly – branches out into animal husbandry without prior authorization from God.[60] The curse of the ground implies that it is Cain who works harder to produce something from the earth to bring an offering to God, unlike Abel who does not struggle because he simply offers something from his flock.[61]

Gerhard von Rad goes even further by saying that "the only clue one can find in the narrative is that the sacrifice of blood was more pleasing to Yahweh,"[62] even though the narrative does not in fact offer any clues – unless, of course, one interprets the killing of Abel as a meat sacrifice and the apparent lack of punishment for Cain as evidence that God likes such offerings. In particular, the narrator uses the Hebrew term מנחה, literally "gift, present," of both sacrifices, suggesting thereby that they were of the same kind and equally represented the best of what each brother could offer.[63] Leviticus uses the term in the cultic context to refer to vegetable or grain offering or as a substitute for a sin offering (Lev. 5:11–13). However, in Genesis the noun is frequently used in the non-cultic context of a gift to a superior[64] and in the Cain and Abel story there is no indication of a cultic setting attached to the term. Therefore, the use of the noun in Gen. 4:3 maintains the idea of a gift, but this time it is a present beyond the sphere of human relationships.[65] Likewise, John Skinner theorizes that "the material of Cain's offering was not in accordance with primitive Semitic ideas of sacrifice" based on the concept that God prefers a pastoral way of life to that of the farmers – although such an idea is absent from not only the Bible (which on multiple occasions mandates offerings of vegetarian products) but also in the entire corpus of ancient Near Eastern texts.[66]

Overall, Gunkel, von Rad, and Skinner appear to follow in the wake of the Philonic argument that animal husbandry is inherently superior to farming and that Yhwh was therefore perfectly justified in preferring Abel's sacrifice:

> 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 rule and kingship. But the other occupies himself with earthly and inanimate things.[67]

The only difference is that Philo presents his reasoning as normative whereas Gunkel, von Rad, and Skinner historicize theirs. They do not agree that, to put it crudely, God likes barbecue more than salad, nor do they call upon their intended

audience to share the idea (indeed, being Christians both sides would probably agree that God does not need sacrifice at all). Instead, they postulate (as we have just seen, without much justification) that this is what the ancient (read "primitive") "Semitic" authors of the Bible must have believed and that knowing this should suffice for the modern educated (and "enlightened") audience in order to make sense of Gen. 4:1–16. This is the kind of absolutism that makes historical criticism inadequate to deal with a pluralistic interpretive community of the twenty-first century.

That said, the parallel with Philo raises the question of whether the preparedness of the above-mentioned exegetes to accept uncritically the bias that they ascribe to the biblical author(s) – or, rather, to avoid querying this bias by making it a matter of the distant past and a strange, "exotic" culture – may have to do with the fact that some corollaries of this bias were consonant with their own ideological presuppositions. For example, since women have been historically linked to nature and men to subjugation and domestication of nature, especially through hunting, it is likely that for Philo, the connection to "earthly and inanimate things" was another way of othering Cain – by "womaning" him. But could the fact that patriarchy remained deeply entrenched in the Western culture make it easier – indeed, more attractive – for Gunkel, von Rad, and Skinner to postulate biblical preference for masculine shepherds rather than feminine farmers? And could Philo's association of animal husbandry with "rule and kingship" help explain the predilections of the three exegetes and their innumerable colleagues by reminding us that a salient feature of their world was incessant warfare, in which sovereigns were sending men to die – and kill other men as well as women and children – in a quest for world domination?

Some modern scholars choose to go inward: since the narrator does not indicate any tangible reasons for God's choice, the problem should be in the brothers' inner attitude, though the Hebrew text does not illuminate their internal motivations. According to Samuel Rolles Driver, "Cain . . . as soon as he perceives that his gift has not been accepted, becomes angry and discontented – in itself a sufficient indication that his frame of mind was not what it should have been."[68] There must have been a secret flaw in Cain's purpose that contaminated his offering; that is to say, his intentions were not pure. Among the possibilities, Driver mentions "envy at his brother's better fortune" and "other thought of feeling inconsistent with 'a sacrifice of righteousness.'"[69] In this, he echoes the Septuagint rendering of 4:3–4 and 4:7aα (where the word ἥμαρτες "sin," absent from the Masoretic text, suggests that Cain had done something wrong even before killing Abel) as well as perhaps Hebrews 11:4 with its claim that Abel brought a better sacrifice because he had faith.

Yet others join ancient interpreters in questioning the material quality of Cain's sacrifice. The Hebrew text says that it included "some of the fruits of the land" (Gen. 4:3) while Abel offered "from the firstborn of his flock and their fat parts" (v. 4). For Kenneth Craig, the double emphasis of the firstlings as the best part of the flock and the fat parts as the best cuts of individual animals "underscores Abel's desire to gratify Yhwh."[70] This differentiation follows Philo's emphasis on Cain as a greedy worshipper who withheld from God the best products of his

farming activity. In the words of a modern commentator, "This distinction is not made pointlessly . . . [whereas] Abel endeavoured to perform his *religious duty* ideally . . . Cain was content merely to discharge the duty."[71] From the historical-critical standpoint, Cassuto's interpretation is plausible: it would not be far-fetched to argue that whoever wrote Gen. 4:1–16 projected the realities of his or her own time – when hardly anybody doubted that sacrifices should be made or was totally ignorant as to what should be offered and when – upon the primeval family. Yet, this interpretation is also misleading in that it presupposes an inept author who missed a glaring anachronism by failing to take into consideration that Cain and Abel had no way of knowing that sacrifice is mandatory, much less that it should include specific items and take place at specific times. Read on its own terms – that is, as deliberately written the way it is – Gen. 4:1–16 does not emphasize the offering as a religious obligation but rather presents it as an extension of human labor.[72] It is at the very least a distinct possibility that Cain and Abel alike – we should remember that the Masoretic text does not differentiate terminologically between their offerings – made sacrifices because they wanted to remain on good terms with the power to which they ascribed the success of their activities (indicated by the fact that they had something to offer). It was a sense of material self-preservation, not idealism, that drove them: they wanted to ensure continuity of subsistence for themselves and their families.[73] If what they offered was a מנחה in both cases, not only Cain but also Abel implicitly demanded a gift in return because such is the very nature of the transaction signified by the basic meaning of the Hebrew term.[74]

Developed by male, upper-class white European scholars, the historical-critical approach affects even those exegetes who are none of the above and strive to read the Hebrew Bible from the standpoint of those who are none of the above. One example is Itumeleng Mosala, who develops what he calls a critical hermeneutics of liberation in the context of black theology in South Africa. His purpose is to relate the biblical discourse to the South African socio-political realities, defined to a substantial extent by white supremacy over material and cultural production, especially over land, by choosing liberation struggle as the primary context. Mosala's hermeneutic emphasizes struggle as part of the historical circumstances that produced the text and then engages the reconstructed history of struggle in the service of ongoing human struggles.[75] Addressing God's rejection of Cain's offering, Mosala maintains that the text reflects "the legitimation of the process of dispossession of freeholding peasants by the new class of estate holders under the protection of the monarchy."[76] Specifically, it validates the peasants' landlessness on the grounds that their harvest is not acceptable to the deity. In this way, the story of Cain and Abel reflects the fact that under the Davidic monarchy the king presided over a relentless process of land dispossession of the village peasants; today's South African farmers, toiling under analogous circumstances, can relate to their struggle, personified by Cain, and draw inspiration from it.

Mosala's reading is refreshing because it endows a familiar biblical story with unfamiliar meaning, one that would hardly have occurred to a typical modern exegete, thus proving that contextualized interpretations, which are most likely to yield such meanings, represent the future of biblical studies.[77] Yet, the historical-critical framework cripples this reading on multiple counts.

First, there is the issue of plausibility. How exactly could the unacceptability of farming products as sacrifice (flying, as already mentioned, in the face of numerous biblical commandments) justify the dispossession of peasants – especially given that after losing their land they were likely to continue producing the same crops, only under much harsher conditions? Why would the ancient Israelite *latifundistas*, who allegedly created the story of Cain and Abel in order to justify their land grabs, choose to be personified by a shepherd – hardly a respectable figure? If Cain is a type of a rebellious peasant, why does not a story designed to defend the interests of rich landowners end with the deity punishing him in a summary and exemplary way? And finally, how does an apology for land grabs fit in with multiple protests against such activity, both in the Enneateuchal account (1 Kings 21) and prophetic discourses (e.g., Isa. 5:8–9)? Second, landless farmers in today's South Africa do not need the Bible's mediation in order to identify with the struggle of their ancient Israelite counterparts. Third, focus on struggle for land is, in essence, parochial because it makes Gen. 4:1–16 irrelevant for all groups, be that urban ethnic minorities or migrants, whose situation and problems are different. Finally – and most importantly for the purposes of the present study – while it may seem that Mosala steps away from the presupposition of God's righteousness shared by the vast majority of ancient and modern exegetes because in his reading the rejection of Cain's sacrifice serves to excuse injustice, in fact the opposite is the case. For this rejection to work as a justification for the dispossession of peasants, both the author and the audience must assume that the deity cannot be wrong, even if its decisions are inexplicable.[78] Rather than undermining the notion of God as Agambenian sovereign, Mosala's reading affirms it, at least as far as the story's hypothetical socio-historical setting is concerned.

Finally, we should mention a group of exegetes who eschew all attempts to explain why God preferred Abel's sacrifice over Cain's by drawing from ancient socio-historical contexts, semantic nuances, or textual emphases. To them, all attempts to present shepherding as superior to farming, to argue that Cain's intentions must have been inappropriate, or to question the material quality of his sacrifice, miss what may be the main point of the story. Like the *Secret Book of John*, these exegetes go directly to the nature of God. To them, God did not have to have reasons to prefer Abel's sacrifice because by definition the deity is not bound by any reasons. In the words of Claus Westermann,

> 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.[79]

The concept of what Westermann calls "something immutable," Richard Nelson "God's sovereign freedom," Karl Rahner "God's incomprehensibility," and Walter Brueggemann, "the capricious freedom of Yahweh" (which in his opinion is "essential to the plot" of Gen. 4:1–16) is deeply rooted in Protestant theology that goes back to Martin Luther.[80] A part of what theologians describe as Luther's

"theology of the cross" is the distinction between the "hidden" and "revealed" God. This theology "teaches that coming to know God's true nature requires the crucifixion of human reason's attempts to fathom the Divine."[81] For Luther, says Walter von Loewenich, "the cross is not only the subject of theology; it is the distinctive mark of all theology," making one thing perfectly clear: God is hidden, immutable, and incomprehensible.[82] God's ambiguous intervention in the life of Cain and Abel is one of the many things that God does not disclose to humans in God's word because even the biblical text does not exhaust all knowledge of the deity proper.[83] For Luther, interpreters should then pay attention to the text, which communicates the revealed God and at the same time, "leave[s] the secrets of the hidden God alone."[84] In this, Luther follows Erasmus's notion that the Bible, in our case Gen. 4:1–16, contains dark teachings which it would be better not to disseminate among the people because they might cause confusion.

Although Luther's theology, revolutionary in his time, was directed in many respects against the Catholic Church, similar ideas can be found in Catholicism: Rahner points out that "Vatican I stated that the existence of mystery (that of God and of his free action in regard to man) is the reason why revelation as such is necessary."[85] This is hardly accidental because the concept of divine freedom is present, without being named or spelled out, in the teachings of Augustine, the intellectual precursor of both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. Augustine implicitly affirms this freedom by postulating that divine predestination of Cain for the city of men and Abel for the city of God was entirely arbitrary. As far as humanity – as represented in Gen. 4:1–16 by Cain and Abel – is concerned, divine freedom as per modern interpreters has precisely the same consequences as the arbitrary predestination as per Augustine. Since only a partial knowledge of God is attainable, no one can be sure about his or her status vis-à-vis the deity and everyone ends up in a permanent state of exception.[86] Liminality becomes the fact of life: humans know – or at least can believe they know – what God wants them to do but they have no way of knowing what God is going to do.[87]

The twin concepts of divine freedom and divine mystery are thus, at their root, mystifications of sovereignty.[88] Agamben addresses this issue when he maintains that exchanging "a juridico-political phenomenon . . . for a genuinely religious phenomenon is the root of the equivocations that have marked studies both of the sacred and of sovereignty in our time."[89] Just like Augustine's God of arbitrary predestination, the absolute free and therefore inherently mysterious deity of modern interpreters is Agambenian sovereign who lays down the law precisely because he is outside the law and who relates to the sacred life not by protecting it but by abandoning it.[90]

The (veiled) notion of divine sovereignty is intimately connected to the issue of patriarchy and androcentrism discussed in the previous section of the study. Perry's interpretation of Gen. 4:1–16 is especially instructive in this respect. As already mentioned, he sees in God a surrogate father who, as suggested by Eve's statement upon the birth of Cain (v. 1) replaces Adam as a paternal figure. At the same time, Perry rejects all attempts to find something wrong with Cain's sacrifice:

> Interpreters rightly point out the distinction between the brothers and their sacrifices, reinforcing the view that God looks to the heart of the person and

> not the sacrifice. But then they subvert this reading by accepting the possibility that Cain's offering is indicative of his essential unworthiness, and the only textual support for this position is God's momentary displeasure. For if God were permanently and personally displeased, there would be no point whatever to the ensuing lecture on mending one's ways in verse 7.[91]

Thus, for Perry God's fatherhood goes hand-in-hand with divine freedom: he claims that trying to "know what God is thinking" is presumptuous and runs the risk of falling "into the very temptation that defeated Cain."[92] This is arguably the most striking aspect of Perry's reading: for him, Cain erred precisely in trying to make sense of God's actions and words.[93] He is a sinner not because he made a wrong offering but because those who "please God" are not tripped by God's ambiguities.[94] According to Perry, Yhwh uses deceptive practices in order to test humans and see who follows divine commands; an example of a correct response to such a test is what Abraham does in Gen. 22. He resists the voice of preferential parental love and obeys God's command to sacrifice Isaac even though it is incomprehensible in the light of the deity's preceding promises that Abraham's progeny will be numerous, possess the land of Canaan, and become a blessing to other people (Gen. 12:1–3) and the prediction that the family line will continue through Isaac (Gen. 21:12).[95] Perry asserts that to properly interpret God's words means that Cain must understand his own mind, clearly and honesty, and not be under the influence of distorting passions.[96]

This is the point where Perry's reading breaks down. If Abraham tried to "understand his own mind, clearly and honestly," most likely he would have refused to obey God's order – not due to concerns over the fulfillment of promises and prophecies but because any normal person would find it very difficult if not altogether impossible to kill an innocent person who happened to be his own son.[97] Moreover, in Abraham's case the narrator makes it clear from the very beginning – by saying in Gen. 22:1 that God was testing Abraham – that in actuality the deity *did not* want Isaac sacrificed.[98] By contrast, the narrator of Gen. 4:1–16 is just as unambiguous in saying that Yhwh paid attention to Abel's sacrifice but not to Cain's.[99] Even though the test administered in Gen. 22 looks cruel, certainly by today's standards, there is little doubt as to its purpose: God wanted to know how Abraham would respond. In Gen. 4, there are no obvious, or even not-so-obvious, reasons for the deity to act the way it does. Finally, Abraham's readiness to follow the divine order to kill without asking questions (the audience knows that it was just a test but he does not) does not look like a good role model in a world where too many individuals and communities believe that it is their religious duty to commit murder and even genocide, or perhaps Abraham is the role model for posterity.

All these vulnerabilities notwithstanding, Perry's interpretation presents itself as climactic in modern exegesis of the Cain and Abel story because it illustrates an important point made by Agamben: sovereignty needs to inscribe itself on bare life due to sovereignty's origin in the father's unquestionable and limitless power over the family including life and death of all its members.[100] Just as the narrator of Gen. 22 entertains no doubts concerning Abraham's prerogative to kill Isaac at

will, that of chapter 4 seems to have no doubts concerning the prerogative of God (in Perry's interpretation, a surrogate father of Eve's children) to permit Abel's murder and leave it unpunished – to say nothing of arbitrary preference of one sacrifice over another. It is hardly accidental that Abraham, who both accepts the power of the father/sovereign over life and exercises it, is ultimately prevented from committing murder and thus saved from the concomitant exclusion and guilt (his life is a perfect example of what Agamben would call *bios*) but Cain, who questions this power, is not (thus becoming an ultimate *zoê*). Consistency demands that those interpreters who accept the latter prerogative as a manifestation of "divine freedom" or "divine mystery" also accept the former. Embracing sovereignty means embracing patriarchy.

Complaint or contrition?

We have seen above that the words of Cain in Gen. 4:13 can be translated in multiple ways including "my punishment is too great to bear" and "my iniquity is too great to be forgiven."[101] If verses 11–12 are construed, with von Rad, as announcing Cain's punishment, his words are interpretable as "a cry of horror at the prospect of such a life of unrest and harassment without peace. . . [because] once God has withdrawn his hand from him, all others will fall upon him."[102] From this angle, Cain's narcissism and selfishness come into full view: instead of being distressed by his brother's death, he is concerned with self-preservation. For von Rad, this paves the way for the redemptive work of God, who has the last word in the story.

Cassuto follows the second interpretive path, asserting that Cain's exclamation should be translated as "my iniquity is too great to be forgiven."[103] Following rabbinic traditions, he states that the idea of forgiveness suits the context.[104] Cain is not protesting God's sentence; he cringes with distress, realizing the gravity of the crime. By repenting and accepting the divine decree, Cain proves that he is not self-centered. Cassuto construes verse 15 as God's response to Cain's contrition, rendering the Hebrew word לכן as "therefore" and interpreting what follows as a warning that those who try to kill Cain would risk not only their own lives but also those of their descendants. Wenham points out, however, that by offering Cain protection the deity did not necessarily relent with regard to punishing him; on the contrary, it could be making sure that Cain's sentence is not reduced by a premature death.[105]

Chung tries to mediate between the two positions by noting that the line "between the interpretation of remorse and complaint" is very thin.[106] Moreover, Chung points out that whether Cain regrets or complains is inconsequential because both interpretations highlight his dependency on God's justice and mercy.[107] In this, Chung hits the nail on the head: no matter what Cain is understood to have said or what he is presumed to have felt (even assuming that his words or his emotions were clear-cut), there is an element of incongruity in what the deity does next. If he is an unrepentant killer who worries about becoming a victim of lawlessness after committing a lawless deed and complains about God's alleged ruthlessness towards him after being ruthless towards Abel, why offer him what von Rad calls

"the mysterious protective relationship" with God?[108] And if he is cognizant and remorseful of the murder, why the banishment, which, as Wenham argues, may be worse than death? Von Rad describes the combination as mysterious because Cain "is cursed by separation from God and yet incomprehensibly guarded and supported by God's protection."[109] He is in a liminal space of care and abandonment, belonging to God (what Chung would call mercy) but at the same time banished from God's presence by none other than God (what Chung would call justice).

This is precisely the kind of relationship that is pivotal to Agamben's political philosophy. Cain fits the description of *homo sacer*. His status is analogous because his life belongs to the sovereign only by its exclusion; like *homo sacer*, Cain is left in a permanent parenthetical state, exposed yet protected, abandoned yet included. He remains in the world as bare life in a state of exception because human and religious law are related to him only by abandoning him. God sentences Cain to be a *sacred man*, not because his life is valuable but because it is valueless.[110]

Protection or abandonment?

Since the mark of Cain comes up in the last part of God's speech that responds to Cain's words in Gen. 4:13–14, it is no surprise that the way in which interpreters understand the mark's meaning depends on their construal of both discourses. The mark is either a sign of God's protection or a disgraceful stigma – or both, if we follow Chung's fruitful approach discussed in the previous section.[111] I will pay special attention to the idea of the mark as a symbol of protection and especially of its bearer's status because of ambiguity associated with both aspects.

Von Rad sees the mark as muffling Cain: by placing it, God has the last word and thereby underlines the definitive character of the "mysterious protective relationship" established between the two.[112] Likewise, Gunkel says that "the mark . . . was not . . . meant to designate Cain as a murderer . . . but . . . intended to protect him from murder."[113] However, even this elementary meaning may be double-edged: by branding Cain for protection, the deity conspicuously singles him out as someone who needs to be protected and therefore as an outlaw. Wenham's suggestion, mentioned in the previous section, that God shields Cain from blood vengeance because a premature death would cut short his sentence – in other words, to prolong his torment – is also noteworthy in this respect.[114]

Two feminist readers also see the mark as a sign of protection. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi says that "God's actions toward Cain show an overriding compassion toward the newly created, fallible humans."[115] Although this may sound like rehashing of Gunkel and von Rad, she adds a meaningful nuance: since it was Yhwh that created the supposedly fallible humans, does the deity tacitly take upon itself at least some of the responsibility for what happened – or was fallibility a part of a plan to make humanity permanently dependent upon the "compassionate" God?

Katharina von Kellenbach, who approaches Gen. 4:1–16 from the post-Holocaust perspective, treats the mark of Cain as a symbol of memory's liberating power.[116] For her, it is a "mixed blessing of punishment and protection . . . that pushes Cain along the road of moral growth."[117] Placing it is God's way to help

Cain with his underdeveloped identity; he is allowed to become a paterfamilias so that he could build new relationships "upon his ability to honor the memory of his victim."[118] Cain does not realize the consequences of killing his brother,[119] and God helps in his recovery and moral identification by placing upon him a public sign of guilt and communal reintegration.[120] Von Kellenbach contrasts Cain's behavior, which for her resembles that of a perpetrator of a major violent crime who denies his responsibility and attempts to cast a wide net of complicity, with the maternal role of his wife whose "companionship has the power to move Cain toward moral maturation."[121]

Due to her emphasis on the issues of individual and collective guilt, von Kellenbach's interpretation is of utmost importance for the analysis of Gen. 4:1–16 and its connection to the pressing problems of today's world. As I will discuss in the next chapter of the study, Byron's Cain can be seen as an example of individual guilt that not only forces a re-evaluation of human relationships but that also questions the systems of power in the society. However, in the critical Agambenian perspective, von Kellenbach's interpretation also serves as yet another testimony to the nexus between sovereignty and patriarchy. On the one hand, she does not question the deity's role in the lives of the two brothers prior to the moment when it brands Cain with a mark of protection and memory and sends him to live in the land of Nod. The Holocaust connection makes her apparent assumption that Abel's murder is exclusively Cain's fault, with God's intervention strictly limited to his caring rehabilitation, especially problematic. In the last few decades, the Nazi genocide has been pivotal not only for a massive theological re-evaluation of the deity's presence in human history[122] but also in critical inquiry (such as Agamben's or Rancière's) into the mechanisms of social and political exclusion mystified by religious dogmas.[123] On the other hand, von Kellenbach's approach to the women in the story displays some androcentric aspects: they are assigned the strictly maternal function of saving the men from their folly and lack of moral integrity and deemed indispensable in making or breaking their "the moral and spiritual transformation."[124] In particular, although the narrative does not record the attitude of Cain's wife or her reasons for marrying him (or even whether she had a choice in the matter), for von Kellenbach, she "should be considered critical for Cain's moral recovery."[125]

Cassuto emphasizes that the mark must have been intended strictly for Cain and not for his descendants because Gen. 4:15 twice singles him out as the sole recipient: "so that no one who came upon *him* would kill *him*."[126] If so, its primary purpose must have been to specify the individual under inclusive exclusion; going in the same direction is Westermann's assertion that the mark "designates Cain as the one who stands under God's curse" and thus prevents anybody else from intervening in this ambiguous relationship. Other interpreters regard the mark as branding an entire group. In von Rad's opinion, the story addresses the historical significance of the Kenite tribe in relation to the Israelites, who possibly borrowed the worship of Yhwh from them.[127] Cain's enigmatic status vis-à-vis God – completely outside of the covenant and still in relationship to the deity – parallels that of the Kenites, who indicated this relationship by a special sign peculiar to them, a kind of tattoo.[128]

Finally, James Kugel makes an extremely important observation when he says that Cain's protection signified by his mark "amounts to a divine exception" entered in the biblical *talion* principle that stipulates measure-for-measure punishment, especially for violent crimes (Exod. 21:23–25; Lev. 24:19–21).[129] Under *lex talionis*, Cain should have been executed for killing Abel; yet, God spares Cain's life and even protects it to the extent of threatening to take not one but seven lives in compensation for it.[130] The deity does not appear interested in restoring the communal – and cosmic – balance disrupted by Abel's violent demise; on the contrary, it pushes the system further out of equilibrium, so that over several generations the imbalance continues to increase exponentially – if the seventy-seven-fold restitution that Lamech promises in Gen. 4:23–24 to his would-be killers is any indication. Even if the "life for a life" principle does not necessarily require capital punishment for murder but rather allows ransom or restitution (this is how the rabbinic tradition interprets Exodus 21:23–25 and Leviticus 24:19–21; see, e.g., *b. B. Qam*. 83b), God still does not follow it in Gen. 4:1–16 because Cain is never required to pay.[131]

This may be seen at first blush as a manifestation of divine grace, but a closer look reveals that the situation is much more ambiguous if not downright sinister. As Žižek says, "there is . . . something liberating in being properly punished for one's crime: I paid my debt to society and I am free again, no past burden attached."[132] *Lex talionis* gives the criminal an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and rejoin the community; conversely, the victim or the victim's family can forgo further vengeance. By neither requiring Cain to pay – in any sense of the word – for the murder he committed nor fully pardoning him, God keeps him in suspense. His life is spared but he remains in a precarious position, inexorably haunted for what he has done.

Cain's mark then serves as a constant reminder to him that due to a merciful divine act he is forever indebted to God, and forever guilty. Kafka runs into this paradox when he notices that his father's grace is the source of his permanent sense of guilt: "Something else . . . grew out of these many occasions where, in your clearly expressed opinion, I deserved a thrashing but was spared by your mercy – again, the intense feeling of guilt. From every side, I was in your debt."[133] In both cases, the father/sovereign figure increases its authority and power over the son by maintaining an ambiguous relation with him. This figure, whose modus operandi is somewhat reminiscent of the Freudian superego, demands absolute protection for Cain, but his demand also means the complete rejection of Cain. God decides not to hold Cain accountable for his crime, and Cain remains in God's perpetual debt. In other words, at the very moment that God exudes mercy, God also exudes rejection. In Agambenian terms, this means that when the sovereign deity shows Cain the path to *bios* (the ideal humanity that lives in the Augustinian city of God) it also pulls him back into *zoê*.[134]

By making it impossible for Cain to recompense with his life the murder he committed establishes him beyond all doubt as valueless – in other words, as bare life in the state of exception. In the Agambenian framework, the mark is a symbol of Cain's condition as an equivalent of *homo sacer*. It represents his double status as protected and outcast, accursed and sacred at the same time. Cain

is excommunicated from God's presence, which implies both that he is not of God and that God is not responsible for what he did to his brother. Moreover, since Cain is not made to pay for Abel's murder, be that with his life or by offering a ransom, the life of the latter is likewise exposed as valueless. As Ellen van Wolde insightfully notes, Abel's very name, whose implications are rarely discussed by the exegetes, points in this direction: the consonantal sequence הבל can be understood as "futility" or "evanescence" (this is how it is usually translated in Ecclesiastes where it functions as a refrain of sorts).[135] Vis-à-vis the deity who is a sovereign and a father, both the perpetrator and the victim are nothing but bare life. I will return to the implications of this problematic relationship in the last chapter.

Notes

1 For example, Richard Nelson notes that "we must also think of God as a character in this story" because "God triggers the problem that Cain faces by valuing the two sacrifices differently." In *From Eden to Babel: An Adventure in Bible Study* (St. Louis: Chalice; 2006), 76. However, Nelson does not follow through with this insight about divine freedom to understand God's behavior in the story. Not only is the deity on trial, what is more important in the analysis is that the political approach to the biblical story connects with socio-political realities of the twenty-first century.
2 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 68.
3 Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters? The Legacy of Historical-Critical Discourse," in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (eds. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 11.
4 For example, in Ilana Pardes, "Beyond Genesis 3: The Politics of Maternal Naming," in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 173–93, the focus of investigation is Gen. 4:1 and the implications of Eve as the subject naming her sons. The second edition of the same book, Athalya Brenner, ed., *Genesis: The Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), does not address Gen. 4. In Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2008), 21, the mark of Cain is interpreted as a sign of compassion toward the fallible humans thus reinforcing the figure of a "compassionate sovereign" who, for this very reason, is not to be challenged. Finally, Gen. 4 is not present in Athalya Brenner, Chichang Li, and Gale A. Yee, eds., *Genesis* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). *The Women's Bible Commentary* in its three editions consistently passes over Gen. 4, addressing the creation stories in chapters 1–3 and jumping directly to Noah's narrative in chapter 6.
5 The inadequacy of historical-critical approaches in the study of the scripture refers to its raising suspicion and failure by the assumption of hermeneutical positivism, absolute knowledge that most characteristically means agreement of all those permitted in the room. The tension in academic circles where methodological discussions take place is clearly between old-line historical criticism, which distances the text from the interpreter and the emerging criticisms (sociological, literary, feminist, postcolonial, and queer).
6 Benedict Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* (trans. Martin Yafee; Newburyport: Focus, 2004), xxi.
7 J. Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.
8 For an example of this critique, see Steven Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 146.

9 Spinoza, *Treatise*, xvii-xviii.
10 Ibid., xx.
11 Ibid., 83.
12 Ibid., xxi.
13 Ibid., xx, 31–42.
14 Ibid., xx.
15 Preus, *Biblical Authority*, 4.
16 Lewis Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984), 69–70.
17 Jay Harris, *How Do We Know This? Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 130.
18 In particular, Julius Wellhausen, whose Documentary Hypothesis reigned supreme in the field for more than a century and retains some of its influence even today, despite reservations expressed by some scholars (e.g., Serge Frolov, "The Death of Moses and the Fate of Source Criticism," *JBL* 133 (2014): 648–60), identified the Cain and Abel story as a combination of J and E sources (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (trans. John Sutherland Black and Alan Menzies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 308).
19 Yet, was it really possible to avoid or eliminate the political element? Anybody using language cannot avoid politics. Augustine tries to avoid politics using an ethical community. But he does not escape it because the people who believe they already belong to the city of God have inside them *zôe*. In other words, inside ethics appears again the political. In the obsession to establish the ethical ideal resides the constant presence of the political.
20 Susanne Scholz, "'Tandoori Reindeer' and the Limitations of Historical Criticism," in *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (eds. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 52.
21 Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza pointed out that "since 1947 no [SBL] presidential address has explicitly reflected on world politics, global crises, human sufferings, or movements for change . . . Biblical studies appears to have progressed in a political vacuum" ("The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 107 (1998): 9).
22 Since the nineteenth century, biblical criticism and its emphasis on historical-critical approaches have symbolized the success of the modern scientific worldview. One should recognize that historical criticism made the reading of the Bible acceptable for the academy. However, many scholars in this tradition still remain reticent concerning the powerful challenges to objectivity and value-neutrality in this tradition of scholarship or choose to ignore them.
23 Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 20.
24 signifyingscriptures.org/signify/about/
25 Recent political readings and analyses of the Bible include Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*; Sherwood, *The God of Abraham*; Sherwood, "Bush's Bible as a Liberal Bible (Strange Though That May Seem)," *Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 2 (1): 47–58; Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-century Revolution* (London: Penguin Press, 1993); Uday Singh Mehta, *The Anxiety of Freedom: Imagination and Individuality in Locke's Political Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).
26 Mieke Bal, *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 81; Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 14.
27 The two frameworks are not as incompatible as it may seem. Even the original title of Spinoza's work suggests as much: with the Greek terms that underlie Latin words understood literally, "theologico-politicus" can be roughly construed as "the word (*logos*) of God (*theos*) about the city (*polis*)" or even "the story (*logos*) of God concerning the city."

28 Youjin Chung, "Conflicting Readings in the Narrative of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1–26)," *AJPS* 14 (2011): 241–54.
29 From a syntactical point of view, the question arises whether or not verse 1 is connected to the preceding narrative. The absence of a *waw consecutive* construction and the word order in which the subject precedes the verb may point to a new story that emphasizes the man who knows Eve. However, Wenham notes that structurally, thematically, and verbally, Gen. 4 is connected with Gen. 2–3. See *Genesis 1–15*, 1–15, 98–100.
30 The incomplete list of possible transgressions in these chapters includes insubordination (the eating of the forbidden fruit), recrimination (Adam blaming Eve and God for the Fall), struggle, betrayal, inappropriate offering, sibling rivalry, and deadly enmity between different ways of life (farmers and shepherds). Cynthia Edenburg, "From Eden to Babylon: Reading Genesis 2–4 as a Paradigmatic Narrative," in *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneateuch? Identifying Literary Works in Genesis Through Kings* (eds. Thomas B. Dozeman, Thomas Römer, and Konrad Schmid; Ancient Israel and Its Literature 8; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 155–67, interprets Gen. 3 and 4 as demonstrating, respectively, that violations of both divine decrees and common social norms result in banishment and thereby provide a clue for the entire Enneateuchal account that ends with Israel's exile from its land as a punishment for offences of both kinds.
31 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. John H. Marks; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 103.
32 Theodore Anthony. Perry, "Cain's Sin in Gen. 4:1–7: Oracular Ambiguity and How to Avoid It," *Prooftexts* 25 (2005): 259. Martin Luther had a similar impression. He comments that Eve intentionally calls her son a *man*, not a *son* because Eve posits Cain as the one who brings to an end the misery of sin. In other words, Cain is the fulfillment of God's promise in Gen. 3:15. In the same way, Abraham erroneously believes that Ishmael is the seed of God's promise. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis* (trans. J. Theodore Mueller; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 1: 91.
33 Another biblical instance in which the metaphor of creation is an expression of divine activity is Proverbs 8:22, which begins "Yhwh created me" (יהוה קנני). The root חיל ("be in labor, tremble") in verses 24–25 illustrates the tight relationship between birthing and the creative processes. See, Paul Humbert, *Opuscule d'un hébraïsant* (Neuchâtel: Université de Neuchâtel, 1958), 166–74; Bruce Vawter, "Prov 8:22: Wisdom and Creation," *JBL* 99 (1980): 205–16. Psalms 139:13 conveys a similar view when God creates (קנה) the innermost parts of the psalmist within "the womb of my mother."
34 Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 201. Other scholars have turned to ANE parallels to find possible connections with the biblical account. For example, John Skinner finds in the Babylonian account of Aruru, who creates the seed of humankind "together with" Marduk, an example of a mother goddess who likely parallels Eve and represents not "a mortal wife and mother, but a creative deity taking part with the supreme god in the production of man." See, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1994), 102–3. Isaac Kikawada turns to the Athrahasis epic where the goddess Mami is commanded by Enlil to create humankind. See "Two Notes on Eve," *JBL* 91 (1972): 325.
35 Andre LaCocque, *Onslaught Against Innocence*, 47.
36 This is what Augustine does when he reads Gen. 4:1–16. But in the case of Eve, for LaCocque, she cannot both have agency and speak for herself.
37 LaCocque, *Onslaught Against Innocence*, 50–51.
38 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
39 Quoted in Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 7.
40 John H. Sailhamer, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis-Numbers* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2: 61.
41 Ibid., 2: 104.
42 Ibid., 1: 97.
43 Pardes, "Beyond Genesis 3," 181.

44 Eve's words may also deliberately echo the triumphant cry of Gen. 2:23, where Adam celebrates the making of the woman out of his own bones.
45 Pardes, "Beyond Genesis 3," 187.
46 Ibid.
47 Miguel de la Torre, *Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 93–9, makes a similar suggestion about Eve. He asserts that the dysfunctionality of the primeval family is probably rooted in Eve's favoritism for her firstborn or God's favoritism of her second-born. However, De la Torre fails to build upon this important insight. Noticing that God, who plays favorites, can be seen as capricious, he draws from the New Testament to say that the issue is that of faith. Again, the figure of the father/sovereign is never questioned, even though De la Torre asserts that he is giving epistemological preference to the readings that elevate the disenfranchised and dispossessed. He recognizes the troubling portrayal of God as a trickster who creates conditions for injustice, but ultimately falls back on the notion of divine mystery that is shared by a number of modern interpreters.
48 Susan Niditch, "Genesis," in *Women's Bible Commentary: Third Edition* (eds. Carol A. Newson, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 31.
49 Pardes, "Beyond Genesis 3," 187 (emphasis mine).
50 Ibid. What Pardes describes as destruction and reconciliation resembles the cycle of violence typical of domestic abuse, especially of women: see Lundy Brancroft, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002), 109–170.
51 Pardes, "Beyond Genesis 3," 187.
52 Victims of violent crime, especially women (e.g., in the cases of rape or domestic violence) are often explicitly or implicitly believed to deserve the fate that befell them because the fact of the victimization undermines their respectability and moral worth; thus the shame of humiliation and degradation adheres to the victim rather than the perpetrator. Concerns about blaming the victim play a major formative role in theological interpretations of the Holocaust; they are the main, if debatable, reason, why divine punishment is usually discounted as a possibility: see, e.g., Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (ed. Eva Fleischne; New York: Cathedral of St. John the Divine, 1974), 25–6. The issue keeps emerging when divine wrath becomes an explanation for natural disasters – for example, when it is alleged that Hurricane Katrina specifically targeted New Orleans, the "sinful city."
53 See Foucault analysis on power in *Society Must Be Defended*, especially the lecture delivered on January 14, 1976.
54 This is the same situation with Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (eds.), *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008). The commentary promises to integrate women's experiences and history, to bring new insights to the Torah, and to offer a way into Torah study for women who previously felt excluded or marginalized. However, in the commentary's interpretation of Gen. 4:1–16 the commitment to historical criticism hinders what it seeks to do. Although the commentary focuses on women in the Torah and on texts particularly relevant to women's lives, the story of Cain and Abel does not receive a critical analysis from a feminist Jewish perspective.
55 Vander Stichele and Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters?," 11.
56 Dianne Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), 22.
57 Ibid.
58 Not to mention that the parallel with David appears strained: unlike Abel, he survives and succeeds in his quest to the throne, and, far from trying to kill him, the "elder brother" Jonathan repeatedly gives him succor (1 Sam. 19:1–7; 20:1–42; 23:16–18). A better fit would be the story of succession to David in 2 Samuel 13–20 and 1 Kings 1–2 where the eldest sons eliminate each other in fratricidal struggle, creating an opening for Solomon, who was born much later.

59 Herman Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark Biddle; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 43. Cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. J. McHugh; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965), 13–14.

60 Also, if Abel was breeding sheep and goats for food and not just wool (which appears likely given that he offers meat as his sacrifice), he violated God's decree in Gen. 1:29 that humans should eat only plants. Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 105–10, argues that God's preference of Abel's sacrifice signifies acceptance of his initiative in taking up shepherding despite the lack of divine pre-approval.

61 Sidney. Breitbart, "The Cain and Abel Narrative: Its Problems and Lessons," *JBQ* 32 (2004): 122–4; cf. Frank Anthony Spina, "The Ground for Cain's Rejection (Gen. 4): 'Adamah' in the Context of Gen. 1–11," *ZAW* 104 (1992): 319–32, which contests Breitbart's idea and asserts that Cain's offering was rejected because of its association with the earth, using the same idea of the curse on the land as the reason for the rejection of the offering. See also Gary Herion, "Why God Rejected Cain's Offering: The Obvious Answer," in *Fortunate the Eyes That See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman* (eds. Astrid Neck, Paul Rabe, and Christ Franke; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 52–65.

62 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 104.

63 Gunkel, *Genesis*, 43 asserts that there was no inferiority in the offering of Cain: like Abel, he sacrificed the best that his farming activity could produce. מנחה is used in cultic contexts to describe a vegetable or meat offering, or in a non-cultic context to denote a gift or tribute. See, *ThWAT*, 4:988–97. See also George Buchanan. Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Its Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), 13–20; Norman Henry Snaith, "Sacrifices in the Old Testament," *VT* 7 (1957): 308–17; Rolf Rendtorff, *Studien zur Geschichte des Opfers im Altern Israel* (WMANT 24; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976), 169–98.

64 Gen. 32:14, 19, 21; 33:10; 43:11, 15, 25.

65 Contrary to Gunkel and von Rad, the Hebrew text does not make any distinction between a regulated and prescribe cultic offering upon an altar and a gift to honor God expecting something in return.

66 Skinner, *Commentary on Genesis*, 105–6.

67 Philo, *QAG*, 1.59 (Marcus, LCL).

68 Samuel Rolles Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1916), 64.

69 Driver, *Genesis*, 65. He does not address the important question of who causes the envy. This is an example of how some contemporary readers cannot see beyond the fraternal relationship to include the character of the deity in the analysis and interpretation of the biblical narrative.

70 Kenneth M. Craig Jr., "Questions Outside Eden (Genesis 4:1–16): Yahweh, Cain, and Their Rhetorical Interchange," *JSOT* 86 (1999): 111.

71 Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 205 (emphasis mine).

72 On this view, see Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 295. Besides Cassuto's emphasis on the religious context in which Cain and Abel make the offerings, von Rad also emphasizes the idea that apart from the lack of religious duty in Cain, the problem was the presence of two altars and the subsequent division between two acts of religious practices (*Genesis*, 104).

73 They may sense the bare lives in themselves. Life is precarious as it is, and the brothers seek to please the sovereign in order to receive the means of subsistence.

74 Jacques Derrida maintains that gift is an impossibility because in order to be genuine it must involve neither the apprehension of a good deed done, nor the recognition by the other party that they have received it. However, at the same time, Derrida recognizes that the existential force of the demand for a gift makes it possible. The elusive nature of the notion means that gift can never be fulfilled, though people seek genuine giving and actually "give," in *The Gift of Death* (trans. David Wills; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); *Given Time* (trans. Peggy Kamuf; Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1992). See also Gerard van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (trans. John Evan Turner (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 2: 351.

75 Mosala's methodology is similar to Foucault's analysis of power and racism. Foucault develops a genealogy of racism in order to determine the contours of knowledge in local contexts and the ways in which such knowledge constitutes the foundation for struggle against the tyranny of globalizing discourses. See *Society Must Be Defended*.

76 Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 35.

77 See Daniel Patte et al., eds., *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).

78 Since Mosala never explains *why*, in the minds of the story's author and its listeners or readers, God would dislike the farmers' offerings, here we are back to square one – or, rather, to the interpretations of Gunkel, von Rad, and Skinner.

79 Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 296.

80 Nelson, *From Eden to Babel*, 74; Karl Rahner, "Mystery," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (ed. Karl Rahner; New York: Seabury, 1975), 1002; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 56; Katharina Heyden, "Die Sünde Kains: Exegetische Beobachtungen zu Gen. 4:1–16," *BN* 118 (2003): 85–109; Joel Kamisky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 21–3.

81 Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 2.

82 Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (trans. Herbert Bouman; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 17. Writing in post-World War I Germany and pursuing the idea that humanity as a consequence of this war stands in a perpetual state of crisis before God, he was the first one to see the theology of the cross as the decisive element in all of Luther's theology. This is one of the characteristics of von Loewenich's analysis of Luther's theology that set his work apart from prior interpreters: see Philip Ruge-Jones, *Cross in Tensions: Luther's Theology of the Cross as Theologico-Social Critique* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 1.

83 Yet, in his *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther falls back on the ancient idea that the problem with Cain's offering is his defective character: "The work pleases because of the person, not the person because of his work," Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), 257. Luther follows Philo in arguing that Cain's problem is his lack of faith; he was an atheist: "Cain's offering did not please because the unbelieving Cain did not please" (ibid., 259).

84 Von Loewenich, *Theology of the Cross*, 35.

85 Rahner, "Mystery," 1000. Christian interpretations of the crucifixion were revolutionized in the mid-to late twentieth century by Jürgen Moltmann, who claimed that the Christian god did not stand outside of the event of the cross but, rather, experienced it. This is one of the theological responses to the Holocaust, trying to account for the violence and atrocities of the last century. Womanist and feminist theologians have also countered traditional theologies of the cross arguing that they glorify suffering and establish a sacred validation for the perpetuation of oppressive systems for persons and communities on the margins. See Jennifer Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009); Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000); and Cynthia Hess, *Sites of Violence, Sites of Grace: Christian Nonviolence and the Traumatic Self* (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2009).

86 Is the basic precariousness of this condition what makes Cain and Abel offer sacrifices in the first place, without God prompting them to do so?

87 This brings to mind Franz Kafka's short story "Before the Law." Its protagonist, the "countryman," spends all his life before the gatekeeper of the entry to the law. He gives

everything, no matter how valuable, in order to gain access; however, by the end of the story and his life, he is still at the threshold.

88 The use of the terms "freedom" and "mystery" (or "inscrutability") is noteworthy in this respect. Deliberately or unconsciously, they produce the impression that those who question divine behavior in Gen. 4:1–16 and elsewhere in the Bible seek to deprive God of what we today consider fundamental, inalienable rights to liberty and privacy. Yet, the power differential looms large here: absolute freedom of the one who calls all the shots (for example, a totalitarian dictator like Hitler, Stalin, or Mao) means absolute lack of freedom for everyone else, and absolute inscrutability of such a figure means absolute uncertainty and vulnerability for everyone else – which is precisely what such dictators seek.

89 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 85.

90 Sean J. MacGrath, "The Facticity of Being God-Forsaken: The Young Heidegger and Luther's Theology of the Cross," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (2005): 273–90, maintains that Martin Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity implicitly assent to the Lutheran concept of God-forsakenness. Yet, to be God-forsaken is not to be ignorant of God; it is to be abandoned by God, to have a history of dealing with God that has resulted in a decisive rupture and distancing.

91 Perry, "Cain's Sin," 262.

92 Ibid., 261.

93 For a similar view on the idea of rejection and preference, see Luis Alonso Schökel, *¿Donde está tu hermano? Textos de Fraternidad en el Libro de Génesis* (Valencia: Verbo Divino, 1990), 29–31; Nelson, *From Eden to Babel*, 75. For Nelson, God's rejection of Cain's offering communicates to Cain that he must accept the reality of his place in life. In the social hierarchy of the brothers' community, Cain's activity as a farmer would never result in the fatty abundance that Abel enjoys and the concomitant divine regard. Thus, Cain must come to terms with it. This is similar to the platonic social hierarchy that Rancière critiques as an element of the ethical community: Cain should remain in his "proper" place and accept that his offering is inferior to that of Abel. This is certainly similar to the ideological discourse that throughout history has maintained people under slavery, oppression, and constant violence, especially when they did not accede to the "proper" place assigned to them by those in power.

94 Perry, "Cain's Sin," 267.

95 Ibid., 268.

96 Ibid., 270.

97 This statement may sound like an illegitimate generalization given that human sacrifice, especially that of firstborn sons, was widespread in a variety of cultures of the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean: see, e.g., John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (JSOTSup 43; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985). Yet, the bare fact of the practice's existence should not be taken as an indication that the parents of the sacrificed boys offered them happily and cheerfully. It is at the very least just as possible that the rite was seen as terrible if unavoidable price to be paid in order to propitiate a cruel deity.

98 The question is, why the need for testing Abraham? If the deity is omniscient, as believed by Christians, Jews, and Muslims, the deity knows what Abraham would do. Thus, the testing is sadistic in its motivation. Abraham's suffering is what concerns Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Tembling*. We will return to this idea in the next chapter.

99 Perry modifies the Masoretic punctuation of Gen. 4:4–5 in order to read: "And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering and for Cain as well, but He had no regard for his *offering*." To him, this is what Cain does not understand: God's rejection of his offering does not mean his rejection as an individual. This is a legitimate innovation, yet it still does not obviate the fact that Yhwh, for reasons unknown, preferred Abel's sacrifice to Cain's. Plus, since whatever the deity does in these verses responds strictly to the sacrifices, how was Cain supposed to know that the regard for him is unchanged? And why does the deity fail to explain as much when in verses 6–7 it addresses Cain directly and verbally?

100 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 87–90.
101 As Chung asserts, this issue originates in the ambiguity of the Hebrew word עון ("Conflicting Readings," 248).
102 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 107.
103 Cassuto's hermeneutical preference is what Kugel calls "moral interpretation" by James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, who asserts that this is not what Cain is saying but does not provide a reason to reject Cassuto's reading. Moreover, he quotes ancient interpretations that find in the phrase an opportunity to preach the virtue of repentance.
104 Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 222.
105 Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 109. He does not seem to contemplate the possibility of Cain committing suicide. If he did, would God be so harsh as to revive him for further suffering?
106 Chung, "Conflicting Readings," 249.
107 Ibid.
108 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 107.
109 Ibid.
110 On the meaning and implications of valueless life, see the next section of the study.
111 For an overview of different readings of the mark, see Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 312–15.
112 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 107.
113 Gunkel, *Genesis*, 47.
114 Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 109.
115 Eskenazi and Weiss, *A Women's Commentary*, 21.
116 Katharina von Kellenbach, *The Mark of Cain: Guilt and Denial in the Post-War Lives of Nazi Perpetrators* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.
117 Ibid., 12.
118 Ibid.
119 Here von Kellenbach approaches the midrashic interpretation of *Genesis Rabbah* that sees Cain's question, "I *am* my brother's keeper?" as one of confusion or bewilderment. In her case, as a consequence of Cain's underdeveloped identity.
120 Ibid., 13.
121 Ibid.
122 A central question in Jewish theology post-Holocaust is "Can we speak about God after Christendom and the Holocaust?" George Steiner, a Jewish scholar, addressed the issue of the Jews' experience of the eschatological end of history and of humanity asking what remains of the Jewish vocation of being the chosen people of God and in what direction should it proceed? The question becomes more relevant as the Jewish community in the modern state of Israel itself commits atrocities against the Palestinians in the name of its own survival. According to Marc Ellis, another Jewish scholar, the question is whether it is possible to speak of God in light of suffering that Jews have endured and suffering that Jews have caused. See, *Unholy Alliance: Religion and Atrocity in Our Time* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), xi, xii, 15.
123 Agamben sees the concentration camp as a paradigm of politicization of life (*Homo Sacer*, 119–80).
124 Von Kellenbach, *The Mark of Cain*, 13.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid., 226.
127 Von Rad, *Genesis*, 107.
128 Ibid., 108.
129 Kugel, "Cain and Abel," 167–90, especially pp. 169–70.
130 Ibid., 170.
131 In Numbers 35:31, accepting ransom is prohibited in the case of murder but as noted by Joe M. Sprinkle, "The Interpretation of Exodus 21:22–25 (*Lex Talionis*) and Abortion," *WTJ* 55 (1993): 233–53, this is an exception that confirms the rule: "The

availability of ransom seems to have been so prevalent that when biblical law wants to exclude it, as in the case of intentional murder, it must specifically prohibit it (Num. 35:31)."

132 Žižek, *Violence*, 190.

133 Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father* (trans. Hannah and Richard Stokes; Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2008), 40.

134 Cf. Žižek, *Violence*, 191.

135 Ellen Van Wolde, *Stories of the Beginning: Genesis 1–11 and Other Creation Stories* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 78.

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3 Cain speaks back to Augustine

A critical reading from Byron to Vallejo

What
Wouldst thou with me?

(Byron, *Cain*, 3, 1, 497–98)[1]

The ancient interpretations of Gen. 4:1–16 reviewed in the first chapter of this book can be classified as tropological and typological.[2] The latter approach, of which Augustine is an outstanding example, is based on the historical and theological concept that Cain represents a group of people, in Augustine's case the outcast Jews.[3] Augustine's extensive typological reading of Gen. 4:1–16 serves as the foundation for his theology of Jews and Judaism.[4] The tropological reading, best exemplified by Philo, which dominated both Jewish and Christian tradition prior to Augustine, "placed the accent on the salutary or moral lessons that one could cull from the story of the primordial brothers."[5] In other words, it served to define moral excellence and cultivate virtue.[6] This reading views Abel and Cain as paradigms, respectively, of moral virtue to be emulated and moral depravity to be avoided; it assesses the brothers primarily in terms of their allegiance to God.

One major aspect shared by both tropological and typological approaches is their dualistic nature: they present evil and goodness, piety and impiety, in general or as embodied by specific communities, as binary opposites. Another common feature, especially important for our purposes here, is the assumption or assertion that God is a sovereign of the Agambenian type – although it would appear that tropological interpretations tend to assume the deity's righteousness whereas typological ones assert its prerogative to act the way it pleases. As shown in Chapter 2, modern biblical scholarship has not made a clean break with these trends, in part due to the abiding influence of the theological traditions going back to antiquity and in part because the historical-critical paradigm pioneered by Spinoza made it difficult for modern exegetes to read the Bible in political terms. In this situation, it fell to artists, some of them definitely unfamiliar with academic biblical scholarship because in their lifetime it was still in its infancy, to pioneer radically new takes on Gen. 4:1–16. This chapter analyzes four such texts by three different authors, one of whom wrote in English and two in Spanish.

I begin by introducing George Gordon Byron's *Cain: A Mystery* in order to determine the literary characteristics of this dramatic poem, paying special

attention to the literary genre of "mysteries" in medieval times and pondering why Lord Byron characterizes his poem as one. Second, I will underline the connections between Augustine's *City of God* and Byron's poem in order to introduce the literary work in relation to the issues that have been analyzed in previous chapters and to demonstrate that the ethical implications of Gen. 4:1–16 teased out by *Cain* are relevant to secular and religious contexts. Third, I will read the poem and offer a commentary in order to develop and evaluate the connections mentioned before. This reading will give me an opportunity to underscore and examine the deep questions the poem raises about the conditions of existence that both ancient and modern readers tend to ignore, mention only in passing, or chalk up to divine "freedom" or "inscrutability." In this way, Agamben's concepts will be the theoretical framework for the study. Finally, I will bring into the discussion César Vallejos's "Los dados eternos" ("The Eternal Dice") and "Voy a hablar de la esperanza" ("I Am Going to Speak About Hope") as well as Jorge Luis Borges's "Juan López y John Ward" ("Juan López and John Ward"), placing them in conversation with Byron's *Cain* in order to examine a sampling of twentieth-century writers who deal with issues related to those raised in Byron's poem. In particular, they take up where Byron left off the theme of guilt and responsibility, prominent in *Cain*. I chose these writers for several related reasons. César Vallejo's poem reverses the roles of the judge and the judged; in it, the poetic "I" speaks to the divine, complaining about the conditions of existence and challenging God about them. Borges shows how in different contexts and times brothers keep killing brothers. His Cain prompts us to explore further the definition and reality of fraternity.

What is *Cain*?

Published by Byron in 1821, *Cain: A Mystery* offers a poetic dramatization of the biblical narrative roughly within the confines of Gen. 4:1–16. Decidedly non-Christian, it nevertheless offers what can be described as a tropological reading of the Bible; what clearly sets it apart from other such readings is that it assesses both the brothers *and* God. This is perhaps the reason why in the religious and socio-political context of Byron's time – the early nineteenth century – his drama was seen as a polemic "against the culture of censorship. . . [and] the interpretive hegemony of the established church."[7]

In literary terms, *Cain* is related to the gender of medieval mysteries. In the preface, Byron says that it follows "the ancient titles annexed to dramas upon similar subjects, which were styled 'Mysteries or Moralities'" (Preface, 3). The most signal aspect of medieval mysteries, to which Byron refers, was "their tone of frivolous jocularity, which occasionally degenerated into 'obscenities.'"[8] For an eighteenth-century Protestant author, the mysteries were "being represented in so stupid and ridiculous a manner that the stories of the New Testament in particular were thought to encourage Libertinism and Infidelity."[9] Yet, the mysteries were also deeply concerned with religious matters, so that during the medieval period different groups used them to promote their theological agendas. During the Reformation, "it was . . . common for the partisans of the old doctrines (and perhaps also of the new) to defend and illustrate their tenets this way."[10] Therefore, the

very notion of a mystery play would invoke the ideas of immorality, profanity, comic bad taste – and theological controversy. On top of all that, in medieval times mysteries were the principal means of conveying to the public (which was predominantly illiterate, especially in Latin) rudimentary knowledge of key stories in the Bible.[11] In most respects, Byron's *Cain* bears no "resemblance to those which it claims as its prototypes. These last, however absurd and indecorous . . . were, at least, intended reverently."[12] Byron does not include any bawdy or even mildly humorous elements in his poem, but neither is he even remotely reverent towards the biblical narrative. In Byron's rewriting, *Cain* inverts the frame of reference in such a way that the titular character becomes the moral center: he is driven by curiosity and intellectual doubt, not by lust, power, ambition, or even destructive envy.[13] At the same time, Abel's moral wholeness celebrated by traditional interpretations becomes spiritual passivity.

As we read Byron's poem, it is important to emphasize its dramatic nature. It unfolds in three acts, mostly through dialogue and monologue. This is significant because as a play *Cain* invites audiences not only to read but also to participate by engaging in their own questioning and critical thinking; ancient Greek theater, which was pivotal for civic education in democratic city-states, intended to stir the audience's consciousness. The most important way the poem invites reflection is through the imagery of journey. Act Two is entirely devoted to Lucifer and Cain flying together through outer space. Here the symbolism of traveling, closely linked to exploration, discovery, and pursuit of knowledge, helps explain Cain's journey in search of spiritual maturity, which mirrors Dante's trip through hell, purgatory, and paradise in the *Divine Comedy*. The latter recounts the narrator's progress towards a harmonious world (the Paradise) whereas the former depicts Cain's as well as the reader's entry into the human world of death, murder, and conflict. Yet both are journeys of self-discovery that convey the idea of change and potentially of liberation, perhaps even hope, because Cain's daily environment limits his capacities to think clearly. The travel is then Cain's, as well as the reader's, chance to break out of what is constraining them and to see other worlds. It also showcases Cain's intent to escape from himself fueled by the desire for knowledge and wholeness.[14] The journey trope is thus both what initiates Cain into the mystery of knowledge, differentiation, and unity and what transforms him. When Cain kills Abel, he regrets that Abel does not have an heir, who might sometime in the future bring the two lines together:

> I
> Have dried the fountain of a gentle race,
> Which might have graced his recent marriage couch
> And might have tempered this stern blood of mine,
> Uniting with our children Abel's offspring. (3, 1, 556–60)

This is the only time that Cain displays the slightest sign of transcending himself, of moving towards differentiation. Yet he accomplishes neither, and so these poetic lines describe a vision that Cain himself does not experience or realize. As Quinones notes, it is in this sense that "the play is properly subtitled a mystery": it is a tragedy based on a sacred text envisioning a future resolution that Cain

cannot fulfill.[15] There is no atonement for Cain in the drama; the implication is that when it is over, Cain continues to live with a deep sense of guilt and responsibility, which is precisely the source of his expiation. To quote Quinones, "in full romantic fashion, his expiation might lie here in this stern adherence to a sense of division that is practically unalleviated."[16] With this in mind, I will explore connections between Augustine and Byron before examining Byron's poem.

Augustine and Byron: similarities in the differences

Byron's Romantic re-envisioning of Gen. 4:1–16 in *Cain* targets the trends in the text's ancient interpretations and manifests the intention to go beyond their moral and religious dichotomy. He still uses images and concepts that Christian theology has traditionally applied to God and Abel, especially the Christian notions of God's goodness and justice long held as presuppositions for the reading of the scripture. Augustine is a classic example of the interpreter who strives to understand the Bible in a way that is "pious and worthy of God."[17] Yet, in *The City of God*, he inadvertently subverts his own claim by pointing out that "[a] more detailed consideration of this subject would engender a great number and variety of discussions, which could not be elaborated without filling more volumes than my time allows or this project demands" (XV, 1, 411). Byron's Cain is one of those whom Augustine dismisses as "men who have leisure and hanker for precision. Their readiness to raise questions exceeds the capacity of their minds to understand the answers" (XV, 1, 411). Instead of accepting censorship and thus reinforcing ideological hegemony, the poem asserts its right to interpret Gen. 4:1–16 as it sees fit and to make its own contribution to the interpretive debate. In Byron's case, the issue of allegiance to God is subverted under a critical view about the circumstances of existence after the expulsion from Paradise. His poem repeatedly challenges divine justice by interrogating the conditions of the life of Adam and Eve's family once they settled down outside of Eden. In contrast to interpretations that simply fall in line with established scholarly understandings of the text, *Cain* contests the nature of the world and proposes that its titular character is motivated by humanitarian concerns, not driven by hunger for power, ambition, or envy.

In *The City of God,* Augustine asserts that Abel, as a pilgrim and stranger in the world, is capable of making progress and that "he will later be good and spiritual" (XV, 1, 413). Augustine insists that the rebirth into Christ, who is a paradigmatic character of virtue in the Christian tradition, prompts and enables an individual's journey to goodness. This path of spiritual awakening and progress is also very important in Byron's Cain. Yet, there are some differences. As we shall see later, for Byron, Cain is a spiritual being and Abel is not because only the former is capable of asking questions and inquiring about the conditions of life. The distinctive spirituality that Byron promotes assumes that the experience of rebirth will entail a journey of existential exploration and critical self-reflection. In this way, *Cain* maintains the idea of spiritual progress that is held so dear in the Christian tradition but unlike it he deals with the ideas of death and suffering as inescapable conditions of existence. The poem invites the reader to recognize the reality of suffering and the possibility of human solidarity with Cain at every turn. Its

didactic vision can be compared with a parable of existence that asks: What are the opportunities for life once we realize that it is surrounded by death?[18]

Regarding Cain and his link to the devil, Augustine opines as follows: "I speak of these branches also allegorically as two cities, that is, two societies of human beings, of which one is predestined to reign eternally with God and the other to undergo eternal punishment with the devil" (XV, 1, 413). Cain, who takes his origin "from a condemned stock" (ibid.) clearly belongs to the latter category.[19] Byron not only preserves the connection but also drastically strengthens it, making Lucifer (a figure not featured in the Bible, at least not explicitly) a major character of the drama, who closely interacts with Cain, functioning as his supernatural alter ego. Unlike the Devil that Augustine doubtless had in mind, Byron's Lucifer is also a paragon of moral virtue whereas God in the drama exemplifies moral vice. The deity, not its antagonist, is on trial as well as the communal ideal represented by Abel.

The ideal community in the *City of God*, at least in Book XV where Augustine develops his reading of Gen. 4:1–16, is one "where there exists no love of a will that is personal or, so to speak, private, but a love that rejoices in a common and unchangeable good and makes a single mind out of many, that is a completely harmonious response to the voice of Christian love" (XV, 3, 423). We have underlined earlier the similarities between the city of God described by Augustine and the ethical community analyzed and critiqued by Rancière as leading to radical exclusion and concomitant violence. In *Cain*, the primeval family initially appears to maintain cohesion based on mutual love, but after Abel is killed, the search for the total identification of the family's harmonious obedience of Christian love as the ground of freedom proves problematic. The poem brings to the fore the deep sense of despair and guilt that negatively charges the interactions between the characters, making it impossible to wholly align each member of the family with the divine rule and with themselves.

According to Augustine, it was envy of Abel's lofty status as "a citizen of the eternal city" (XV, 5, 427) that prompted Cain to murder him. Byron emphatically rejects this position and examines a deeper issue in the brothers' relationship: the connection between innocence and suffering. As we shall see later, this is what constantly troubles Cain. By presenting the conflict between the brothers as the example of the hostility between the city of men and the city of God (XV, 5, 427) Augustine ignores the third link in that relationship: the role of the father/sovereign. The focus on fraternal envy that we have noted in both ancient and modern interpretations deflects attention away from the arbitrariness of election and the character of God because brotherhood inevitably points out its debt to paternal authority. God as such authority in the sphere of the divine is already part of the fraternal relationship because this relationship does not exist without the figure of the father. *Cain* then underlines and systematically deconstructs the concepts of brotherhood and election that are so prevalent in *The City of God*.

Finally, by considerably expanding the story of Cain and Abel as told in Gen. 4:1–16, Byron's poem employs the same exegetical strategies as some of the ancient interpretive texts, such as the Targums and the midrash. These texts substantially amplify the biblical narratives mainly for the sake of filling the gaps

and "clearing up" the ambiguities; yet, as we have seen previously, in doing so they inevitably introduce new ones. By injecting new plot and new dialogue into the Cain and Abel story, Byron suggests that the Bible can be debated by being restaged. Whereas Augustine uses the brothers as archetypes of the dichotomous cities and their initial manifestation on earth, *Cain* comes to very different conclusions. By imaginatively reconstructing the life of the primeval family after its expulsion from the Paradise, the poem casts Gen. 4:1–16 as a text that is open to negotiation, and in doing so, dislocates the interpretive hegemony of the ecclesiastical authorities over this text in order to reassess it.[20]

A critical reading of *Cain: A Mystery*

The poem begins with the prayers of the primeval family. The very way in which each member addresses the deity signifies recognition of its authority and creative power. Adam uses magniloquent epithets, "God the Eternal! Infinite! All-wise!" (1, 1, 1), Eve recounts the deity's mighty deeds, "God! Who didst name the day and separate/Morning from night" (1, 1, 5–6), and Abel invokes the primary elements of nature, "Earth, ocean, air, and fire," and the beings who "enjoy them/ And love both them and thee [God]" (1, 1, 9,12–13). They act as an ideal Augustinian ethical community, one that rejoices in the good of creation and reflects the harmonious obedience of mutual affection. The content of the prayer gradually changes as each member takes a turn at praising God. From the omnipotent and transcendent being with which Adam's prayer begins, it moves to immanent images of the divine and the idea of fatherhood.

It is Adah, never mentioned in the Bible but featured as one of the daughters of Adam and Eve in the poem, who introduces the latter theme: "God the Eternal! parent of all things!" (1, 1, 14). She will be the paradigmatic character that develops this theme throughout the poem. Zillah, Adah's sister, continues the communal prayer. Her part is different because she takes up the motif of love but underlines its problematic consequences: "Oh God! who loving, making, blessing all,/Yet, didst permit the serpent to creep in, And drive my father forth from Paradise" (1, 1, 18–20). Zillah attributes to God both the good and the bad: the all-encompassing blessing and the serpent who causes the expulsion from the idyllic place. Apparently unaware of the perceptible contradiction inherent in a deity who cares for the creation but who also failed to protect her and her family from the serpent, she asks God to keep them from "*further* evil" (1, 1, 21; emphasis mine). As we shall see later, the poem attributes to the deity responsibility for the seed of the problem because God plants the tree of knowledge and creates the conditions for Adam and Eve to violate the prohibition.

Søren Kierkegaard's view of the condition of transgression in *The Concept of Dread* is helpful here. He asserts that the so-called fall of the primeval family could not have happened unless Adam and Eve had had a pre-understanding of dread – "the reality of freedom as possibility anterior to possibility," which was catalyzed by the taboo of the tree of knowledge itself.[21] Kierkegaard develops this idea by introducing the concept of desire: "When one assumes that the prohibition awakens the desire, one posits a knowledge instead of ignorance; for Adam would

have had to have a knowledge of freedom, since his desire was to use it."[22]The pure possibility of freedom is what Kierkegaard regards as the condition of dread, insisting that it was already in Adam and Eve before the expulsion.

My reading sees Zillah as the self-reflective subject. The term comes from Terry Eagleton in his analysis of Kierkegaard's work on the concept of dread. Kierkegaard says that innocence is the condition of the human being who is "soulishly determined in immediate unity with his natural condition."[23] In other words, it is a human being that is unable to differentiate itself from the environment of which it is little more than a determined reflex. Using this concept, Eagleton posits the existence of a "self-reflective subject," one who represents a break with the ignorant condition of the innocent human being. The self-reflective subject is as ignorant as that one of immediate unity; however, irony is what makes it slightly different because it "raises the subject out of its mindless communion with the world . . . but since it yields no positive alternative truth it leaves the subject giddily suspended between actual and ideal, in and out of the world simultaneously."[24] For Kierkegaard, Socrates's thought is the example of irony because the latter "is the point lying between" actuality and possibility. "Irony," says Kierkegaard, "oscillates between the ideal self and the empirical self; the one would make Socrates a philosopher, the other a Sophist."[25]

In Zillah, the self-reflective subject tries through irony to arise out of her ignorant communion with the world around her, that is, to exit the state of immediate unity. However, this state is never genuine innocence since, as Kierkegaard explains, in the state of immediate unity there is something else – the perception of nothingness, which is what begets dread.[26] It is in Zillah's prayer that irony shows up, by characterizing God as loving and blessing all, yet also being the one who permitted the serpent to point out the presence and desirability of the tree of knowledge. However, the irony in the prayer is not evident to her.

It is then Cain's turn to address God but he demurs, not because he does not want to speak but because his father, Adam, compels him to do so. We observe that the family is together at the beginning of the poem, yet they do not relate to each other in their prayers, only to the deity. From the start, then, what unites them at the same time reveals their mutual alienation. Whenever the characters address each other, it is as servants of God, not as members of the same family. Thus, Adam demands that Cain enter the circle of adoration and offer a prayer in order to be God's servant. Instead of complying, Cain questions the very need to worship – "Why should I speak? . . . I have naught to ask" (1, 1, 21–27) – and remains stubbornly silent. He certainly has many things to say, but not in a prayer to God. When Adam, trying to convince him that he should be grateful to the deity asks, "Dost thou not live?" (1, 1, 29), Cain, always inquisitive, offers a sharp rejoinder, "Must I not die?" (1, 1, 29). The irony implicit in this rhetorical question reveals Cain's distinctiveness and existential separation from his family whose other members open the poem with words of gratitude and love for the creator and the creation. Cain's queries have repercussions beyond themselves: they not only challenge Adam's worldview but also the reader's by pointing out "the whole frame of reference within which the exchange is constrained to operate. They are critical questionings of a phenomenon, as opposed to mere questions

addressed to another speaking about this phenomenon."[27] Put differently, the questions that Cain asks are potentially political assertions. However, as we shall examine later, his initial attitude of self-sufficiency eventually changes once he meets with Lucifer.

Cain's response to Adam's question points to the other major theme of the poem. Adah's prayer extols God's creative power that produces "best and beauteous beings,/To be beloved, more than all" (1, 1, 15–16). Cain, on the other hand, is aware of the reality of death and wonders about the justice in life that is destined to end. This initial dialogue between Cain and the members of his family raises two questions. First, what is the source of Cain's defiant attitude toward his father? Second and more important, why is he focused on death in such a way that he finds nothing to be thankful for in life? Cain's disobedience is what Augustine considers a defect in nature (XV, 6, 432–33) because it defies spiritual progress toward the fulfillment of the law. However, as we shall see later in the poem, it is the very law established by God that makes impossible its fulfillment.

For the primeval family, Cain's attitude is blasphemous; in Adam's words, "Oh! my son,/Blaspheme not: these are serpent's words" (1, 1, 34). However, for Cain, the association is false because he can find nothing wrong with the serpent's words: "Why not?/The snake spoke truth. It *was* the tree of knowledge;/It *was* the tree of life. Knowledge is good,/And life is good, and how can both be evil?" (1, 1, 35–38). This is the first time in the poem that Cain uses the word "evil" to question the idea that it could be applied to life and knowledge as he knows them. This raises the question: To what kind of life does Cain refer? As we continue to examine the poem, it will become clear that Cain longs for existence that makes sense, which is why he constantly questions the conditions outside of Paradise. The fact that he does not affirm goodness of life and knowledge but raises a *question* reflects the struggle between what he sees in his family and his own thoughts. Lucifer, as we shall see later, also uses queries in order to enlighten Cain about what he has been pondering since the beginning of the poem.

For Cain's mother, words are likewise sinful: "My boy, thou speakest as I spoke in sin,/Before thy birth: let me not see renewed/My misery in thine. I have repented" (1, 1, 39–40). To Eve, misery is associated with the capacity to question the quandary of her family. As someone who also once questioned the prohibition to know, she is familiar with that capacity but now she has come to repent it. Eve represents a defiant discourse against the powers that be but she forgets the mind that "made her thirst for knowledge at the risk/Of an eternal curse" (1, 1, 180). She glimpsed the possibility of freedom paradoxically catalyzed by the divine prohibition; however, according to Kierkegaard, such possibility "does not consist in being able to choose the good or the evil . . . Possibility means *I can*."[28]

This condition is what Kierkegaard refers to as a mode of negativity, which invades the sphere of immediate unity, in other words, the experience of dread in the encounter of Eve's own dream of differentiation and freedom. "The profound secret of innocence," says Kierkegaard, is "that at the same time [it] . . . is dread."[29] For him, this is not a positive state of potential but a form of ontological *angst* (anxiety).[30] The *angst* that Eve experienced when she caught a glimpse of freedom before eating from the tree of knowledge was horrible enough to make

her repent after actualizing the desire. However, she will never be able to return to the state of immediate unity or innocence. She *knows*, and such knowledge makes it impossible to go back. In Kierkegaard's words, "innocence is not a perfection one ought to wish to recover; for as soon as one wishes for it, it is lost, and it is a new guilt to waste time on wishes."[31] According to Eagleton, Eve is an example of the ethical self because she duly acknowledges her guilty past, repents of it, and emerges as a determinate and temporally consistent subject.[32] However, this is a state that needs to be ceaselessly re-enacted due to the guilt-ridden temporality in which Eve lives – thus the family's daily prayers, one of which begins the poem. In other words, she cannot regain the illusion of immediacy/innocence of the prelapsarian state, and the crisis of self-choosing is the process of transformation in which Eve acquires subjectivity.

Understandably, she hopes "not [to] see [her] offspring fall into/The snares beyond the walls of Paradise,/Which ev'n in Paradise destroyed his parents" (1, 1, 42–43). That outside the Edenic space an inquisitive mind can lead to a pitfall is obvious; however, Eve also recognizes that the traps were *already* present inside the Paradise. The locus of what she describes as "destruction" was not external; from the beginning, its seed was inherent in the divine creation, including the Garden of Eden. Like Zillah, Eve is not aware of the contradiction or irony in her thoughts about the family's predicament. Kierkegaard explains the absurd aporia, asserting that "without sin there is no sexuality, and without sexuality no history."[33] In other words, knowledge sprang from the transgression, so that the prohibition itself, in Freudian style, opens up desire. Still, Eve believes that the problem was hers and blames herself for eating from the tree of knowledge. Had she not eaten from it, "thou [Cain] now hadst been contented" (1, 1, 46). What Eve does not realize is that the source of sin is not in her; it predated her existence. As Eagleton says, "sin has no place or source, lying as it does under the sign of contradiction. To sin is to have been always able to do so."[34]

From the beginning of the poem, Cain's inquisitive mind questions the conditions of the family's existence outside of Paradise. Knowledge and life are good, yet they brought expulsion. According to Eve, the only viable way of living is repentance of knowledge and resignation. The birth of her ethical self depends on the recognition that guilt is a part of her life. Eve's acknowledgment of responsibility before the family is already conditioned by the guilt that she decides to confess, repenting and moving on. Yet, as much as Eve wants to focus her life on the family, the guilty origin of her desire is the hidden source of her responsibility. In psychoanalytic terms, this is what splits Eve's sense of ethical wholeness and sense of purpose. Her prayer to God is conditioned by the tragedy of expulsion from Paradise, and the split results in Eve being driven not only by noble purposes but also by fear of punishment by the paternal divine authority. Even though she places guilt in the past, her desires and faculties are in constant contradiction and her sense of fulfillment in living a purely ethical life is fleeting and tainted.[35] Underlying Eve's dystopian vision of wholeness in the family's social order is her love for the implacable divine law.[36] Eve's words to Cain, "Content thee with what is" (1, 1, 45), demonstrate that she wants all members of the family to align their desires with the divine rule, even as she recognizes that this rule also introduces

lack into the family's members because in the eyes of God, the subject is always guilty.

Adam interrupts the dialogue between Cain and Eve, in which he does not participate, stating that the time of prayer is over and reminding them of their duties: "Our orison completed, let us hence,/Each to his task of toil" (1, 1, 46–47). This is the kind of attitude that Eve tries to teach Cain: "Behold thy father cheerful and resigned./And do as he doth" (1, 1, 48–49). To be happy is to abstain from questioning the conditions of one's existence, that is, to relegate the politics of living to the past, to let such matters have no bearing on the present reality.[37]

Cain continues the conversation with his brother and sisters but they reiterate Eve's message. Zillah urges him to abstain from his thoughts. Abel asserts that Cain's deep sadness avails him nothing, "save to rouse/Th' eternal anger" (1, 1, 52–53). The siblings leave to begin the tasks of the day but Cain seeks to be alone before catching up with them. The ethical community does not have answers to the questions he poses. Cain thus represents the intrusion of the political into the "peaceful" life of the primeval family. While all of them have already been exiled from Paradise, Cain will be the ultimate exile because his parents and siblings will likewise expel him from their midst – or, in Agamben's terms, abandon him. Although Adam, Zillah, and Eve have hinted at the troubling condition of their existence, inside their community Cain has not been able to structure his thoughts and find a partner in the conversation. Remaining silent and not praying to God, being concerned about death, and considering knowledge a good thing is synonymous with misery.[38] The only other option Cain is given by his family is to repent and resign to being cheerful, yet to him it means not thinking, not taking reality seriously.

Dissensus is at the heart of Cain's view of his existence, which is why he needs to be alone. Cain is the interruption, or, as Rancière says, the moment of rupture in the functionalist worldview of his family with its emphasis on inclusion and political consensus that is supposed to eliminate conflict or swiftly deal with it.[39] At the beginning of the poem, Adam's invitation to Cain to pray as all members of the family have done is at the same time a warning that if he does not, he has no share in the community. In this, Byron's character echoes Augustine's exhortation (written with Gen. 4:1–16 in mind) to make spiritual progress towards the fulfillment of the law: "If a man [such as Cain] is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should instruct such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted" (XV, 6, 433). Another warning, or perhaps a premonition, can be seen in the fact that Adam does not participate in the conversation between Cain and Eve but rather calls attention to the duties of the day. Cain needs to keep his thoughts to himself lest they resonate in some other family member and the community as an economic unit loses bodies capable of the physical labor that is needed to till the ground and gather its fruits in order to survive. In other words, Adam's invitation is an illusion that conceals the governing order of the primeval family: resignation brings happiness and knowledge, misery. Cain is the only one who does not accept this reality, and hard work can change that by preoccupying his mind and leaving him no leisure to ponder the "worthless" questions. Cain is thus nudged into the position of the "undocumented" day laborer of modern

capitalist societies (or the factory worker of Byron's time) whose job demands all his time and energy so that there is no opportunity to think. In response, Cain launches into a soliloquy, through which he develops his ideas and conveys them to the reader while making it clear that he is already split between the demands of the family and those of his inquisitive mind.

This is the initial view of Cain that the poem will continue to develop. His character is the subject who exists in the irony of the discrepancy between inward reflection and the family's invitation to resignation and cohesive unity. His liminal state is marked by the ambiguity of his subjectivity that negates the world he confronts daily. Cain is not a member of the ethical community that represses conflict. He is the example of the political community that rebels against the figure of the father and recognizes his own misery.

Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, rejects any attempts to socialize individuals, such as Cain. He insists that individual alienation is only overcome at the religious stage of an absolute relation with God, represented by Abraham and his total, unquestioning obedience.[40] Cain is the paradigmatic example of someone who moves in the opposite direction. He is the subject who rejects the ethical self – the individual that fits in the system and finds a purpose for existence in the primitive social world of his or her family. Instead, Cain is the political subject who, according to Rancière, interrogates the functionalist view of the ethical community. That community, in turn, eliminates subjects who do not fit the structure. One could say that the Byronic Cain is a critique of Kierkegaard's exaltation of Abraham. Abraham is the example of the uniquely valuable individual that transcends the ethical system in order to establish an absolute relationship with God, a process known as the teleological suspension of the ethical. However, this absolute relationship comes with the reduction of Abraham to an arbitrarily interchangeable cipher because he blindly obeys a divine authority that asks him to eliminate his own conscience.

In contrast to the other members of his family, Cain begins his discourse in Byron's poem by addressing life, not God. His initial question as to why death exists is complemented by an inquiry about the purpose of work and the reason why he has to pay the consequences of his parents' mistake in Paradise: "And this is/Life. Toil! And wherefore should I toil? Because/My father could not keep his place in Eden?/What had *I* done in this? I was unborn;/I sought not to be born; nor love the state/to which that birth has brought me" (1, 1, 65–69). As Bernard Blackstone says, this speech "is a powerful presentation of the intellectual difficulties of the Mosaic-Christian theology of the Fall."[41] Cain seeks to understand the relation between life and toil as the consequence of Adam's failure. It was not Cain's but he is paying for it. The figure of the father has the primary role in Cain's questioning of the conditions of his existence. He cannot love his life, is resentful about living in such conditions, and does not understand the connection between suffering and life. The long-debated issue of innocent suffering emerges for the first time in Cain's thoughts – "Why did he/Yield to the serpent and the woman? Or/Yielding, why suffer? What was there in this?" (1, 1, 69–70) – and begins to shape his discontent. As we shall discuss later, Cain's refusal to pray and his soliloquy complicate the long-standing exegetical tradition that Cain's anger

or despondency noted in Gen. 4:5 is the result of envy caused by God's preference of Abel or his sacrifice. The poem points to something else as the source of those emotions.

Cain continues his questioning by wondering why the tempting tree of knowledge was located close to where Adam and Eve lived: "The tree was planted, and why not for him [Adam]?/If not, why place him near it, where it grew,/The fairest in the centre?" (1, 1, 73–74). Here the problem is not only that God planted the forbidden tree but also that it grew in beauty and height in front of Adam and Eve, leading to a concomitant increase of their desire. Cain is questioning the deity's justice in placing the tree in Paradise but prohibiting Adam from eating its fruit. Cain perceives the beauty of creation as not only its positive aspect, worthy of love and care, but also a trap, an instigator of human desire. This provokes his next question about the relation between power and goodness: "They have but/One answer to all questions: "'Twas *his* will,/And he is good." How know I that? Because/He is all-pow'rful, must all-good, too, follow? (1, 1, 74–77). This is what characterizes the functionalist ethical thinking of his family: first, if there is only one answer to all questions, there may not be many of those; second, if the answer is "'Twas *his* will, and he is good," the implication is that there is no room for discussion. Hardly anything exemplifies the tyranny of the ethical community more than having only one answer; that is why there is no *dissensus* in it. Yet, Cain's questioning of God's justice and fairness is the greatest dissent possible in the framework of a monotheistic religion because in essence he raises the problem of theodicy: If the deity is omnipotent and good, why do innocent people live in misery in a world that the deity created and over which it presides?

Another theme of the poem is desire. For Eagleton, it "interrogates . . . the whole classical aesthetic heritage . . . of the . . . serenely balanced subject" – such as Adah, who loves and praises creation and its maker.[42] Desire punctures Eve's illusion of the prelapsarian plenitude. The fact that she yearns for it makes it impossible to achieve it. In Lacanian terms, desire is the condition that exposes the human subject as fissured and unfinished and insinuates the lack at the very heart of human existence.[43] For Eve to be a subject means to be alienated and "rendered eccentric to [herself] by the movement of desire" for the object (in this case Paradise) expected to stabilize her meaningful selfhood but never completely achieved.[44] The lack is already suggested in Eve and Zillah's initial prayers to God, but repressed as sinful thinking and behavior. The ethical-religious dream of fullness, as represented in Adah's prayer, is itself a fantasy inherent in the view of immediate unity with the world that ignores the fragmentation of the human psyche. As Eagleton says, desire slides into the cracks of the subject a negativity "which renders it non-identical with itself."[45]

Cain answers his own question, since he has no partner with whom to talk: "I judge but by the fruits – and they are bitter" (1, 1, 78–79). We have already encountered this attitude in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of Gen. 4:8, where Cain tells Abel that the world "is not governed according to the fruit of good deeds, and there is partiality in judgment." This text is an early testimony to the Jewish theological speculation, and probably debate, about theodicy in general and specifically about God's role in the story of Cain and Abel but, as we have seen, for

the most part ancient interpreters have sidestepped the issue, emphasizing instead the supposedly inferior quality of Cain's sacrifice or his intentions. In Byron's poem, Cain's perception of the world and the deity becomes a central point; what drives him is not a deficient character but rather an inquisitive mind that struggles with existential questions about life. As we shall see later, his discontent has to do not with God's preference for Abel or his sacrifice but with what Cain sees as the deity's unjust violation of his patrimonial claim to the Garden of Eden. Byron reverses the concept of fixed dualism between evil and goodness, piety and impiety not by simplistically praising evil and defying good but by attempting to restore justice towards Cain who, as Quinones says, "is the only character in the drama whose intelligence is probing, who seems to be a character of consciousness as well as conscience."[46] Byron's Cain deconstructs God and marks the divine being as the source of evil and injustice.

At this point in Cain's soliloquy, he realizes the presence of a spiritual being that unsettles him: "Whom have we here? A shape like to the angels,/Yet of a sterner and a sadder aspect/Of spiritual essence. Why do I quake?/Why should I fear him more than other spirits,/Whom I see daily wave their fi'ry swords" (1, 1, 80–84). He thought that he was alone after his siblings left but his thoughts have brought to him someone from the supernatural realm. We will discuss this character later; for now, it is important to note that this encounter happens on the fringes of Paradise. Cain says that he lingered "in twilight's hour to catch a glimpse of those/Gardens which are my just inheritance" (1, 1, 85–87), walking around the "inhibited walls" that encircle "the immortal trees" (1, 1, 88–89). He can see the Paradise but not inhabit it; the trees are within his view but he cannot eat from them. Whether consciously or not, Cain desires the Edenic garden that he associates with completeness and identity. In other words, he longs to be back in the Lacanian imaginary state, even if he has never been there. At the heart of Cain's being is a sense of lack, and through his desire, in exact accordance with Lacan's definition of the term, he endlessly seeks to compensate for this lack.[47] Yet, this also reveals a measure of sadism in the divine treatment of the primeval family. Banned from Paradise, it is allowed to stay close enough for all members to see what has been lost and to long for it. The possibility of approaching the garden adds to Cain's anguish. He is like an exile who wants to return to his or her country but cannot do so, the Cuban living in the United States who knows Cuba is so close to the most southerly part of Florida but at the same time so far from the desire of democratic liberties.

Cain's lingering on the fringes of Paradise is a liminal condition that defines his border identity. That this happens in an hour when night transitions into day further reinforces this notion. The border, be it psychological, existential, philosophical, or graphic, is also the gap between life and death, the desired and the forbidden, as well as between the ethical (the Paradise) and the political (the world). Yet, in the latter case, as Cain rightly says and Eve notices as well, the political had been planted by God already in the Garden of Eden so as to make the ethical community impossible. In Freudian terms God exemplifies the self-contradictory nature of the superego: at the very moment when it shows the path towards the ethical community, it sadistically pulls the primeval family back into the state of endless sin and merciless guilt.[48]

In addition to languishing on the threshold of Paradise, Cain finds himself at the fringes of the primeval community that silences his questions. In both respects, he is hesitant to accept his condition, attempting to analyze, in a highly deliberate way, what is happening to him. In other words, while other interpreters often seek to portray Cain as a rebel without a cause, in Byron's poem this is not the case. Not that Cain has no compassion for his family – he just comes to a fuller understanding of human existence because he cares to look at the worst of humanity rather than remain in a state of romantic sentimentalism. He has distanced himself from his own world in order to have a critical view of it. There is no critical perspective without detachment – that is why, in many instances, those who consider themselves close to God do not hesitate to commit atrocities.[49]

Not accidentally, after noticing Lucifer's "sadder and sterner aspect (1, 1, 81–82), Cain asks himself, "Why should I quail from him who now approaches? Why should I fear him?" (1, 1, 92). He recognizes in the newcomer somebody who also suffers, maybe even to a greater extent: "Sorrow seems/Half of his immortality" (1, 1, 95–96).[50] Unable to relate to the lifestyle and worldview of his family, Cain discovers in the unfamiliar being something of himself: a deep pain. He recognizes that the other also suffers but wonders why. In Lacanian terms, Cain lives in the symbolic from the beginning of the poem.[51] When he sees himself in the mirror of Lucifer, the first image he has of Lucifer is not one of plenitude but of sadness and sternness, just like him but worse. What is absent is the imaginary stage. When Cain finds his mirror, he does not see his heroic image – only his brokenness. From the start, the mirror is ruined.

This scene accomplishes two things. First, it recognizes Lucifer as someone who experiences suffering and pain; in other words, it establishes Lucifer's humanity. Cain's recognition that Lucifer suffers as well should not be considered derogating because in the dialogue between the two, Cain's questions lose the rhetorical quality that predominated when he was talking with his father; instead, his questions genuinely look for answers and thus invite dialogue. In recognizing the human in Lucifer, Cain does not demote him to the status of a mortal being; Lucifer remains much more than just an elder brother of sorts who knows something Cain wants to know.[52] Second, and more important, the scene critiques the family's earlier view of creation by implicitly failing to recognize their suffering. The others' focus on the beauty of creation hinders them from seeing what Cain sees clearly: that the other suffers as well. This is what prompts his inquiries.

The prayers of Adam, Eve, Abel, Adah, and Zillah that open the poem are addressed to God, but God does not appear or speak to them. Cain's soliloquy is addressed to himself (or to no one in particular) but the outcome of his inquiry into human suffering is the appearance of Lucifer, the second main character of the poem who not only engages him in a conversation but also takes Cain on an otherworldly journey. Lucifer is Cain's double, his immortal part, "which speaks within you" (1, 1, 104).[53] To quote Quinones, "Lucifer is 'another' who is 'the same.'"[54] He has left the spirits and come on Earth to "walk with dust" (1, 1, 99), and he "know[s] the thoughts/Of dust, and feel for it, and with you" (1, 1, 101). Lucifer is the drama's only character capable of recognizing Cain's condition as "dust who thinks" and to empathize with it – unlike Cain's father, who sees in him but

a servant of God trying to shirk his duties. Cain is dust before he is a servant, and Lucifer discerns the former, essential condition; his ability to do so is an important insight about the possibility of hope in the midst of suffering. A person should recognize his or her own suffering in order to be able to see it in the other. We will develop this idea in the next section with the analysis of César Vallejo's poem "I am going to speak of hope." For now, suffice it to note the contrast between Lucifer and the other authority figure in Cain's life, his father, as well as the fact that due to its dramatic nature the poem implicitly identifies not only Cain but also the reader as the one to whom Lucifer relates when he uses the address "you."

When Cain asks whether Lucifer knows his thoughts, the latter introduces the disturbing idea that Cain may, after all, be immortal: "They are the thoughts of all/Worthy of thought. 'Tis your immortal part/Which speaks within you" (1, 1, 103–104). Up to this point, Cain had only known that death is his inexorable destiny, but Lucifer tells him that reflection on the condition of life is itself the sign of his immortality.[55] In response, Cain reiterates what he has already told Adam but elaborates on what is behind his thoughts: "I live,/But live to die: and, in living, see nothing/To make death hateful, save an innate clinging,/A loathsome and yet all invincible/Instinct of life, which I abhor, as/I Despise myself, yet cannot overcome./And so I live. Would I had never lived!" (1, 1, 110–115). Cain is caught between two different desires. He sees nothing good in life, yet there is an instinct to live that he is unable to overcome. The condition of death that surrounds his life makes him reject life as repugnant. However, as we shall see later, he also does not want to die, except after Abel's death when he is willing to give his life for his brother. For now, the desire to find a way to defeat death is one of the reasons why Cain is prepared to follow Lucifer. Here, what Cain refers to as life is the existential situation of his family that for him does not make sense.

In the conversation between Cain and Lucifer, the poem deconstructs the biblical story of Cain and Abel and even the image of God. Knowledge is a purpose of Cain's existential journey, and the encounter with Lucifer stimulates his intellectual quest. Lucifer tells Cain they are equals because both are "souls who dare use their immortality,/Souls who dare look the omnipotent tyrant in/His everlasting face and tell him that His evil is not good!" (1, 1, 137–138).[56] Contrary to Cain's family, whose prayers speak about the deity obliquely by describing its creation, Lucifer dares to look, finding in God's image the source of evil. He does not choose the path of repentance instead of asking questions. Lucifer's out-and-out challenge to God in the poem raises two questions. Why does God allow it rather than destroying Lucifer? And more important, why is it that (supposed) evil is always too present and near and God too absent and far away? The same questions can also be asked of the biblical narrative. God does not prevent Cain from challenging the divine decision to choose Abel's offering and not his – and even after killing Abel, Cain is permitted to live and is even offered protection. He remains too close while God remains too far.

The poem portrays Lucifer as a real humanist. He is the one who appears when human beings dare to think about the conditions of life and questions whether their instincts come from God while suggesting that the deity set up Adam and Eve by planting a tree that generates desire and then prohibiting from acting on

it.[57] Byron's God is an absentee; by contrast, Lucifer is on earth, next to Cain, recognizing Cain's condition as dust but also nurturing his dream of immortality. Lucifer is the one who cares about what Cain wants and does not judge him or reject Cain's inquisitive mind that sets him apart from his family. Indeed, this inquisitive mind is the reason Lucifer appears to Cain. In a sense, Lucifer is the only admirer of Cain as the only one in the primeval family who dares to think. This is one of the characteristics that makes Byron's poem so consonant with the mindset of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries – the eras in which humanity has faced the ultimate evil and suffering, making the question of God's goodness and omnipotence the central topic of theological speculation. The socio-economic and political conditions that prevailed in the first half of the twentieth century are already foreseen in Lucifer's call to "look the omnipotent tyrant in/His everlasting face and tell him that/His evil is not good" (1, 1, 137).

The pervasive use of the pronoun "we" in the conversation between Lucifer and Cain underscores the correlation between them: "We are immortal! . . . We in our conflict" (1, 1, 144–145). Lucifer inverts the dichotomy of good and evil, acknowledging God as the sole creator of humanity but claiming that the deity's sole purpose was to torture them: "he makes but to destroy" (1, 1, 266). God is neither good nor happy, because God is alone: "Goodness would not make/Evil, and what else hath he made? But let him/Sit on his vast and solitary throne,/Creating worlds, to make eternity/Less burthensome to his immense existence/And unparticipated solitude" (1, 1, 146–151). This picture of loneliness contrasts the affinity that is already emerging between Lucifer and Cain. Yet, although God is also unhappy, there is a significant difference between dust's suffering and the sovereign's sadness. The latter is a byproduct of a power that distances itself from the other, from the creation, as it inflicts pain upon them. God decides to remain distant from humanity, even though humans for their part address the divine daily in their morning prayers (I will further address the issue when we discuss Vallejo's "The Eternal Dice"). Lucifer, contrary to the traditional view of this figure, speaks of goodness. He adheres to it and uses it to fight back at God, whose "evil is not good" (1, 1, 140). In Lucifer, Byron rejects Christian morality by associating the archenemy of God with virtue instead of vice. As Wolf Hirst points out, this is a "cosmos whose deity has lost its authority as a moral guide."[58] For Cain and Lucifer, there is no justice in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

As a counterweight to the tyranny of the lonely creator deity that multiplies misery as it multiplies worlds in the universe, Lucifer exalts the solidarity of those whose suffer: "Spirits and men, at least *we* sympathize;/And, suffer in concert, make our pangs,/Innumerable, more endurable,/By the unbounded sympathy of all/With all! But *He*, so wretched in his height,/So restless in his wretchedness, must still Create and re-create" (1, 1, 157–161). He explains to Cain that evil is in othering and that God is its source because God decides to remain distant from the human condition; yet, paradoxically the deity is still present through an interdiction that makes impossible the ethical community of the Paradise. Cain is encouraged to learn that his sense of isolation was mistaken: "I look/Around a world where I see nothing, with/Thoughts which arise within me, as if they/Could master all things; but I thought alone/This misery was mine" (1, 1, 175–179).

He is in the company of others – including, as we are going to see, the speakers in Vallejo's poems – who also suffer, and this sense of shared pain, of community in anguish makes the human condition more endurable even though still insurmountable. Cain's skepticism about his reality encounters a speck of solidarity and agency in Lucifer's words. There is agency in the possibility of suffering together and recognizing the suffering of the world instead of remaining in "unparticipated solitude." There is solidarity among people who also question and challenge the creator and share their pain – unlike the members of Cain's family, who choose the option of repentance instead of the path of knowledge. Here the poem offers another critique of Adah's view on love by emphasizing a down-to-earth dose of doubt, which permits Lucifer and Cain to build up a trust based on a shared knowledge of suffering, its needs and attendant weaknesses, as central to existence. The commitment to endure suffering echoes Cain's extraordinary perception of the imperfect and unfinished state of human affairs, a perception that is far removed from the romantic sentimentalism that permeates the primeval family's perception of the stable subject who addresses God and exalts the creation.

Cain's encounter, in Lucifer, with the other who also suffers becomes a turning point for Cain because until this moment he "never could/Reconcile what [he] saw with what [he] heard" (1, 1, 168–169).[59] Cain lives in the discrepancy between inward reflection and the thoughts of his family expressed in their prayers. Not even Adah, says Cain, "my/Own and belovèd, she too understands not/The mind which overwhelms me. Never till/Now met I aught to sympathise with me./'Tis well. I rather would consort with spirits" (1, 1, 188–191).

As already mentioned, the encounter with Lucifer is at the same time Cain's encounter with himself; their journey is then the realization of that part of Cain that he has yet to discover and that he gradually will get to know.[60] Even if Lucifer is Cain, in the poem, Lucifer appears as the other with whom Cain has a conversation. This is perhaps the meaning of Kristeva's analysis of the foreigner: "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing *him* within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself."[61]

Likewise, it is Lucifer, as the other, who permits Cain to acquire a deeper sense of himself as a stranger, as an "undocumented" other. The relationship between Cain and Lucifer is in the end the possibility of human relationships. When Cain sees Lucifer, instead of only looking at the differences, Cain finds similarities. As Kristeva suggests, the discrimination of the other begins when I see another person as opposite to myself so that I detest him or her for being different. The moral here is that even if the other is as different from me as Lucifer, I can always find myself in the other. Furthermore, I should recognize that I am also the other and that I cannot turn against that other without turning against myself. In this way, the poem makes a contrast between the Lucifer-Cain relationship and that between Lucifer and Adah. As we shall see later, Adah cannot see what Cain sees, and probably neither can Abel, who senses fear and rejection rather than "harmonious obedience of mutual affection" when he looks at Cain in the third act of the drama.

The conversation between Cain and Lucifer revolves around death. Lucifer asks, "Dar'st thou to look on Death?" (1, 1, 249). The capitalization of "Death"

is significant here because it draws a graphic parallel with God who, according to Lucifer, is not only the creator but also the destroyer.[62] Cain only knows that Death is a dreadful thing but uses the pronoun "he" instead of "it" to explain it: "My father/Says he is something dreadful, and my mother/*Weeps* when he's named, and Abel *lifts* his eyes/To heav'n, and Zillah *casts* hers to the earth/And *sighs* a prayer, and Adah *looks* on me/And speaks not" (1, 1, 253–255; emphasis mine). The family cannot do what Lucifer and Cain can: dare to look at the reality and recognize it – which is the reason why Lucifer does not appear to them. Importantly, it is not that the family is ignorant of what Cain has been inquiring about since the beginning of the poem; they know about death but choose to ignore it, as the verbs describing their actions suggest: to weep, to cast, to sigh, to look.

In Kierkegaard's terms, the family encounters their own nothingness in the idea of death surrounding life. Dread is their response to the unsettling emptiness that haunts human existence. The anxiety that death produces in Cain makes him long for what Kierkegaard describes as the immediate unity of blissful undifferentiated state: "Were I quiet earth/That were no evil. Would I ne'er had been/Aught else but dust" (1, 1, 290–291). Yet, this condition, in which Cain no longer has to struggle with his own thoughts and yearn for knowledge, cannot be but death itself. Death is the nameless anxiety that Cain suffers in the search for the fullness of his existence, which he believes can be attained through knowledge. In Lacanian terms, death is the presence next to the child's mirror-stage that constantly threatens to puncture its coherence.[63] However, as discussed above, for Cain the mirror is ruined from the outset by his inquisitive mind. He seeks freedom from death, but what he has yet to realize is that freedom also means abandonment or the impossibility of defeating death. As we shall see later, he remains *homo sacer* in relation to the sovereign, who abandons him but still maintains a dread grip on his existence. Parallel to his mother, who chooses to live as an ethical self in fear of punishment by God, Cain, the image of the superego, also lives in fear but the source of his fear is different. He will learn that the anxiety of freedom is the realization of his own nothingness.

The poem draws a parallel between the entity of Death and that of God, who "absorbs all things/That bear the form of earth-born being" (1, 1, 261). Cain is willing to wrestle with Death; however, just as God does not respond to the prayers, so too Death does not come:

> I have looked out
> In the vast desolate night in search of him,
> And when I saw gigantic shadows in
> The umbrage of the walls of Eden, chequered
> By the far-flashing of the cherub's swords,
> I watched for what I thought his coming; for
> With fear rose longing in my heart to know
> What 'twas which shook us all, but nothing came (1, 1, 269–277).

Cain worries about life to the point of being willing to confront Death; it is as if he believes that once it is defeated something good would come from its nothingness. In squaring up to Death, Cain reveals an energy that probably seeks to

negate it: "Could I wrestle with him? I wrestled with the lion when a boy/In play till he ran roaring from my grip" (1, 1, 260).

We have already seen, however, that Cain sees nothing good in the instinct of life, which despite himself he is not able to overcome. This again reveals the split in Cain's desires: he searches for death because he sees nothing good in life, but at the same time he wants to defeat death. Life as Cain experiences it outside of Paradise is one that reproduces death; this is what he sees in the child he has with Adah: an affirmation of life but also persistence of toil and suffering. Likewise, in the opening line of Cain's soliloquy we hear: "And this is Life. Toil!" (1, 1, 65). Yet, most important, for Cain the problem with life at the threshold of Paradise is that this life is unjust: innocent people are punished for the misdeeds of others. When Cain regards the "fall" of his parents as a tragic occurrence that was *not* meant to happen, his sense of outrage is sharpened because he sees himself tagged as a criminal simply on account of existing and forced to pay for the consequences of what Adam and Eve did.

Cain also reaches beyond this mistake to look directly at God's justice. It seems that for him tragedy lies in the sense of failure to attain something that could have been attained: life without the dread of death. In other words, for Cain, his fate went awry when his parents ate from the tree of knowledge without eating from the tree of life: "Deadly error!" (1, 1, 14). Cain is not complaining about his parents doing something forbidden but rather about them never attempting to eat the whole enchilada, to gain both knowledge *and* life. Nevertheless, as we have noted before, for Kierkegaard, Adam's disobedience is an absurd aporia: he could not have fallen unless some vague pre-understanding that freedom is possible was already at work within his prelapsarian innocence – one that Cain has already explicitly declared impossible due to God deliberately planting desire and then issuing the prohibition. Before the fall, Adam was already "awakened to the pure possibility of freedom, of the simple condition of being able, and this is the condition of dread."[64] However, as we shall see later, the journey with Lucifer and personal encounter with death will change Cain's initial attitude of pure defiance towards it. This is another facet of the knowledge that Cain craves: he wants to know Death but only to defeat it the way he once defeated a lion, so that he could stop being afraid of it.

Lucifer, who is aware of Cain's existential craving, tells him: "And I who know all things fear nothing; see/What is true knowledge" (1, 1, 300). Lucifer is unlike the angels that Cain has previously known: claiming not to fear God, he is willing to show Cain his knowledge because after all Cain is Lucifer's worshipper by default: "Not worshipping/Him [God], makes thee mine the same" (1, 1, 319). However, when Lucifer asks Cain to follow him, the latter is hesitant: "But I must retire/To till the earth, for I had promised – " (1, 1, 323). Cain is still unwilling to renounce connections to his family, especially Adah, for whose sake he is prepared to humiliate himself before Lucifer: "She is my sister,/Born on the same day of the same womb, and/She wrung from me with tears this promise, and/Rather than see her weak, I would, methinks,/Bear all and worship aught" (1, 1, 330–332). Love towards his sister/wife is the only thing that might cause Cain to abandon the search for the roots of humanity's predicament and its suffering. He

struggles with the double desire of knowledge and love that splits his will and makes him hesitant to take a decision. Cain's ambivalence about his family, the symbol and agent of subjection under God's control, is another evidence of divine cruelty. He still wants to love and desires to live with his family but he cannot accept the intervention of God that he finds repugnant.

Adah is then the paragon of love who points out to Cain the consequences of his quest for knowledge. Although according to Lucifer, "truth in its own essence cannot be/But good" (1, 1, 356), Adah remarks that "all we know of it has gather'd Evil on ill; expulsion from our home, And dread, and toil, and sweat, and heaviness, Remorse of that which was, and hope of that Which cometh not" (1, 1, 356–360). For Kristeva, Adah would be the kind of foreigner who does not know that she is one and therefore cannot encounter Lucifer as such: "On the one hand, there are those who waste away in an agonizing struggle between what no longer is and what will never be – the followers of neutrality, the advocates of emptiness; they are not necessarily defeatists, they often become the best of ironists."[65] This is the self-reflective subject that I introduced previously when discussing the character of Zillah. At the same time, this is what makes Lucifer a character of utmost importance in the poem because in a reversal of his usual portrayal as the source of evil he speaks here like a good Christian or even a minister, connecting truth with goodness. Kristeva's comment on the second kind of foreigner makes Byron's Lucifer even more scandalous, from the traditional Christian perspective:

> On the other hand, there are those who transcend: living neither before nor now but beyond, they are bent with a passion that, although tenacious, will remain forever unsatisfied. It is a passion for another land, always a promised one, that of an occupation, a love, a child, a glory. They are believers, and they sometimes ripen into skeptics.[66]

With belief and skepticism going hand in hand in this portrayal, Lucifer can be seen as a foreigner who, unsatisfied by the conditions of existence, has become a skeptic in order to be able to question reality. As we shall see later, Adah has the same capacity but something keeps her from abandoning the neutral stance.

Adah seems initially to defeat Lucifer's arguments but when she introduces the idea that "Omnipotence/Must be all goodness" (1, 1, 390) his terse reply – "Was it so in Eden?" (1, 1, 391) – makes Adah examine her state of self-reflection and thus becomes the turning point for her as well. Confronted with an issue she has not faced before, Adah addresses Eve:

> Oh my mother! Thou
> Hast plucked a fruit more fatal to thine offspring
> Than to thyself. Thou at least hast passed
> Thy youth in Paradise, in innocent
> And happy intercourse with happy spirits.
> But we, thy children, ignorant of Eden,
> Art girt about by demons, who assume
> The words of God and tempt us with our own

> Dissatisfied and curious thoughts, as thou
> Wert worked on by the snake in thy most flushed
> And heedless, harmless wantonness of bliss (1, 1, 395–405).

For the first and only time, Adah thinks about the conditions of her existence and realizes the injustice of God, who punishes her for the mistake of her mother, who actually enjoyed Paradise in her youth. Particularly important is Adah's implicit acknowledgment that the "demons" (clearly a jab at Lucifer) do not put "dissatisfied and curious thoughts" in her; these thoughts are her own. Again, Byron's Lucifer appears not as an evil being that plots humanity's destruction but rather as a minister of sorts who encourages people to think about and understand the conditions of their existence, seeking truth and the goodness in it along the path of knowledge, not submission. Indeed, in his willingness to share the suffering endured by humanity this character may not just be a good Christian but also a shadow of Christ himself.

Yet, this is not enough for Adah; instead of Lucifer's suffering, she sees his beauty: "Fiend, tempt me not with beauty. Thou art fairer/Than was the serpent, and as false" (1, 1, 392). Having no answer to Lucifer's question, she strives to despise him: "I cannot answer this immortal thing/Which stands before me. I cannot abhor him" (1, 1, 406). Adah begins to feel drawn towards Lucifer: "A fastening attraction. . . /Fixes my flutt'ring eyes on his. My heart/Beats quick, he awes me, and yet draws me near./Nearer, and nearer" (1, 1, 410–413) – to the point that she begs Cain to save her (1, 1, 413). Even though Adah did not see and desire the fruit of the tree of knowledge, her feelings at this point are comparable to what Eve must have experienced in Paradise: the temptation was so powerful that she felt constrained and immobilized by it. Adah's fascination with the being that she perceives as malevolent (even if in the poem she is wrong about it) demonstrates how much easier it is to do evil than to do good because of the former's seductive power.

Cain, who sees the suffering beyond Lucifer's beauty, responds: "What dreads my Adah? This is not ill spirit" (1, 1, 414). Yet, Adah, blinded by her neutrality and emptiness, does not perceive this dimension of life in herself, Cain, and Lucifer. The binary opposition of knowledge and love is further developed at this point. It is Adah who states the impossibility of having both, claiming that they do not go hand in hand: "I have heard it said,/The seraphs love most; cherubim know most./And this should be a cherub, since he loves not" (1, 1, 420–423). What is loved cannot be known, and what is known cannot be loved – or, in Lacanian terms, we never know what we love or what we desire, so it is impossible for love to meet knowledge.[67] This is the case in modern society with inculcated patriotism: the better one knows and understands his or her country, the more difficult – in many cases, nearly impossible – does it become to love it. It is even possible to say that love for one's country is shaped and buttressed by what the individual does not know about it or simply and unquestioningly assumes to be true while neglecting or refusing to consider evidence to the contrary.

This, I would suggest, is the reason the members of the primeval family weep, lift up their eyes, cast them down, or stare at Cain – anything but looking directly at the deity. If they did, as Lucifer and Cain do, they would not be able to love it. Lucifer encourages Adah to choose between love and knowledge, arguing

that there is no other choice and that God has already chosen the latter. This, he says, is why worship of God means fear; having chosen knowledge, the deity is incapable of love: "Choose betwixt love and knowledge, since there is/No other choice. Your sire has chosen already./His worship is but fear" (1, 1, 429–431). More than that, the deity does not want to be known, to the point that it cannot be named, for naming bestows power. To love God is to love the unknown. Trying to refute Lucifer concerning God's capacity to love, Adah asserts that the deity is not lonely because the angels and the mortals make it happy: "Alone! Oh my God!/Who could be happy and alone, or good?/ . . . He is not so; he hath/The angels and the mortals to make happy,/And thus becomes so in diffusing joy./What else can joy be but the spreading of joy?" (1, 1, 473,479–81). Lucifer responds with a suggestion intended to show Adah the irony implicit in her question: "Ask your sire, the exile flesh from Eden;/Or of his first son; ask your own heart./It is not tranquil" (1, 1, 482). She realizes that her heart is not and replies with another query, likely rhetorical: "Are you of heaven?" (1, 1, 484).

Lucifer's answer to this query can be understood as revealing the primary goal that he pursued in appearing to Cain and inviting him on a journey to see other worlds. He starts by pointing out that if God is the cause of all-encompassing happiness, "the all-great and good/Maker of life and living things; it is/His secret and he keeps it" (1, 1, 486). Reiterating in part what he has already told Cain about the deity as a tyrant and the imperative of solidarity in standing up against it, Lucifer continues:

> We must bear,
> And some of us resist, and both in vain,
> His seraphs says; but it is worth the trial,
> Since better may not be without, there is
> A wisdom in the spirit, which directs
> To right, as in the dim blue are the eye
> Of you young mortals lights at once upon
> The star which watches, welcoming the morn (1, 1, 489–495).

He is aware of his defeat and accepts it, but he is also aware and proud of his agency in resisting God's tyranny, no matter how futile this resistance might be, and invites Adah to join him.

Lucifer can be seen as the colonized native whom Frantz Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The native is always on the alert," writes Fanon. "Confronted with a world ruled by the settler, the native is always presumed guilty" – much in the same way that the primeval family is always presumed to be in the wrong vis-à-vis God. Yet,

> the native's guilt is never a guilt which he accepts; it is rather a kind of curse, a sort of sword of Damocles, for, in his innermost spirit, the native admits no accusation . . . he is treated as an inferior but he is not convinced of his inferiority. He is patiently waiting until the settler is off his guard to fly at him . . . He is in fact ready at a moment's notice to exchange the *rôle* of the quarry for that of the hunter.[68]

Lucifer's defeat is thus not permanent, and the symbols of the primeval social order "are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating. For they do not convey the message 'Don't dare to budge'; rather, they cry out 'Get ready to attack.'"[69] This is what Lucifer regards as wisdom and what would guide Cain, hence humanity. Wisdom means maintaining a critical view with respect to the (divine) law and not remaining in a state of ironic infantilism convinced of one's inferiority. Cain, before the journey with Lucifer, was able to distance himself from his world in order to have a critical view of it; however, he remained deeply in pain about the mystery of death and its consequences:

> Never
> Shall men love the remembrance of the man
> Who sowed the seed of evil and mankind
> In the same hour. They plucked the tree of science
> And sin, and not content with their own sorrow,
> Begot me, thee, and all the few that are
> And all the unnumbered and innumerable
> Multitudes, millions, myriads, which may be,
> To inherit agonies accumulated
> By ages – and *I* must be sire of such things! (1, 1, 440–450)

Despite acknowledging previously that he does not understand why God planted the fairest tree in the center of the garden and placed Adam close to it, at this point – before the journey – Cain still sticks to the idea that it was his father who sowed the seed of evil, still accepts the guilt of his existence as the outcome of that mistake. The journey will make clear that this guilt is not that of submission but of constant reflection and endurance.

Cain loves his children but sees that affection only leads to sin and sorrow:

> Thy beauty and thy love, my love and joy,
> The rapturous moment and the placid hour,
> All we love in our children and the placid hour,
> But lead them and ourselves through many years
> Of sin and pain, or few, but still of sorrow,
> Interchecked with an instant of brief pleasure,
> To death the unknown (1, 1, 451–456).

All the pain that Cain sees in life is accompanied by fleeting instances of brief pleasure, which makes the suffering even deeper. Resentful, he lashes out at the absurdity of the biblical "fall" narrative that needs a serpent to impart the knowledge of death, which had in fact already been present in the possibility of sin: "Methinks the tree of knowledge/Hath not fulfilled its promise. If they [parents] sinned,/At least they ought to have known all things that are/Of knowledge – and the mystery of death./What do they know? – that they are miserable./What need of snakes and fruits to teach us that?" (1, 1, 456–46). Lucifer promises him that his longing for knowledge will be satiated, and Act One ends with them departing together while Adah stays behind.

In the "abyss of space," Lucifer shows Cain "the history/Of past, and present, and of future worlds" (2, 1, 24–25) in order to teach him that nothing can escape death: "And if there should be/Worlds greater than thine own, inhabited/By greater things, and they themselves far more/In number than the dust of thy dull earth,/Though multiplied to animated atoms,/All living and all doomed to death and wretched,/What wouldst thou think?" (2, 1, 42–47). This is a shocking revelation that Cain refuses to accept. He prefers to die and remain in the abyss of death than to go back and "give birth to those/Who can but suffer many years, and die,/Methinks is merely propagating death, And multiplying murder" (1, 1, 68–70). Cain does not want to be part of the death-life-death cycle, above all because Lucifer has told him that Cain is immortal and he wants Lucifer to explain the *meaning* of his immortality. Lucifer wants Cain to understand that the human being is immortal because suffering defines life. Lucifer has been defeated by God in a cosmic struggle but it does not mean acceptance of inferiority. On the contrary, the defeat stimulates Lucifer's daring look at God and the primeval symbolic order. Therefore, Cain's pain and sense of guilt comes not out his rebellion against his family's view of their existential condition, but from what Eagleton says is the reality of sin and guilt, "the fact that before God we are always already in the wrong."[70] The deity in Byron's poem is the figure of the superego, who as Freud remarks, "does not trouble itself enough about the facts of the mental constitution of human beings. It issues a command and does not ask whether it is possible for people to obey it."[71] Lucifer revolts against this deity and asserts that immortality *also* means the unceasing desire to rebel against the divine mandate of death even if he knows he is already defeated and will be defeated again and again. Or perhaps it is that the defeat has to be reenacted again and again by God, since again and again it will meet endless resistance.

All through the journey, Cain behaves like an apprentice who strives but fails to understand himself and his world; he keeps on asking, "Then what is death?" (2, 2, 34). Nevertheless, this is precisely what, in Lucifer's eyes, constitutes his best quality and makes him worthy. In order to educate Cain, Lucifer takes him through all the worlds that were and will be, demonstrating the destruction and chaos that reign in the universe. This depresses Cain to such an extent that he wants to stay "forever" in the abyss instead of returning home where he sees nothing but pain and death: "Since/I must one day return here from the earth,/I rather would remain. I am sick of all/That dust has shown me; let me dwell in shadows" (2, 2, 106–109). He protests again that the tree of knowledge was actually "a lying tree, for we *know* nothing./At least it promised knowledge at the price/Of death, but knowledge still; but what *knows* man?" (2, 2, 161–163). With the question that concludes this outburst, Cain gives voice to the disappointment of knowledge that promises freedom but actually brings the realization that death is the only true certainty and the dread of living face to face with that reality. Lucifer responds that "it may be death leads to the highest knowledge,/And being of all things the sole thing certain/At least leads to the surest science; therefore/The tree was true though deadly" (2, 2, 164–167). The price of knowledge is knowing that life is surrounded by death. Thus, the tree did not lie because it shows the most fundamental misery of life, that of there being nothing before or after it. Cain's question, "What *knows*

man?" is then a protest not against the impossibility of knowledge but against the injustice of knowing that life is hopelessly contained by death.

Eventually, the journey makes Cain ask deeper questions: "Why do I exist?/ Why are *thou* wretched? Why are all things so?/Ev'n he who made us must be, as the Maker/Of things unhappy! To produce destruction/Can surely never be the task of joy,/And yet my sire says he's omnipotent./Then why is evil, he being good?" (2, 2, 279–285).[72] For Cain, existence and evil are combined as if one implies the other, and this knot continues to distress him. His father has given him the traditional answer about the *telos* of suffering but Cain finds it incomprehensible: "Because this evil only was the path/To good. Strange good that must arise from out/Its deadly opposite" (2, 2, 286–289).

All through the journey, Lucifer does not provide clear answers to Cain's questions, leading him instead to self-examination by showing more worlds and beings that have existed and will exist. Finally, Cain asks: "And to what end have I beheld these things/Which thou hast shown me?" (2, 2, 416). This is the crucible of the entire act, the moment when Cain understands who he is. Lucifer asks, "Didst thou not require knowledge?/And have I not, in what I showed,/ Taught thee to know thyself?" (2, 2, 417–419). At this moment, Cain realizes his insignificance: "Alas! I seem Nothing" (2, 2, 420) and Lucifer tells him that this is "the human sum/Of knowledge, to know mortal nature's nothingness" (2, 2, 421).

Before the end of Act Two, Byron's Lucifer launches another broadside against the concept of God as a just ruler of creation: "He as a conqueror will call the conquered/Evil, but what will be the good he gives?/Were I the victor, his works would be deemed/The only evil ones. And you, ye new/And scarce-born mortals, what have been his gifts/To you already, in your little world?" (2, 2, 443–446). The claim that what is considered just depends solely on who is in control resembles Nietzsche's thesis – formulated, for example, in his treatise "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" – that religious morality is arbitrary and artificial because powers that be frame the ethical standards in accordance with their interests. Put differently, it is always those in charge who decide what is right and what is wrong.[73] Lucifer tells Cain that there is no fairness in the deity because it manipulates good and evil at will and – behaving exactly like the Freudian superego – maintains the primeval family in a state of paralysis, always in the wrong. This is also a major reason why the relationship between Cain and Abel ultimately turns violent and deadly. As Fanon says,

> The settler keeps alive in the native an anger which he deprives of outlet . . . But we have seen that inwardly the settler can only achieve a pseudo-petrification. The native's muscular tension finds outlet regularly in bloodthirsty explosions – in tribal warfare, in feuds between septs, and in quarrels between individuals.[74]

Living at the fringes of Paradise, Cain's family is never allowed to forget about the divine power over it – as Cain has noticed when he walked around the walls of Eden. The cherubs and their swords are the daunting symbols of what would happen if the humans chose to disobey the divine command that banned them

from the garden. The purpose is to maintain discipline by keeping them paralyzed, but Fanon presents us with another side of this psychological condition: it is what causes the colonized to express their anger at the colonial power by turning violently against each other.

"Think and endure," says Lucifer to Cain at the end of Act Two (2, 2, 462); this is the "good gift" (2, 2, 459) of the forbidden fruit: the capacity to reason. The gist of endurance is desisting from an open confrontation with an unjust ruler who has already won: "Let it not be over-swayed/By tyrannous threats to force you into faith/'Gainst all external sense and inward feelings" (2, 2, 460–463). Here, Byron accomplishes another reversal of the traditional view of Lucifer as a fallen angel. Lucifer speaks as someone who endures suffering due to being tempered by inward self-reflection; more importantly, he encourages Cain to do the same. Lucifer advocates non-violent resistance: he does not entice Cain to fight against God but to think and to judge the morality imposed by the victorious deity. For Lucifer, to think is to fight because it means searching for the forbidden fruit of knowledge. He even calls upon Cain not to take him at his word but to judge by the results: "If/Evil springs from him [God], do not name it mine,/Till you know better its true fount; and judge/Not by words, though of spirits, but the fruits/Of your existence, such as it must be" (2, 2, 455–457). Reason is what cannot be defeated as long as there are people like Cain, willing to think and risk their lives in pursuit of knowledge that is liberating.

In Act Three, Cain is back with Adah and their children but the knowledge of himself gained through the cosmic journey has drastically changed his relationship with the world. Now he knows that he is nothing, which means that he is something because he knows. However, it is not only Cain who ponders the terrible idea; Adah does it too even though she is not aware of it. She places their son under a cypress (3, 1, 2), but as soon as Cain sees the tree and his son under it he immediately recognizes it as a symbolic representation of Adah's unconscious knowledge of death: "Cypress! 'tis/A gloomy tree, which looks as if it mourned/O'er what it shadows. Wherefore didst thou choose it/For our child's canopy?" (3, 1, 4–5). This introduces the poignant realization that the child will also die one day. Cain's inquisitive mind cannot help pondering the injustice of death. Although his son "has not plucked the fruit" of the forbidden tree, some day he "shalt be amerced for sin unknown" (3, 1, 22–24). The child is unconscious of its fate, which is why its sleep is undisturbed. Cain cannot sleep because he knows the reality of death; thinking about it makes him quake and tremble as he did when he met Lucifer. The trope of quaking also implies broader fragmentation and unbalance: the child's state of innocence contrasts with Cain's sense of unbalance and disintegration, throwing it into starker relief.

The visit to other worlds has completely awakened Cain to the reality that death surrounds life, resulting in utter despair; the quest for victory over death has merely left him with a renewed sense of his "littleness" (3, 1, 67). Even love, personified in the poem by Adah, further exacerbates his misery because he understands that there is nothing to be done to save the child he loves dearly, from the suffering of life and death. Adah notices the change: "Cain, that proud spirit who withdrew thee hence/Hath saddened thine still deeper" (3, 1, 45). These words

may indicate a measure of spiritual progress in Adah: still unable to see suffering in Lucifer, she for the first time recognizes it in Cain, which momentarily distracts her from extolling the beauty of their son and creation as a whole. Adah's portrayal as partially blind to Cain's suffering and entirely blind to Lucifer's is interpretable as another critique that the poem levels against the "politics of Paradise." As Emmanuel Lévinas suggests, evil is not only that which inflicts suffering on the other, but also that which ignores the suffering of the other.[75] For him, this is the problem of Cain; he interprets Cain's question "Am I my brother's keeper?" as a sign of detachment from humanity and of unwillingness to take responsibility for killing a human being.[76] However, by accomplishing a reversal between the "judge" and the "judged" – which, as will be discussed below, some literary critics consider the poem's main goal – Byron offers a different view of the famous question.[77] He demonstrates that even in human attachment there may be a hidden element of evil because love can sap – as happens with Adah – a person's capacity to recognize suffering.[78]

Further sharpened by the encounter with Lucifer and the journey with him, Cain's abhorrence of death prompts within him the idea of putting an end to it once and for all by providing God with a victim: "Why, so say I, provided that one victim/Might satiate the insatiable of life,/And that our little rosy sleeper there/ Might never taste of death nor human sorrow/Nor hand it down to those who spring from him" (3, 1, 80–84). Even Adah asks, "How know we that some such atonement one day May not redeem our race?" (3, 1, 85). Cain's response indicates that for now he remains doubtful – not only because he wonders how much blood would be enough but also because such a sacrifice would be tantamount to accepting the divine rules of the game that he has railed against all along:

> By sacrificing
> The harmless for the guilty? What atonement
> Were there? Why, *we* are innocent; what have we
> Done that we must be victims for a deed
> Before our birth, or need have victims to
> Atone for this mysterious, nameless sin,
> If it be such a sin to seek knowledge? (3, 1, 86–92)

Even in Cain's recognition of his existential anxiety, there is a sense of courage; he faces it rather than repressing his feelings. Certainly, awareness of death is what leads him to despair but he prefers it to the illusions of the lost immortality: "he [God] contents him/ With making us the nothing which we are;/And after flatt'ring dust with glimpses of Eden and Immortality, resolves/It back to dust again" (3, 1, 70–73). Yet, Cain's answer to Adah's question also reveals that his existential problem goes deeper than death and its reproduction: he is concerned with justice. Cain sharply questions God's moral authority; to him, divine omnipotence is not fair, and neither is the sacrifice of the innocent for the guilty. He still sees himself as innocent and sin as mysterious and nameless despite becoming aware, thanks to the journey with Lucifer, that sin has always already been in him – as knowledge. Commenting on Kierkegaard, Eagleton ponders: "'Sin

presupposes itself", Kierkegaard writes, meaning perhaps that its origins are in any temporal sense quite unthinkable. Sin has no place or source, lying as it does under the sign of contradiction. To sin is to have been always already able to do so."[79] In other words, like his father, Cain brings sin into the world because of the possibility of transgression, which has always been present in him, his anguish, and his awareness of dread. The sense of innocence comes from Cain's ignorance that ultimately the sin of knowledge is the sin of birth. Perhaps, as the Spanish playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca suggests, "birth itself is man's greatest crime."[80] From this perspective, Cain's mark is the very fact of his being alive; birth is his birthmark. Every human being is likely to experience Cain's anguish, originating in the very instance of birth. Augustine calls this proclivity original sin but does not question it, just as Cain's family does not question the condition of human life. Yet, all the members of the family have the potential that is actualized in Cain – the desire to know and not to die, despite the fact that both properties pertain strictly to the deity, the only entity that knows all and is immortal.

Adah wonders why Cain continues to "mourn for Paradise" (3, 1, 36). "Can we not make another?" she asks (ibid.), believing that Paradise is everywhere as long as Cain is with her and their child and all of them are with their extended family. Adah does not seem to realize that this idyllic vision is bound to be cut short by death, or that there is no way out of this condition. Besides locating her idea of Paradise in Cain, Adah also associates it with her family: "Have I not thee, our boy, our sire, and brother,/And Zillah, our sweet sister, and our Eve,/To whom we owe so much besides our birth?" (3, 1, 41–42). As Abel's death will later demonstrate, this is likewise an illusion: the subsequent exchanges between Adam and Eve will reveal that the family's daily prayers and offerings had repressed mutual resentment and masked the tragedy of the expulsion from Paradise. This repression of politics is the price to pay for the illusion of communal unity; a lie is what keeps the family together. This is the moment when the real human relationships begin to emerge: Adam blames Eve, and she curses Cain. The "total" social order, wholly incorporated in each member of the family, one that identifies their desires entirely with divine rule, proves elusive, and the idea of a benign divine control fully internalized and appropriated as the ground of human freedom is exposed as a sham. Even before the family's members finally tell each other what they really think, death already hangs over it as a curse that negatively imbues all the interactions between the characters with a deep sense of despair and guilt. They do not know death but they fear it all the same.

Cain even contemplates killing his son to prevent him from suffering: "The germs of an eternal misery/To myriads is within him! better 'twere/I snatched him in his sleep, and dashed him 'gainst/The rock, than let him live – " (3, 1, 122–126). Adah, by contrast, sees the child "full of life,/Of strength, of bloom, of beauty, and of joy;/How like to me – how like to thee, when gentle,/For then we are all alike, is't not so, Cain?" (3, 1, 140–143). To Cain, Adah is ignorant of their son's fate: despite being alive, he is not "full of life" because death progressively intrudes on his being. To Adah, Cain does not want to see the life that moves inside the child. This is the problem that Lacan defines as the ambiguity of the signifier. For him, a signifier does not have a fixed meaning because it is linked to other signifiers,

not to a unique, specific signified; thus, the entrance in the symbolic order takes place through language – the mirror that simultaneously promises a coherent set of meanings and ruins them. Adah and Cain cannot understand each other because to her, life signifies nothing but itself, while to him, it signifies nothing but death. And for God as an Agambenian sovereign, life signifies abandonment.

Throughout the poem, Cain defies power and detests the idea of groveling before it. This becomes especially clear in his dialogue with Abel that follows the scene with Adah and in the outcome of the encounter. Lucifer takes note of the conflicted relationship between the two brothers long before they meet for the second time in the poem. He points out to Cain that Abel is loved by his family – "Thy father loves him [Abel] well – so does thy God . . . He . . . is his mother's favourite" (2, 2, 340–343) as well as by God: "And the Jehovah – the indulgent Lord,/And bounteous planter of barred Paradise –/He, too, looks smilingly on Abel" (2, 2, 346–348). For Cain, this is not the reason why he too cannot love his brother: "What is that/To me? Should I not love that which all love?" (2, 2, 345) Still, the matter troubles him, and he demands to know why Lucifer raised it; the response is, "Because thou hast thought of this ere now" (2, 2, 354). The realization that this is indeed so visibly stuns Cain: he "*pauses, as agitated*" (2, 2, 356). Does he love his brother out of routine and habit, just because this is a proper thing to do? Does he actually envy Abel's position of preference vis-à-vis their family and the deity?

Soon, however, it becomes obvious the issue is more complex. When Cain learns upon his return from the journey with Lucifer that Abel has prepared two altars for sacrifices, his response exudes disdain: "And how knew he, that *I* would be so ready/With the burnt off'rings, which he daily brings/With a meek brow, whose base humility/Shows more a fear than worship, as a bribe/To the Creator" (3, 1, 99–102). As we have discussed earlier, in the biblical narrative the offerings of both brothers are interpretable as caused by dread that their existence may be arbitrarily cut off and desire for material self-preservation; they sense that they are in the state of exception because there is no assurance as to what God would accept from them. In Byron's poem, this is how Cain understands Abel's cultic activity and why he is at best reluctant to participate in it.

In this, he puts his finger on the existential dilemma of sacrificial cult. Without the eschatological notions of heaven and hell, to a believer in a transcendent reality as the source of human existence the offering becomes the means of securing survival compared to a divine being that is absent and ambiguous as befits a true father figure. The logic of the sacrifice has nothing to do with the idealistic notion of Abel giving something to God out of the goodness of his heart. Since a gift demands something in return, from this standpoint an offering is indeed "a bribe to the Creator"; the person who makes it manipulates the relationship with God. On this issue, the importance of the poem lies not only in the way it analyzes a theological dogma and the issue of human relationships, specifically the idea of community in relation to sovereign divine authority but also in the questions that Byron forces the audience to face. He invites the readers or spectators to see how superficial faith can be and therefore to ponder about their religious commitments and examine their cultic practices. This approach, related to what Anselm of

Canterbury expressed in his motto "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*), transcends the notions of divine inscrutability or sovereign freedom that some modern exegetes use as a fallback when discussing Gen. 4:1–16.

The simple sentiment of sibling envy thus does not even begin to account for what transpires between Cain and Abel in Act Three of Byron's poem. In fact, by this time Cain no longer even recognizes a fraternal relationship between them: while in Act One he tells Abel, "Precede me, brother. – I will follow shortly" (1, 1, 59), in Act Three, when Adah tells him, "Our brother comes," his response is, "*Thy brother Abel*" (3, 1, 162; emphasis mine). In this sharp distinction from the other, the potential for violence is already lurking. What still maintains the link between Cain and Abel is Adah, to whom the latter refers as "our sister" (3, 1, 164). Cain does not answer "your sister," indicating thereby that so far he separates himself from Abel only.

In the encounter that follows, Abel insists on understanding Cain. In Act One, he has already pointed out that Cain's attitude would only elicit divine wrath. Now, Abel warns that Lucifer "may be/A foe to the Most High" (3, 1, 168) – to which Cain defiantly responds by characterizing Lucifer as a "friend to man" (3, 1, 170). That Cain is now much closer to Lucifer than to Abel is suggested in an even stronger way when the latter expresses his concern about Cain's changed appearance: "Thine eyes are flashing with unnatural life/Thy cheek is flushed with an unnatural hue/Thy words are fraught with an unnatural sound./What may this mean?" (3, 1, 185–188). This description inadvertently evokes Lucifer (whom Abel never meets in the poem) and thus reinforces the idea that he is Cain's double and vice versa. Even more important, it suggests the humanity of both. Abel has noticed gloom in Cain's brow (1, 1, 54) and now he notices Cain's flashing eyes. But what he fails to see is Cain's suffering.

Cain refuses to answer Abel's questions with a terse "I pray thee, leave me" (3, 1, 188) but Abel in his turn refuses to heed the warning and relent. He asks his brother to join him in giving offerings to God, arguing that this will calm Cain: "The more my grief; I pray thee/To do so now. Thy soul seems laboring in/Some strong delusion; it will calm thee" (3, 1, 201–203). Cain warns him again – "My Abel, leave me/Or let me leave thee to thy pious purpose" – but Abel keeps insisting: "Neither; we must perform our task together./Spurn me not" (3, 1, 206–207). Here, Abel acts like a missionary who would not take "no" for an answer when it comes to involving his or her targets in a religious practice. In this, there may be a parallel between Abel and Lucifer; as noted above, in a sense Byron portrays the latter as a minister who helps Cain look for the answers to the questions that bother him. What makes a world of difference is that Abel is as pushy as Lucifer is patient; the latter listens to Cain and talks with him while the former not only humiliates himself before God, but also nags Cain to follow suit. In a similar fashion, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan has Abel zealously defend against Cain what the text considers the correct theological views and die for them. What sets Byron's Cain apart from that of the targumic tradition is that the former does not immediately resort to violence. In fact, he even agrees to perform the ritual and thereby brings into the picture the poem's last character in the order of appearance – the deity. The consequences for Cain and the entire primeval family are nothing short of disastrous.

After preparing the sacrifices, Abel kneels and offers a prayer that not only acknowledges Adam's transgression but also presents all humans – even those who had not been born yet – as accomplices, spared only by the divine grace:

> Oh God
> Who made us, and who breathed the breath of life
> Within our nostrils, who hath blessed us,
> And spared, despite our father's sin, to make
> His children all lost, as they might have been,
> Had not thy justice been tempered with
> The mercy which is thy delight, as to
> Accord a pardon like Paradise,
> Compared with our great crimes (3, 1, 224–231).

Interiorizing what Cain has rejected all along, Abel accepts both human guilt and divine judgment; the comparison of God's forgiveness with Paradise makes it possible for him both to affirm divine justice and avoid longing for what the family has lost. He does not notice the irony implicit in what he says in continuation: "Sole Lord of Light,/Of good, of glory, and eternity;/Without whom were all evil and with whom/Nothing can err, except to some good end/Of thine omnipotent benevolence,/Inscrutable, but still to be fulfilled" (3, 1, 231–36). If nothing can err "with God," except for a good end, does it mean that by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge Adam and Eve, who at the time obviously fit the description, actually fulfilled an "inscrutable" divine purpose – and that this is precisely the reason why the deity did not prevent the snake from seducing them? Then why should they, to say nothing of the countless generations of their descendants starting with Cain and Abel, be considered – and consider themselves – guilty to such an extent that the very fact of their continued existence becomes a manifestation of divine grace? Why, in particular were they expelled from the Garden of Eden – or, if *this* was the purpose of the entire charade, why had they been settled there in the first place?

The irony in Abel's prayer and especially the implicit fear, the dread before the inscrutable that informs it, places another question mark over the Kierkegaardian exaltation of Abraham as the paradigmatic example of the champion of faith who is able to suspend the teleological imperative of the ethical state and obey the absurd commandment of the divine. This exaltation does not acknowledge that such willingness to obey also is motivated by an existential fear of God's justice, which might all of a sudden become separated from mercy that supposedly keeps justice under control. In other words, it is possible to think that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son may have been motivated out of fear for his own life.[81]

When Abel concludes the prayer by stressing his utmost humility – he is not just on his knees but also "bowing his own [face]/Even to the dust, of which he is, in honour/Of [God], and of [God's] name, for evermore!" (3, 1, 242–242) – Cain, who has remained standing throughout (3, 1, 244), begins to speak. His discourse is not so much a prayer or an invocation of the deity as a challenge to it. This is the first time in the poem that Cain addresses God, and this address sounds

from the outset as a direct confrontation: "Spirit, whate'er or whose'er thou art,/ Omnipotent, it may be – and, if good,/Shown in the exemption of thy deeds from evil" (3, 1, 245–247). For Cain, God's deeds are good because they are defined as such by virtue of their divine source, not because they are actually so. He critiques the deity's justice because God remains in "unparticipated solitude," seeing suffering but not intervening, not even to prevent Abel's death. In this, Cain echoes Lucifer's critical view of God's involvement with the world – or lack thereof – and of divine mercy. Not accidentally, the discourse consistently employs the pronoun "thou," which demands God's presence by implying that Cain is actually looking directly at the deity and demanding that it speak or act – even if that action would be lethal for him:

> If a shrine without victim,
> And altar without gore, may win thy favour,
> Look on it. And for him who dresseth it
> He is such as thou mad'st him; and seek nothing
> Which must be won by kneeling. If he's evil,
> Strike him. Thou art omnipotent, and may'st,
> For what can he oppose? If he be good,
> Strike him, or spare him, as thou wilt, since all
> Rests upon thee; and good and evil seem
> To have no pow'r themselves, save in thy will.
> And whether that be good or ill I know not,
> Not being omnipotent, nor fit to judge
> Omnipotence, but merely to endure
> Its mandate, which thus far I have endured (3, 1, 266–279).

This is the first time in the entire poem that Cain refers to himself in the third person. When thinking about the possibility of enduring God's presence and justice, he distances himself from himself. Contrary to Abel, who is totally submissive to God, Cain goes only as far as to recognize the *homo sacer* in himself, since he believes that whether what he does is actually good or bad, God may "strike him"; in this, he again makes the Nietzschean claim that the definition of good and evil is the function of power. Since God alone sets the rules of the game, Cain does not have any way to know the divine decision beforehand and therefore remains in a state of exception. In Agamben's words, "the sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating sacrifice, and sacred life – that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed – is the life that has been captured in this sphere."[82]

The twin divine response to the two sacrifices and two conflicting discourses is the fire that kindles Abel's sacrifice and raises it to the sky and the whirlwind that overturns Cain's altar and scatters his offerings. In this scene, Byron reconceptualizes the sacrificial ritual, commonly understood in terms of intimacy with God, to endow it with a moral meaning against which Cain is rebelling. He insists that the deity rejected his offering because it prefers blood and destruction of life to the fresh fruits of the land (which, as we have seen earlier is precisely the

concept of divine predilections that some ancient and modern interpreters ascribe to the author of Gen. 4:1–16): "Thy burnt flesh-off'rings prospers better; see/How heav'n licks up the flames, when thick with blood" (3, 1, 284–285). The image of heaven licking flames, but only when they are full of blood, is graphic and gruesome; Cain speaks as though he sees God's tongue probing the sacrifices and savoring those that contain flesh.[83] His own offering – "a shrine without victim, an altar without gore" (3, 1, 265–266) thus becomes the moral ground for Cain's critique of God's justice. The whirlwind actually confirms his ethical position and exposes the violence of God, who feasts on death. Cain does not want to offer another sacrifice as Abel begs him to do but instead tries to cast down Abel's altar because it is "blood of lambs and kids,/Which fed on milk, to be destroyed in blood" (3, 1, 291–292).

With this image, the poem connects the sacrifice of blood with Cain's memory of his own son whose life is cursed with death; it is probably not accidental that earlier, he compares the young animals, which Abel sacrifices, with children:

> I lately saw
> A lamb stung by a reptile: the poor suckling
> Lay foaming on the earth, beneath the vain
> And piteous bleating of its restless dam;
> My father plucked some herbs, and laid them to
> The wound; and by degrees the helpless wretch
> Resumed its careless life, and rose to drain
> The mother's milk, who o'er it tremulous
> Stood licking its reviving limbs with joy.
> Behold my son, said Adam, how from evil
> Springs good (2, 2, 289–298).

This image of children as sacrifice to God is what seems to drive Cain to violence. His outrage at God's apparent bloodthirstiness is exacerbated by the memory of Adam's claim that the suffering of innocent little beings actually brings about good. The brothers struggle: Abel to prevent what he sees as an act of sacrilege, and Cain to destroy what he sees as a grisly symbol of death. Abel's words during the dustup, "I love God far more/Than life" (3, 1, 315), likely infuriate Cain even more because for him they express masochistic love that encounters God's sadistic desire for blood. In accordance with the biblical account, he "rises" against Abel and kills him.

By far the most consequential detail that the poems adds at this point is Cain's sarcastic exclamation that this is what Abel wanted him to do all along – offer an innocent life as a sacrifice to the deity that craves gore. As Harold Fisch notes, "Byron's revisionism has here given the story a perverse twist. The God of Abel substitutes animal sacrifices for the more bloody offering up of a human being, and yet he is here perversely being made responsible for the human sacrifice that Cain is about to offer! Byron has thus turned the biblical narrative on its head."[84] The irony of Abel's death is that it happens in the context of Cain trying to prevent further sacrifices of blood to God. The poem thus profoundly re-conceptualizes

the killing. It is not the outcome of Cain's distorted passion; actually, from Cain's standpoint it is not a fratricide at all because, as we have seen, he no longer perceives Abel as his brother but rather as an incarnation of what is detestable in God. Cain's words that precede the murder are telling in this respect: "Give way! This bloody record/ Shall not stand in the sun, to shame creation!" (3, 1, 303–304). Protecting creation is supposed to be the prerogative of the deity, but Byron, as we have seen, presents it as enjoying the destruction and not the creation of life. To protect the lives that God has initially created, Cain has to take a stand against God, who does not care about them. Abel's murder then takes place in the context of Cain's crusade to restore creation. If he has had any doubt about the nature of God, here it becomes clear to him. The offerings, the fire consuming Abel's animals, and Abel begging him to offer more blood to God provide more than enough evidence, and Cain fights back against the cruelty – but commits cruelty in the process.

At this point, it is important to clarify what kind of life Cain is seeking to protect. As repeatedly noted above, since Act One he does not see anything good in living; to Adam's question, "Dost thou not live?" (1, 1, 28) he responds: "Must I not die?" (1, 1, 29) Likewise, in the conversation with Lucifer: "I live/But live to die. And living, see nothing/To make death hateful, save in innate clinging,/A loathsome and yet all invincible/ Instinct of life, which I abhor, as I/ Despise myself, yet cannot overcome. And so I live./Would I had never lived!" (1, 1, 109–115) Cain rejects life as the sovereign has established it, one filled with suffering and injustice. He yearns for a life with fairness, in other words, for a life that makes sense, that is not absurd. For him, there is a difference between loving a life that makes sense and preferring death to an absurd life governed by a divine being from whom Cain does not know what to expect: whether Cain is actually good or bad, God may strike him dead.

Abel's senseless murder as an ironic outcome of Cain's quest for a meaningful life further highlights the absence of fairness and coherence in the primeval social setting, whose distortions do not start with Abel's death but rather go back to the planting of the tree in the Garden of Eden and the divine interdiction not to eat from it. Moreover, the very presence of Paradise that the family of Eve and Adam can see but not enter, desire but not experience, further underlines the injustice and incoherence of their existence. Even before Abel's death, Cain is already a Lacanian subject in the sense that his quest for plenitude reveals that life lacks fullness, which is what his family ignores. Cain can see what his family cannot. This is the source of his tragedy: he cannot *not* see. His encounter with violence, then, is his full awareness of the reality of emptiness as a negative plenitude.

After Abel's death, Cain does not immediately understand what has happened and again becomes distant from himself: "Where am I? Alone! Where's Abel? Where/ Cain? Can it be that I am he?" (3, 1, 321–322) Having spent most of his life under the dread of encountering death, he fails to recognize its presence and thinks – or, perhaps, hopes against hope – that Abel is sleeping: "My brother,/ Awake! Why liest thou so on the green earth?" (3, 1, 322). The moment when Cain finally faces himself in death's mirror arrives only when the dying Abel asks, "What's he who speaks of God?" (3, 1, 332); Cain's brutally honest response is,

"Thy murderer" (3, 1, 333). The separation is thus complete: just as Abel is no longer Cain's brother, Cain is no longer Abel's brother but his killer. Yet, this very alienation brings even more strongly to the light of consciousness the experience of a true brotherhood, forged by blood ties. In other words, the killings also made them brothers. They create separation and bond at the same time. Cain's question, "Who makes me brotherless?" (3, 1, 337), shows that he is still distancing from himself; the implication is that Abel's death is not the work of his own hand or, that by taking the guilt of the murder upon himself he benefits God who does not take responsibility for it. Cain's question is saying that someone has made him brotherless. God allows the killing of Abel. In a similar fashion, the title character of Borges's *Three Versions of Judas* becomes the ultimate hero who accepts the blame to the point of becoming Jesus.[85]

The reality of Abel's death completely disrupts Cain's perception of reality: "This is a vision, else I am become/The native of another and worse world./The earth swims round me. What is this? 'Tis wet" (3, 1, 341–344). This is the moment in which human history begins; up to this point, the place where the family resides, on the fringe of Paradise, is a limbo, a liminal space between immortality and death. Now, Cain becomes a subject – and a human subject at that – of the reality that includes killing and death. Fully entering the Lacanian symbolic order, he experiences his own alienation and fragmentation. It is through this that Cain acquires full subjectivity.[86] His desire for fairness in life, his crusade to protect it against the divine tyrant is at the same time the source of the tragedy; he ends up killing his brother. In other words, Cain finally renounces the idea of Paradise to which he might return some day and faces the world around him. It is an experience of rebirth but one that is traumatic and "that cannot be achieved without a virtual or a symbolic slaying."[87] "Then what have I further to do with life,/Since I have taken life from my own flesh?" (3, 1, 346) – these words mark Cain's absolute separation from the idyllic dream of innocence prevalent in his worldview in the preceding parts of the poem as well the acceptance of his own guilt. The open-ended question reflects what every human being faces in the world: what to do with life once we realize that we take the blood of our brothers and sisters every day. For the first time, Cain is unambiguously guilty, this guilt – the consequence of his own deed – being far removed from the metaphysical concept that he discussed with Lucifer in Act Two.

It is from this highly personal guilt that Cain continues to question God: "Life cannot be so slight, as to be quenched/Thus quickly!" (3, 1, 351) He realizes that the fragility of life renders death even more terrifying. Through Abel's demise, Cain not only acquires subjectivity; above all, death reveals the underlying tragic foundation of fraternity. As Quinones says, commenting on the poem, "violence itself seems to be strangely and paradoxically related to the ideal of brotherhood."[88] Cain calls Abel his brother again: "What shall I say to him? My brother? No;/He will not answer to that name; for brethren/Smite not each other" (3, 1, 355). He still does not see that by killing Abel he has strengthened the link of fraternity and that contrary to what he thinks, from now on brother will be killing brother. This is, paradoxically, the other dimension of fraternity that repeatedly emerges in human history. It is after killing Abel that Cain has a new sense of love for him – as we shall soon see in Cain's dialogue with the angel, even to the point

of Cain's willingness to die so that Abel could come back. In a certain sense, Cain becomes at this juncture what Hirst calls a "potential Christ-figure," ready to give his life in order to snatch others from the jaws of death.[89]

The family arrives on the scene, and Adam immediately blames the serpent and Eve for the death of Abel: "A voice of woe from Zillah brings me here./What do I see? 'Tis true! My son, my son!/Woman, behold the serpent's work, and thine" (3, 1, 380–82). The family unity, seemingly tight in Act One, begins to reveal its hidden gaps; the pious life of the primeval community proves an expression of a hidden bitterness that bursts through as soon as Abel is dead. Adam, it turns out, has all along blamed and hated Eve for the expulsion from Paradise; the acceptance of the divine decree expressed in his prayers has consequently been superficial at best and perhaps entirely insincere. Eve, it turns out, has no affection for Cain at all, only for Abel, whom she calls "my best beloved" (3, 1, 384). Having realized that Cain is the murderer, she does not hesitate to disown him: "Hear, Jehovah!/May the eternal serpent's curse be on him!/For he was fitter for his seed than ours. May all his days be desolate!" (3, 1, 401–403) Recognizing that her sense of wholeness was concealing the reality of a curse resting on the family, Eve sees Abel's murder as an opportunity to transfer this curse onto Cain, whom she now abandons. Cain's mother is the first to transform him into a *homo sacer*; the continuation of her presupposes total isolation from both the natural and the social:

> May ev'ry element shun or change to him!
> May he live in the pangs which others die with!
> And death itself wax something worse than death
> To him who first acquainted him with man!
> Hence fratricide! Henceforth that word is *Cain*
> Through all the coming myriads of mankind,
> Who shall abhor thee though thou wert their sire
> May the grass wither from thy feet! the woods
> Deny thee shelter, earth a home, the dust
> A grave, the sun his light, and heav'n her God!! (3, 1, 435–444)

"Something worse than death" is a fitting description for the condition of *homo sacer* who constantly remains in the dread of death; this is what Agamben calls the ban/curse of life. We see family, the first institution of the human order, abandoning life. Abel's killing is reenacted in the family's "killing" of Cain. The chain reaction of murders has already begun.

Eve accuses Cain of committing an act that is against nature: "I curse him from my sight for evermore!/All bonds I break between us, as he broke/That of his nature in yon" (3, 1, 409–410). Ironically, it was the other way round: Cain acted according to his nature because he acted as a human being. By killing his brother, Cain enters the human world, one in which brother will seek to kill brother – and, as later suggested by the angel, the father as well: "Thou hast slain thy brother/And who shall warrant thee against thy son? . . . The fratricide might

well engender parricides" (3, 1, 485,492). Cain becomes *homo sacer* precisely at the moment that he becomes human.

Byron follows the biblical narrative by reproducing almost verbatim the famous exchange from Gen. 4:9.[90] The angel that appears on the scene asks, "Where is thy brother Abel?" (3, 1, 467), and Cain replies, "Am I my brother's keeper?" However, in the framework of the poem the dialogue acquires a new meaning. Byron's Cain is not the morally deficient individual of ancient and even some modern interpretations, which makes it difficult to construe his response as an attempt to cover up the crime or shirk the moral responsibility for it. On the contrary, as we have just seen, he recognizes his guilt very soon after committing the murder. Confusion thus becomes a much better clue. To reiterate, initially Cain does not even know where he is (3, 1, 321) and feels as though he is in an unfamiliar space: "This is a vision, else I am become/The native of another and worse world" (3, 1, 342). Moreover, it is precisely the sudden awareness of responsibility for Abel's life that causes Cain's confusion, as well as the fact that this awareness comes when Abel is already dead.[91] The proverbial השמר אחי אנכי is thus best rendered in the Byronic context as expressing Cain's gradual and painful realization of the tragedy that befell his brother and him as well as of its causes: "I *am* my brother's keeper?" The poem does not try to rewrite the biblical narrative to absolve Cain of Abel's murder; rather, it fills the gaps in this narrative in such a way that the traditional portrayal of Cain as nothing but a villain is deconstructed and the circumstances of Abel's death problematized. An all-important upshot of this strategy is that the deity's role in the killing moves to the foreground; reversing the roles of the judge and the judged to the fullest extent possible, Byron joins Cain (and Lucifer) in judging God.

The second abandonment of Cain is that announced by the angel who in the Agambenian framework represents the state: "A fugitive shalt thou/Be from this day, and vagabond on earth! (3, 1, 475–476) In a major departure from the biblical narrative, it is Adah who responds: "This punishment is more than he can bear./ Behold, thou driv'st him from the face of earth,/And from the face of God shall he be hid" (3, 1, 477–478). Contrary to Gen. 4:13–14, Cain asks not for death, but the angel tells him, "It must not be" (3, 1, 499), after marking his forehead so that he is exempt "from such deeds as [he] has done" (3, 1, 498). When Cain makes a similar request in the conversation with Lucifer, the latter not only denies it but also explains why; from the messenger of God, no explanations are forthcoming. Cain thus finds himself in an inescapable state of exception, related to both his family and God by the severance of all relations to them.

Nevertheless, he neither loses his inquisitive mind nor abandons his defiant attitude to the divine authority. After the angel marks his forehead, Cain's response is sarcastic: "Is there more? Let me meet it as I may" (3, 1, 501). He continues to question God's justice:

> That which I am, I am; I did not seek
> For life, nor did I make myself; But could I
> With my own death redeem him from the dust –
> And why not so? Let him return to day,

> And I lie ghastly! So shall be restored
> By God the life to him he loved; and taken
> From me a being I ne'er loved to bear (3, 1, 509–515).

Cain recognizes his guilt through the double "I am" and is ready to sacrifice his life to restore Abel's; the fact that God rules it out is yet another reason to question divine benevolence and fairness. If the deity loved Abel and if it hates Cain, why not restore the former to life by killing the latter – instead of forcing him to live? This raises the question: *What* is it that God loved in Abel? *What* is it that God sees and prefers in him: an offering or a person? It is probably not accidental that by reminding Cain that Abel was nourished by the milk of their mother, the angel implicitly portrays the latter as a suckling animal he used for sacrifice: "Did not the milk of Eve give nutriment/To him thou now see'st so besmeared with blood?" (3, 1, 488–490) This suggests that it was the life of Abel that God wanted to have as sacrifice. To quote Fisch,

> Byron's *Cain* is an example of the fascination which the theme of the "sacred executioner" still exercises whilst the associated guilt (for that too is part of the story) is shifted onto the victim! In the sequel, the murder of Abel carries with it a suggestion of the greatest human sacrifice of all. As every reader or spectator will gather, Abel at the end is given the Christ-role. "Oh God, receive thy servant and/Forgive his slayer. . . ," says Abel (3.1.318–19). In carrying out this particular sacrifice, Cain becomes the sacred executioner *par excellence*, the guilty, God-haunted, but necessary instrument of ultimate salvation.[92]

Abandoned by his family and God, Cain is now about to leave with Adah. The invisible third companion is Cain's guilt, associated as before with his subjectivity and impressed on his conscience by God. He tries to rid himself of this guilt by, in essence, sacrificing himself for Abel's sake, but God would not allow it. This means that Cain's anguish is permanent; he is offered no opportunity either to explain or to expiate it: "Who shall heal murder? What is done is done./Go forth. Fulfill thy days and be thy deeds/Unlike the last" (3, 1, 516–518). The command to behave in the future may sound like a hint of a future redemption, but even as such it does not foresee a release from the guilt incurred through the murder of Abel. In this sense, God's behavior in the poem is even more questionable than in the Bible where the deity at least tries to tell Cain something about doing or becoming better *before* he commits the irreversible act of violence (Gen. 4:6–7). Coming after the fact, a similar exhortation is inevitably tinged with mockery. Conversely, while in the Bible Cain's failure to respond can (although does not necessarily have to) be interpreted as indicative of his irredeemable nature and stubborn determination to commit murder, in the poem it smacks of both disdain and despair. Cain has nothing to say because he already understands his responsibility for the lives of others; the problem is that the price of this understanding is the death of his brother at his hands. The question "Why did not God prevent the murder?" thus becomes even more vexing.

All that said, there may be an even more profound, and arguably more relevant, message encoded in the angel's reference to Cain's future deeds. Perhaps all that Cain finally knows boils down to this guilty conscience. The death of Abel is what brings home to Cain his state of guilt. However, this consciousness also brings a sense of responsibility. As Mark Canuel notes, in Cain's new attitude "Byron stresses [that] religion does not consist only of a human's relationship with God but of one human's relationship with others."[93] This can also shed light on the meaning of Cain's above-mentioned vision of entering a new world. His doorway to the human world is a criminal act. His guilty consciousness carries within itself at least the possibility of redemption through the sense of responsibility. By admitting his guilt, Cain is taking responsibility for the world in which he lives, and that at the very least invites him to be careful in every action he takes from now on, just as the angel tells him. The issue then lies not in Cain's guilt per se but rather in what it will lead him to be and do. Can he stop killing his brother? This is a question faced by each new generation: Is it possible to achieve such a spirituality in which this does not happen anymore?[94] Eagleton's answer seems to be positive: "It is a question of neither denying nor appropriating the law, but of nurturing an ambivalence towards it more creative than that infantile ambivalence which causes pain."[95] Cain's spiritual journey of self-reflection and discovery may lead in this direction. It does not take him – and the audience – to Paradise-like places but to dark ones, because all of us, in certain ways, have killed our own brothers and sisters and have benefitted from people who are killed or abandoned, and nothing can erase that guilt. This is the moment in which Cain becomes human.

The guilt that we are discussing here is not that of "original sin" that does not interrogate the divine authority; this is why for Byron humanity begins with Cain rather than Adam.[96] It is the guilt not of submission but of endurance, guilt as the beginning of a troubling relationship with the other and the source of a critical analysis of the systems of power in the society because it is power, including religious authority, that reproduces death and injustice. Just as for Augustine Cain is a symbol of the Jews – bearers of the Old Testament and witnesses to the good news in Christ – and a paradigmatic denizen of the city of men, for Byron he is a witness against the tyranny of God and a paradigmatic champion of creation and fairness in life.[97] Even more important, he is witness to humanity. The poem invites the readers to look in the mirror of Cain and recognize him in ourselves, as the stranger that lives within us whose keepers we are to be. A typical literary product of modernity, which is characterized among other things by rejection of belief systems as means of social organization, *Cain* is also implacably postmodern due to its relentless pursuit of the questions that contemporary societies choose to raise.

The poem ends with Adah saying, "Peace be with him [Abel]" (3, 1, 561), and Cain responding, "But with me!" Paradoxically – but at this point, predictably, given that he has offered his life for Abel's – after grappling throughout the entire poem with the concept of death, he envies the dead brother. Will Cain ever find peace? As we shall see in the two concluding sections of this chapter, twentieth-century Spanish-language authors give different although by no means incompatible answers to this question.

The Cain within us: Jorge Luis Borges

In the Bible, the most obvious outcome of the murder that Cain commits is differentiation. Up to this point, the primeval family functions as a unit: Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit together and are together clothed, cursed, and banished from the garden of Eden. Cain and Abel are born in a quick succession, at least from the literary standpoint, and make sacrifices together or in equally quick succession; the only distinction between them lies in their occupations. After Abel's death, humanity for the first time ever divides into branches, never to be whole again (except, perhaps, for a brief moment on Noah's ark). Cain is spatially removed from the rest of the family, settling in the land of Nod, building his own city, and founding his own line that never explicitly mixes with other descendants of Adam and Eve.[98] Augustine emphasizes this separation, which for him gives rise to the dichotomy of the city of God and the city of men, discussing it in considerable detail and repeatedly insisting that it is absolute and irrevocable (XV, 17–18; see also XV, 8, 451). In Byron's *Cain*, the differentiation is less pronounced because the poem ends before its title character goes into exile, but the split between Cain and Adah on the one hand and the rest of the primeval family on the other is nevertheless made clear, especially in Eve's fiery curse.

Yet, the other side to the story is that in biblical terms all humans, no matter how far removed from each other by millennia of incessant differentiation, are children of Adam and Eve, and we still have much in common. It is only when group loyalties make us blind to this fact that we end up killing our brothers and sisters. This is the thrust of the poem "Juan Lopez and John Ward" by the famous Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges that alludes to the 1982 war between Great Britain and Argentina over the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas):

> Their luck was to live in a strange time
> The planet had been parceled out to different countries, each provided with loyalties, fond memories, with a past certainly heroic, with rights and grievances, with a particular mythology, bronze heroes, with anniversaries, demagogues, and symbols.
> That division, the work of cartographers, was sponsoring wars.
> Lopez was born in the city by the motionless river. Ward, on the outskirts of the city where Father Brown walked. He had studied Spanish to read Don Quixote. The other one professed a love for Conrad, who had been revealed to him in a classroom on Viamonte street.
> They would have been friends, but they only saw each other face to face once, on some islands exceedingly famous. And each one of them was Cain and each was Abel.
> They were buried together. Snow and corruption know them.
> This incident took place in a time we cannot understand.[99]

The poem underlines, above all, how similar John and Juan are in their differences. They share the same name in different languages; under different circumstances, their love for literature might have brought them together. Yet, their national identities set them apart and the only way for them to meet was in a war. For Borges, Juan and John re-enact in the twentieth century the tragedy of Cain and Abel.

Brothers by way of their humanity, due to the bad luck of living at the "strange time" of "arbitrary divisions" into political states, they not only develop different subjectivities but also kill each other as a result. The source of conflict and death is again a father figure – this time not a divine character but the fatherland where each man was brought up with his own loyalties, memories, mythology, anniversaries, and symbols. Their nations gave them identity but it was based on the exclusion of the other – or, more precisely, on John and Juan excluding each other. In the poem's paradoxical double vision, this made each of them Cain and Abel simultaneously: both are the victim, both are the executioner, and the division between them is superfluous. By killing the other, they also killed themselves. This is the climax of the story, the moment in which their subjectivities are confronted in a face-to-face encounter. Yet, they do not see each other as fellow human beings but as enemies because this is how the father figure of the political state educated them.

As we have examined in the previous section of the study, the members of the primeval family in Byron's poem address Cain as servants of God and end up "killing" him by pronouncing a curse that accentuates his condition as *homo sacer*. In Borges's text, John and Juan end up killing each other because each considers himself and the other primarily a servant of the respective fatherland. The violent foundation of fraternity in the story of Cain and Abel is reconstructed in the twentieth century under a different myth – that of the nation-state.

Borges thus exposes the problematic nature of the chosen, the *citizens*, by implicitly reading the biblical account in Kristevian terms. Each of the two characters is a stranger to himself because the Cains (John and Juan) – unwelcome for the sovereign power (of the other nation) and forced to kill (each by his own nation) – become the other of the community of Abels (Juan and John) who actually are the killers of their brothers. This is the pathos of the line: "And each one of them was Cain, and each one was Abel." The abandonment is double because Cain/Abel is also abandoned by the sovereign power that sends him to war so that he becomes the sacred executioner of his brother for the sake of the nation that benefits from death and that kills without committing homicide.

Byron and Borges rewrite in different social contexts the myth of the foundational killing in which, as we have discussed with regard to Augustine, the figure of a murderous but vanquished Cain lingering on the fringes buttresses an ethical community. Yet, when seen as a continuum, the two poems also suggest that ultimately fratricide accentuates the differentiation between brothers and sisters. Borges does not see (or at least does not show) an exit from this human quandary, accentuating instead the reproduction of death and highlighting the role of the father in the endless cycle of killing. César Vallejo proposes the possibility to assume the guilt and a different sense of responsibility that permits us to approach the other knowing that we will never be able to experience a full sense of solidarity, that we cannot overcome the gap that separates one body from another, that each of us is alone in her or his suffering.

Reaching for the other: César Vallejo

A native of Peru who spent much of his adult life in Europe, Vallejo is considered the most important Latin American poet of the twentieth century.[100] He had

a profound interest in the human condition; the existential reality that his poems explore is shaped by the uncertainty of life and death, by suffering and desperation, and by intense feelings of love, pity, and nostalgia. José Carlos Mariátegui describes the latter as "a sentimental or a metaphysical protest; a nostalgia of exile, of absence."[101] Vallejo's poems address the very fiber of existence, the mortality of the human being and the absurdity of the arbitrariness and confusion that somehow molds the individual reality. His work reflects the same existential anxiety as that tormenting Byron's Cain, who faces the impossibility of both ignoring and defeating death. Vallejo's voice is not that of the poet troubled exclusively by his personal destiny; in the deep agony of his oeuvre, he attempts to speak in the name of all humanity. The poems that I will examine show that Vallejo is aware of the impossibility of fully understanding and experiencing the suffering of the other. He was committed to revolutionary causes in Peru and Spain but the stance of his poetry is not that of defiance but rather of anguished uncertainty about the conditions of human existence.[102]

In Vallejo's rhetoric, the poetic persona is in conflict with religious orthodoxy. Institutionalized Christianity may not accept him but his emphasis on suffering and the other can be of benefit to the faith of individuals and religious communities. In some way, he may be close to the Latin American liberation theology that begins its theological speculation with the economic realities of the poor and marginalized, yet even liberation theologians would likely have a problem with Vallejo because he shows a deep conflict with religious faith itself. In the poem "The Eternal Dice" that appeared in *Los heraldos negros* (*The Black Heralds*, 1918; actually published in 1919), the first of Vallejo's three books of poetry, the poetic persona falls within a Christian framework not because it belongs there but because the poet reconceptualizes Christianity itself in such a way that it falls within a humanistic order. Mariátegui, who sets the tone for the analysis of this poem, offers a précis of this reversal in Vallejo's early poetry:

> There is nothing satanic or morbid in him. It is the pessimism of a spirit that endures and expiates "man's affliction" . . . He sums up the philosophical experience, he condenses the spiritual attitude, of a race and a people. There is no relationship or affinity between him and the nihilism or intellectual skepticism of the West. The pessimism of Vallejo, like the pessimism of the Indian, is not a belief or a feeling. It is tinged with an oriental fatalism that makes it closer to the Christian and mystic pessimism of the Slavs . . . The pessimism is full of tenderness and compassion, because it is not engendered by egocentricity and narcissism, disenchanted and exacerbated, as is the case almost throughout the romantic school. Vallejo feels all human suffering. His grief is not personal. His soul is "sad unto death" with the sorrow of all men.[103]

Mariátegui presents Vallejo as a witness to all humanity who realizes the utopian vision of the possibility to suffer as the other (who for Mariátegui is the Peruvian Indian). I would argue, however, that Vallejo's poems attempt to reach out to the other, to suffer as such, yet with the full awareness of this being impossible. This

awareness is what links "The Eternal Dice" with "I Am Going to Speak about Hope," written later in Vallejo's career, during his stay in Europe and included in *Poemas humanos* (*Human Poems*) – his last, posthumous book of poetry (1939).[104] Although he never dropped the anxious voice that tries to convey the suffering of existence, in the latter poem, reflecting "an attentiveness to history with a myriad of cultural and geographical references unavailable to Vallejo in his Peruvian years – including poems in which he expresses the outrageous discrepancy between intellectuality and human experience," there is no religious imagery. The poetic subject is indifferent to the hereafter, and does not quarrel with transcendental entities. However, I would argue that despite the deity's absence the poem implicitly accuses it of indifference to human suffering.

Los dados eternos/The eternal dice

My God, I am crying over the being I live;
it grieves me to have taken your bread;
but this poor thinking clay
is no scab fermented in your side:
you do not have Marys who leave you!

My God, had you been a man,
today you would know how to be God;
but you, who were always fine,
feel nothing for your own creation.
Indeed, man suffers you; God is he!

Today there are candles in my sorcerer eyes,
as in those of a condemned man –
my God, you will light all your candles
and we will play with the old die. . .
Perhaps, oh gambler, throwing for the fate of
the whole universe,
Death's dark-circled eyes will come up,
like two funeral snake eyes of mud.

My God, and this deaf, gloomy night,
you will not be able to gamble, for the Earth
is a worn die now rounded from
rolling at random,
it cannot stop but in a hollow
the hollow of an immense tomb.[105]

The religious imagery is the point of entry for the analysis of this poem. The phrase "My God" comes close to being the poem's refrain; it is repeated four times, three of them at the beginning of a stanza.[106] Yet, even though this phrase implies a close relationship between the deity and a believer, so close that the former can be addressed in a personal way, the feelings expressed by the poetic subject are those of reproach and disappointment. "My God" is then a frustrated

reaction to the divine as the impossible presence, the one who has created an unfathomable emptiness.[107] The discontent is so profound that the poetic subject detaches from himself: "I am crying over the being that I live." He is able to see himself as a suffering subject that inhabits a body. In other words, the suffering is so complex that the poetic "I" has a split sense of identity and is able to recognize its own body as something outside of itself: to live and to have a body is the human condition over which the speaker cries.[108] Byron's Cain expresses a similar emotion in his initial encounter with Lucifer:

> I live
> But live to die: and living, see nothing
> To make death hateful, save an innate clinging,
> A loathsome and yet all invincible
> Instinct of life, which I abhor, as I
> Despise myself, yet cannot overcome –
> And so I live (3, 1, 109–115).

The *inclusio* that the repeated phrase "I live" forms around Cain's description of his existence points to the same desperation as that permeating "The Eternal Dice." Both speakers recognize themselves as living beings who suffer; the difference is that in Vallejo's poem, the poetic subject explicitly identifies God as the source of his bottomless anguish. The crying mentioned at its very beginning turns out to be more than weeping that comes from the sense of helplessness and desperation; it grows into a scream, a shriek at the absurdity of existence. Discontent with the divine becomes clear already in the next line, "It grieves me to have taken your bread"; owing the deity a favor increases the speaker's sense of abandonment. The regret is so profound that it is like a heavy weight he carries around; the inability to remove it makes his feeling of desperation even deeper.[109]

Having received food from God, Vallejo's poetic persona lives from the beginning of the poem in the quandary of inclusion but at the same time he cannot overcome the exclusion that the divine presence creates in him. It is a presence that brings emptiness, and all the speaker can do is cry over and regret the relationship itself. If the bread symbolizes, through the Eucharist, the body of Christ, the poetic "I" is in a sense guilty of the crucifixion, of the suffering of the crucified other. At the same time, all through the poem it is this "I" that suffers on the cross, nailed to it by the paternal divine authority; the near-refrain "my God" is vaguely reminiscent of Jesus's anguished cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, and the mention of "Marys" points in the same direction by evoking two women by that name in Jesus's life, his mother and Mary Magdalene.[110] To Vallejo, the crucifixion is permanent because it testifies to the deep pain of the human condition. A major part of this pain is caused, it would seem, by the fact that God never speaks in the poem and therefore may not be listening. Like *homo sacer*, Vallejo's poetic persona is abandoned by the sovereign; he is in a relation of inclusive exclusion. Nevertheless, the very fact of him speaking signifies his enduring agency. He speaks as "poor *thinking* clay" (emphasis mine), which implies that he has not given up on questioning his condition of existence, that the cry is more than weeping, and that the weight he carries

around ultimately does not define him.[111] The knowledge that he acquires as a result of his capacity to think is that of abandonment, making this capacity the source of his grieving. Because he thinks, he feels the rejection. The address "my God" thus does not entail love for the divine, only the paradox that the capacity to think about the human condition brings about the feeling of dread.

Divine detachment and indifference already become fully evident by the end of the poem's first stanza: "this poor thinking clay/is no scab fermented in your side:/ you do not have Marys who leave you." The allusion is to the creation account, in which the first human being is created out of dust and God breathes life into it (Gen. 2:7). Yet, the poetic subject is the fallen human, the Adam banned from Paradise – and sentenced to "return to dust from which he has been taken" (Gen. 3:19). God has allowed him to acquire the capacity to think (by eating of the tree of knowledge) but expelled him from the Garden of Eden for doing that because as a result he became a "scab fermented in [God's] side." Put differently, for God an inquisitive human is no more than a minor nuisance, a boil – certainly, not a partner in a dialogue and, properly speaking, not even a subordinate. The deity does not relate to "poor thinking clay" and feels "nothing for [its] own creation." The poem underlines the solitude of the divine that does not need other beings and therefore cannot be hurt by abandonment, by "Marys who leave [it]" and he cannot feel guilt either. This is the exactly what Lucifer tells Cain: "Goodness would not make/Evil, and what else hath he made? But let him/Sit on his vast and solitary throne,/Creating worlds, to make eternity/Less burthensome to his immense existence/And unparticipated solitude" (1, 1, 146–151).

The monologue of the poetic persona plays with the idea of God's presence, central to the Christian *Weltanschauung*. Although the deity is everywhere, the poetic speaker asserts that it is alienated from the human condition: "My God, had you been a man/today you would know how to be God . . . Indeed, man suffers you; God is he!" Not being mortal, God cannot suffer as humanity does; there is an abyss separating the two experiences.[112] The Christian framework is thus reversed; the poetic subject does not fit in the religious subject: while the latter, after the manner of Byron's Adam, sees good coming out of evil and explains it as God's providence, the former is a suffering being that endures God's abandonment. The urgency of entreaty for God to experience the anguished uncertainty of the poetic "I" is manifest in the word "today," which appears for the first time, accentuating the immediacy of suffering and the solitude of humanity amid the paradox of the divine presence being, in fact, an absence.

At the same time, the poetic persona moves gradually and consistently to challenge God. The crying of the first stanza, which is already a challenge, is amplified into the assertion "man suffers you; God is he!" that overturns the very foundation of the entire monotheistic tradition, and certainly of Christianity. Rather than God becoming human in Jesus and thereby redeeming humanity, humans become divine in the sovereign abandonment by the deity – and, if the analogy is taken to its logical extreme, redeem God. The speaker asserts that had the deity truly become human, it would be able to understand him; yet, as a perfect divine being, the absolute other who is never wrong and does not know temporality or pain, God cannot grasp the human condition, much less feel sorrow and help a human. Contrariwise, humans have at least the capacity to share the pain of the other

and therefore to relate to the deity; to be human is to "suffer God."[113] In demanding God to be "a man," the poem seeks, despite the gender-specific language, to embrace the painful voice of all human beings.

"Today" shows up again as the first word of the third stanza, pushing "my God" two lines down and thus accentuating the urgent desire of the poetic subject to do something about humanity's condition of unceasing anguish. To that end, he turns on the lights and demands that God do the same. In the first two stanzas, the poem's "I" was speaking in the darkness that enveloped its life and exacerbated its sense of abandonment; the speaker was addressing the deity but could not know if it was actually there.[114] Now, God is dared to show up and roll the "old die."[115] By envisioning a denouement for the speaker's (and, by extension, humanity's) condition of suffering and abandonment, this stanza – with eight lines, by far the longest of the poem's four – becomes the climax of the entire piece.

Yet, while reaching for light the stanza remains enveloped in a dark desperation. The candles lit by the speaker burn in his "sorcerer eyes" – an expression that brings to mind Job's summoning of the sorcerers in the curse of the day when he was born (3:8) while also resembling what Abel sees in Cain after his journey with Lucifer: "Thine eyes are flashing with unnatural light,/Thy cheek is flushed with an unnatural hue,/Thy words are fraught with an unnatural sound" (3, 1, 185–187).[116] The poetic "I" is a "condemned man" (a Cain, perhaps?), and the only outcome of "playing with the old die" that he can envision is "snake eyes" – the lowest possible combination of one pip on each die that triggers an associative chain leading to death and funeral. Probably not by accident, the stanza ends with the word "mud": in accordance with Gen. 3:19, the "poor thinking clay" of the first stanza now returns to that from which it came.

There is no vision of hope in "The Eternal Dice"; everything is absurdity and the "deaf, gloomy night" of the "immense tomb." As Britton put it, "despite moments of desolate certainty – and here Vallejo's undoubted humanity is revealed – he remains a victim of doubts, searchings, and vacillations. Vallejo never speaks from a viewpoint that is either consistently philosophical or philosophically consistent."[117] There is a note of irony even in the imagery of lights. Artificial sources of illumination play an important role in a number of religious traditions; in particular, Roman Catholics and many other Christian denominations light candles as a sign of belief in God, supplication, or penitence. The ritual expresses the believer's confidence or hope that there is something out there that can listen and respond to her or him. In Vallejo's poem, candles are lit in an entirely different context, that of the speaker inviting God to play – mindlessly, it would seem – with the fates of the world.

The appearance of Death in the poem's third stanza completes the triangle whose other two corners are the concepts the speaker develops in questioning the divine – life and suffering. In line with what we have repeatedly seen in Byron's *Cain*, capitalization elevates Death as the only verifiable reality of the human condition. Paradoxically, this reality is invoked at the climactic moment of contention with divine tyranny. The poetic subject knows the end result of God's game and finds some sense of liberation in accepting the reality of death at the end of his life. This again brings to mind Lucifer, who knows that he has lost but exhorts Cain to "think and endure and form an inner world/In your own bosom, where

the outward fails./So shall you nearer be the spiritual/Nature, and war triumphant with your own" (2, 2, 462–466).

The final stanza again begins with "my God," and again the poetic "I" addresses the deity out of a space devoid of sound and light.[118] This time, however, the speaker realizes that God has been playing with humanity for eternity – which finally explains the poem's title. The nearly spherical shape of our planet is a consequence of "rolling at random" and therefore a graphic testimony to the arbitrariness of the human condition. Similar to Cain after his journey with Lucifer, this is the only knowledge that the poetic subject truly acquires. The emphasis on the word "hollow," repeated at the end of the poem, underlines the nothingness of human existence. The speaker accepts the inevitability of death, finding the only solace in telling God that he is not deceived: the game is rigged; the die can only stop in a tomb.[119] He is defiant but the defiance does not seem to lead anywhere.

That, in turn, may have to do with the fact that the poetic "I" of "The Eternal Dice" is alone in facing the lonely God: although the speaker implies that he addresses the deity on behalf of all humans, other suffering individuals are conspicuously absent from the poem. This is the primary weakness of its persona; in the words of Byron's Lucifer, "spirits and men, at least we sympathise/And, suffering in concert, make our pangs/Innumerable, more endurable/By the unbounded sympathy of all/With all!" (1, 1, 156–61) This aspect of Vallejo's outlook drastically changes in the poem that I will discuss in the next section of the study.

Voy a hablar de la esperanza/I am going to speak about hope

> I do not suffer this pain as César Vallejo. I do not ache now as an artist, as a man or even as a simply living being. I do not suffer this pain as a Catholic, as a Mohammedan or as an atheist. Today I simply suffer. If my name were not César Vallejo, I would still suffer this very same pain. If I were not an artist, I would still suffer it. If I were not a man or even a living being, I would still suffer it. If I were not a Catholic, atheist or Mohammedan, I would still suffer it. Today I suffer from further below. Today I simply suffer.
>
> I ache now without any explanation. My pain is so deep, that it never had a cause nor does it lack a cause now. What could have been it cause? Where is that thing so important, that it might stop being its cause? Its cause is nothing; nothing could have stopped being its cause. For what has this pain been born, for itself? My pain is from the north wind and from the south wind, like those neuter eggs certain rare birds lay in the wind. If my bride were dead, my pain would be the same. If they slashed my throat all the way through, my pain would be the same. If life were, in short, different, my pain would be the same. Today I suffer from further above. Today I simply suffer.
>
> I look at the hungry man's pain and see that his hunger is so far away from my suffering, that were I to fast unto death, at least a blade of grass would always sprout from my tomb. The same with the lover. How engendered his blood is, in contrast to mine without source or consumption!

> I believe until now that all things of the universe were, inevitably, parents or offspring. But behold that my pain today is neither parent nor offspring. It lacks a back to darken, as well as having too much chest to dawn and if they put it in a dark room, it would give light and if they put it in a brightly lit room, it would cast no shadow. Today I suffer come what may. Today I simply suffer.[120]

In its structure, the poem resembles the litanies or responsive readings practiced in the religious services of some communities, with the chorus of parishioners repeating the same phrase – in this case, "Today I simply suffer" – after each section recited by the leader. Although the divine is never mentioned, at least not explicitly, and the speaker's attention is wholly devoted to human interactions, this pattern accentuates the poem's role as a religious text.[121] "Pain" and "suffering" are the most important words: they occur twenty-five times, far more frequently than any other nouns.[122] Vallejo does not offer any solutions to these conditions. However, as we shall see, the poetic "I" does not wallow in the guilt he experiences but instead embraces a different sense of responsibility towards the other.

In the first stanza, the poetic persona begins by shedding his identities; he divests himself of each and every mark of distinctiveness: name, profession, gender, religion, and even biological status.[123] Vallejo deconstructs binary opposites – atheist vs. believer, Christian vs. Muslim, capitalist vs. Communist, man vs. woman, black vs. white, native vs. settler, and rich vs. poor – opposites that, as we have seen in Borges's poem, produce othering and ultimately death. Throughout the stanza, there is a gradual downward movement to a raw suffering unclothed of all specifics: "Today I suffer from further below. Today I simply suffer." The second stanza begins, accordingly, with the assertion that what is left after the cultural selves are gone is a pain that comes from nowhere and therefore from everywhere: "It never had a cause nor does it lack cause now . . . Its cause is nothing; nothing could have stopped being its cause."[124]

The third stanza is drastically shorter than the first two. The poetic persona visualizes "the hungry man's pain and see that his hunger is so far away from my suffering, that were I to fast unto death, at least a blade of grass would always sprout from my tomb." The poetic "I" not only recognizes itself as a suffering being but is capable of identifying that the other suffers as well. Nevertheless, the identification is not complete. Even if the speaker wants to share the suffering of the other, he cannot do it. There is always an existential separation between the suffering of the poetic "I" and the pain of the hungry man. Even after death, the speaker would not be able to experience fully the pain of someone who has no food at all because he would still have a shoot of grass to eat.[125] This imagery communicates the impossibility of entirely sympathizing with the suffering of the other, the realization that such connection is not achievable, but this is precisely what makes the poetic subject strive even more to reach out to the hungry man and understand his suffering. The poem then makes it clear, if implicitly, that before trying to understand suffering and do something about it, we need to realize the hopelessness of the former task. In the moment that the poetic persona grasps this paradox, it is the source of deep distress: he wants to reach out to the hungry man

but cannot do it. This generates a different sense of responsibility because the possibility of hurting the other is always present. The intervention to help the other begins with the awareness of the total separation.

The final stanza follows up by accentuating the sense of lack and guilt that is already present in the realization that the poetic persona cannot stop the hungry man's pain. This is the Kierkegaardian experience of dread, the anxiety that sin presupposes itself. The speaker sees himself as inadequate: "But behold that my pain today is neither parent nor offspring. It lacks a back to darken, as well as having too much chest to dawn and if they put it in a dark room, it would not give light and if they put it in a brightly lit room, it would cast no shadow." The vision conjured up by the poetic persona – that simply of suffering – is utopian because it is impossible not to suffer as someone or something. César Vallejo suffers as César Vallejo. Yet, it is precisely the identity as someone – for example, Juan or John in Borges's poem – that hinders the relationship with the other.

Thus Vallejo early on puts his finger on the conflicting nature of the discourse of human rights that begins with the supposition of a generic human subject. If the poetic "I" who saw the hungry man as a victim and as a subject had the capacity to eliminate his hunger, it would be following the basic ideology of this discourse: identifying the suffering in humanity and doing something to eradicate it. There is nothing problematic about that unless, as often happens, human rights initiatives fail to grasp that in many instances their mission to eradicate pain ends up in totalitarian nightmare where, as Alain Badiou put it, "Every will to inscribe an idea of justice or equality turns bad. Every collective will to the Good creates Evil."[126] According to Badiou, when humanitarian crusades against suffering see the other as simply a living being, bare life, a victim of evil socio-political systems,

> we are inevitably pushed to a conclusion quite opposite to the one that the principle of life seems to imply. For this 'living being' is in reality contemptible, and *he will indeed be held in contempt*. Who can fail to see that in our humanitarian expeditions, interventions, embarkations or charitable *légionnaires*, the Subject presumed to be universal is split? On the side of the victims, the haggard animal exposed on television screens. On the side of the benefactors, conscience and the imperative to intervene. And why does this splitting always assign the same roles to the same sides? Who cannot see that this ethics which rests on the misery of the world hides, behind its victim-Man, the good-Man, the white-Man?[127]

Here, we deal again with *homo sacer*, the subject who lives in parentheses, included and excluded, the target of humanitarian interventions, often by violent means, which while intending to protect life require its annihilation. This is the problem that Vallejo addresses in this poem. A complete understanding of the suffering of the other is impossible, and the conceit of being able to intervene and eradicate it may turn bad and create more suffering and evil, perpetuating the killing of the brothers and sisters without committing homicide because it is in the name of goodness that the crimes are committed.

Why then does the poem include the word "hope" in its title? Certainly, this is not the hope that is implicit in human rights discourse, the hope of ending all suffering and eradicating all evil. As we have just discussed, this humanitarian vision has all too often produced its opposite – more evil, suffering, and death. Vallejo does, however, express the hope of the hopeless who decides not to give in or give up. It is a sense of hopelessness that paradoxically brings out the only hope there is for us: the sacrifice of our very selves as they are shaped by the politics of identity for the sake of others. The reason, suggests the poem, is that there is nothing but this: we are in *abandonment* in pursuing the utopian vision of not suffering as someone. The poetic subject is once again *homo sacer*.

The absence of a paternal/divine figure in Vallejo's poem also speaks about the kind of hope it communicates. The poetic "I" does not relate to the hungry man as brother or sister: "I believed until now that all things of the universe were, inevitably, parents or offspring. But behold that my pain today is neither parent nor offspring."[128] The relationship with the suffering other transcends the fraternal connection. As Kristeva says, "We are far removed from a call to brotherhood, about which one has ironically pointed out its debt to paternal and divine authority – 'In order to have brothers there must be a father.'"[129] It is in the exclusion of the paternal/divine/national identity that brothers and sisters paradoxically can begin to see each other as fellow immortal sufferers. When the national and religious spaces disappear, the poetic persona can see that what is left is his condition as an orphan, and as such, he can approach the other.[130] Perhaps the hope lies in seeing the other as a Kristevian stranger who lives within ourselves and who can be approached but never assimilated completely because doing so leads to othering and thence to evil. To quote Badiou again,

> Every intervention in the name of civilization *requires* an initial contempt for the situation as a whole, including its victims. And this is why the reign of 'ethics' coincides, after decades of courageous critiques of colonialism and imperialism, with today's sordid self-satisfaction in the 'West,' with the insistent argument according to which the misery of the Third World is the result of its own incompetence, its own inanity – in short, of its *subhumanity*.[131]

Conclusion

The preceding close readings of Byron, Borges, and Vallejo reveal that they (and their characters or poetic personae) are precisely the kind of people whom Augustine dismissed as being more ready to raise questions than capable of understanding the answers (XV, 1, 411). They do question the divine modus operandi – in Gen. 4:1–16 and overall – and they refuse to accept prefabricated answers. As a result, they achieve something that few if any biblical scholars have achieved: they give voice to the exiles, the subhuman, the banished subjects of the city of God, the ethical community. Their voices challenge the systems of sovereign power by accentuating the anguished liminal state of *homo sacer* and interrogating the conditions of life surrounded by suffering and death. This also enables them to address – and perhaps to start resolving – the thorny issues of interaction with the other.

My own reading of Gen. 4:1–16 will be inspired by these authors but in one important respect I will not follow them. Like the story's ancient interpreters, they do not consider themselves constrained by the short and terse biblical account, and rightfully so. Byron freely modifies it, adding characters (Lucifer, Adah, and Zillah) as well as long conversations and removing details (in his poem, God does not speak to Cain before Abel's murder, and Cain does not ask for protection), while Borges and Vallejo engage the Bible on the conceptual rather than narrative level (Vallejo does not even mention Cain and Abel). Although the convention of modern biblical scholarship that nothing can be read into the analyzed text or removed from it at will is open to challenge, in the next, concluding chapter I will follow this convention.

Notes

1 The critical apparatus for the nomenclature of the poem comes from Truman Guy Steffan, *Lord Byron's Cain: Twelve Essays and a Text with Variants and Annotations* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 159–258. The poem is divided into three acts as pointed out by the first Arabic numeral. The second Arabic numeral is the scene of the act. The last Arabic numbers indicates the line(s) in the poem from where the citation comes. An online copy of the poem, without the critical apparatus, is available at books.google.com as *Cain: A Mystery Embellished with Coloured Engravings*. See also Edward E. Bostetter, ed., *Selected Works of George Gordon, Lord Byron* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1972).

2 This classification mostly follows Unterseher, "The Mark of Cain," 92, although she views typology as a kind of allegory (see her chapter, "Cain and Abel in Pre-Augustinian Exegetical Tradition").

3 According to Unterseher, "Whereas these earlier exegetes focused primarily on the two sacrifices of Cain and Abel for their typology, presenting them as a type of the contrast between Judaism and Christianity, Augustine would shift his attention primarily to the punishment of Cain to form his typology between Cain and the Jews" ("The Mark of Cain," 10).

4 Unterseher, "The Mark of Cain," 3–4.

5 Ibid., 3. See her Chapter 3 for an extensive analysis of this emphasis in formative Judaism, from the last part of the first century B.C.E. until the time of the Church fathers and normative Judaism.

6 Unterseher, 58–66. For Philo, virtue includes character traits that ultimately do not allow the existential situation of the primeval family after the expulsion from Paradise to be questioned. He exalts obedience to the divine command.

7 Michael Simpson, *Closet Performances: Political Exhibition and Prohibition in the Dramas of Byron and Shelley* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 267.

8 Philip W. Martin, *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 165.

9 Robert Dodsley, ed., *A Select Collection of Old Plays* (London: J. Nichols, 1780), 1: xxxvi-xxxvii.

10 Ibid., xli.

11 Martin, *Byron*, 167.

12 Ibid.

13 Quinones, *Changes*, 89, 92.

14 Juan Eduardo Cirlot, "Journey," in *A Dictionary of Symbols* (trans. Jack Sage; ed. Juan Eduardo Cirlot; London: Routledge, 1971), 165; Federico Revilla, "Viaje," in *Diccionario de Iconografía y Simbología* (ed. Federico Revilla; Madrid: Cátedra, 2010), 695–7.

15 Quinones, *Changes*, 107.
16 Ibid., 108.
17 Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, 2.2.3, quoted in Unterseher, 87.
18 I have borrowed the term from Quinones who argues that the regenerate Cain becomes an essential theme for modernity (*Changes*, 99).
19 The idea is common in pre-Augustinian ancient interpretations. It can also be found in Jerome's *Epistula* 36, which preserves a fragment of Hippolytus's commentary on Genesis that makes a typological connection between Cain and the devil. See *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 5:169, cited in Unterseher, "The Mark of Cain," 77.
20 Evans's *Reception History*, 149–51, 181–90 is another example of recent work in reception history that deals with how the Bible's interpretation in secondary work functions.
21 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread* (trans. Walter Lowrie; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 38.
22 Ibid., 40.
23 Ibid., 37.
24 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990), 174.
25 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (London: Collins, 1966), 158.
26 Kierkegaard, *Dread*, 38.
27 Simpson, *Closet Performances*, 265.
28 Kierkegaard, *Dread*, 44.
29 Ibid., 38.
30 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 177.
31 Kierkegaard, *Dread*, 34.
32 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 180.
33 Kierkegaard, *Dread*, 44.
34 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 177.
35 See Eagleton's analysis of desire and the creation of the subject (*Aesthetic*, 263).
36 All along, Eve remarks that the duty of the primeval family as servants of God is to praise and obey the deity. This duty is what she must fulfill at all costs, even to the point of forgetting everything else. That is the reason she has repented and moved forward and asks Cain to do the same. Yet, at the same time, it is an impossible duty because of the reality of guilt. Therefore, in Eve's desire to see Cain content, what she is looking for is to fulfill her own desire. She wants to do good to Cain but this does not protect her from the guilt of the expulsion from Paradise. Her hidden desire behind the ethical imperative may turn against itself so that she, as the poem shows, becomes unable to see the suffering of the other. The issue does not boil down to the reductionist claim that behind every ethical act there is a "pathological" motivation. As Lacan has pointed out, it is when desire itself no longer is grounded in a "pathological" interest and the performance of one's duty overlaps with one's desire that law and desire become close relatives. In the case of Eve, she will not be able to perceive Cain's suffering after the death of Abel and curses her surviving son, at least in part out of duty. See Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter; London: Routledge, 1992), 311–25; Žižek, *Violence*, 195–6.
37 Byron commented with regard to what he called "the politics of Paradise" that the subject of his examination was not only religion but also the political mobilization of religious beliefs. See Leslie Marchand, ed., *Byron's Letters and Journals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 8: 216.
38 The conditions of existence in the primeval social context in the poem correlates in the neoliberal economic ideology with the punishing state that increasingly criminalizes a range of social behaviors and dissensus in order to reduce the population to clean and obedient citizens able to assimilate and function according to the ideologies of the market. The family then, in contemporary Western societies, becomes another punishing apparatus to maintain the status quo of neoliberalism, see Henry Giroux, *Neoliberalism's Way on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014), 14, 22, 26, 96, 136.

39 The concept of functionalism presupposes the subject's commitment, within his or her temporality, to finding a role within the society (as a spouse, friend, worker, etc.) that makes it possible to fit in the best way possible. This presupposes a stable, ordered social system and leaves outside the subjects who do not accept the status quo.
40 In *Fear and Trembling,* Kierkegaard develops the concept of three stages of subjectivity. The first is the aesthetic stage, at which the person (a kind of Don Juan) contemplates the world without any commitment or positive relation towards a system or a community, living moment by moment. At the second, ethical stage, the individual is committed to finding his or her roles in society and functioning as the subject who strives to live the good life, Agamben's *bios*. However, Kierkegaard asserts that the ethical stage still remains within the constrictions of temporality and posits a third one, at which the religious relation with the Absolute raises the subject from his or her temporality and connects him or her directly with God. At the aesthetic and ethical stage, the subject is empty because the state of no commitment to the society at the former and the duty imposed by the society at the latter do not complete the individual's existence. At the religious stage, the person leaves behind the temporality of the initial stages and faces God directly. Abraham is then Kierkegaard's paradigmatic example of the latter subject who lives in a dangerous relationship with God. It is a relation based on the absurdity of following the commandment to destroy life, and not just life in general but that of one's own son. Abraham represents the individual who experiences an intense struggle between the general and the particular. The agonized individual, Abraham, tears himself away from the first two stages with much fear and trembling.
41 Bernard Blackstone, *Byron: A Survey* (London: Longman, 1975), 244–5.
42 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 263.
43 As Nick Mansfield explains, "At the heart of [the subject's] very being is a sense of *lack*. It endlessly seeks to compensate for this lack, to fill the hole at its core. This longing for self-completion is Lacan's definition of *desire*." See *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 45.
44 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 267.
45 Ibid., 263.
46 Quinones, *Changes*, 87.
47 See Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 45.
48 Freud remarks: "The super-ego does not trouble itself enough about the facts of the mental constitution of human beings. It issues a command and does not ask whether it is possible for people to obey it." In *Civilization, Society and Culture: Group Psychology, Civilization and Its Discontent and Other Works* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 337.
49 As Žižek notes regarding this idea, "And if God does exist, then everything is permitted – to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, as the instruments of His will; clearly, a direct link to God justifies our violation of any "merely human" constraints and considerations (as in Stalinism, where the reference to the big Other of historical Necessity justifies absolute ruthlessness)," *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 96.
50 Lucifer, as the analysis of the poem will later show, is Cain's double.
51 As noted by Mansfield, at the Lacanian symbolic stage, "The system of meanings and identities from which your selfhood derives is not your own. This system is what Lacan calls the *symbolic order* . . . At its very birth, [the subject] only gets a sense of its own definition from the outside, specifically from an image of itself returned to it from the world" (*Subjectivity*, 43).
52 For a different view of the relationship between Lucifer and Cain, see Simpson, *Closet Performances*, 266.
53 For an analysis of the double in literature see Quinones, *Changes*, 97–101; Ralph Tymms, *Doubles in Literary Psychology* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1949), 15; Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (ed. and trans. Harry Tucker; Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971). Claire Rosenfield, "The Shadow

Within: The Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double," in *Stories of the Double* (ed. Albert J. Guerard; Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1967), 311–31 presents the double as "shadow self" with "antisocial tendencies."

54 Quinones, *Changes*, 98.

55 Alain Badiou asserts that the human being is immortal for the same reason, the acknowledgement of his/her suffering as a point of departure to interact with another human being. Badiou asserts that "if we do not set out from this point . . . if we equate Man with the simple reality of his living being, we are inevitably pushed to a conclusion quite opposite to the one that the principle of life seems to imply. For this 'living being' is in reality contemptible, and *he will indeed be held in contempt*." This is another instance of the *homo sacer*. See, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (trans. Peter Hallward; London: Verso, 2001), 12.

56 The imagery of "presence" is common in the biblical tradition. For example, in Psalm 27 the speaker yearns to "behold the beauty of the Lord" and to "seek his face." The psalmist wants to feel the presence of God and live "in the house of the Lord." Against this background, the poem asserts that the face of God does not reveal goodness and beauty, only evil.

57 In medieval Europe, the devil was a major religious, literary, and artistic figure, seen especially often as a trickster and a tempter. In mysteries, he was usually depicted as small, ugly, and sordid. Byron's anthropomorphic Lucifer is none of the above: splendid, sad, intelligent, and concerned about fairness, he bears a much closer resemblance to the positive figures of medieval Christianity. See, e.g., Jérôme Baschet, "Diablo," in *Diccionario del Occidente Medieval* (trans. Ana Isabel Carrasco Manchado; Madrid: Akal, 2003), 212–20.

58 Wolf Z. Hirst, "My Brother's Keeper: Biblical Heritage in Byron's Cain," in *Byron Heritage and Legacy* (ed. Cheryl A. Wilson; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 83.

59 Cain here encounters the fundamental lie in the promise of the symbolic order – that language makes sense, that things stabilize in language as there is a signified for every signifier. This demonstrates the modernity of Byron's poem; to quote Quinones, "rather than Wordsworth or Keats or Shelley, the romantic who anticipates modernism is Byron" (*Changes*, 105).

60 Here we can recall the symbolism of journey introduced at the beginning of the chapter.

61 Kristeva, *Strangers*, 1.

62 Interestingly, when Cain first mentions death, the word is not capitalized: "The tree of life/ Was withheld from us by my father's folly,/ While that of knowledge, by my mother's haste Was pluck'd too soon; and all the fruit is death!" (1, 1, 107–108) A possible implication of this is that on his own Cain is unable or reluctant to form the association between death and the deity; it is only in the conversation with Lucifer that the idea begins to take shape.

63 In Mansfield's words, "The mirror-stage compensates for, and overturns, [the] lack of perspective, [the] sense of disproportion and randomness. The mirror stage supplies the self with an image of its own coordination, of system and unit. The limbs are no longer part of the outside world. That world is separate, and the limbs now seem part of a simply unified whole that is set off against that world. This complex experience, where the subject feels its unity and separation in response to what it has been of itself in the mirror, becomes – because it is governed by the image – the *imaginary*" (*Subjectivity*, 42).

64 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 177.

65 Kristeva, *Strangers*, 10.

66 Ibid.

67 In the symbolic order, the subject still maintains, even if at an unconscious level, a pursuit of the sense of completion that it felt during the momentary stage of the imaginary. This is what is called the lack, and the endless quest to compensate it, the longing for self-completion is what Lacan defines as desire. The subject tries to fill its desire with each separate thing that it pursues in life, such as emotional and sexual relationships but also the cultural ideas of nation, race, and material conditions. Yet, no *demand* will be able to satisfy desire, and each of them only offers a momentary possibility of

satisfaction. This tension between endless desire and the demands that fail to appease it is what makes it impossible for love to meet knowledge. See Mansfield, *Subjectivity*, 45–6.

68 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington; New York: Grove, 1963), 53.

69 Ibid.

70 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 182.

71 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Freud Library, 1985), 337.

72 Lucifer is wretched in the same sense as Fanon's native: "He is treated as an inferior but he is not convinced of his inferiority" and ready to strike back (*Wretched of the Earth*, 53). Yet Fanon's binary opposition of the settler and the native does not take into account that the oppressed often (almost always, in fact) wants to become the oppressor. Put differently, the native has a settler inside him or her; as Camus says in *The Rebel* "the slave begins by demanding justice and ends by wanting to wear a crown" (quoted in Quinones, *Changes*, n.1. 262).

73 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 143.

74 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 54.

75 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-other* (trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav; New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 91–122.

76 However, he does not extend this reading to God. After all, the latter could also ask Cain: "Am I your brother's keeper and yours?" In Byron's poem, this definitely is not the case, nor, it would seem, in the Bible. For Levinas, it is possible to put oneself in the place of the other, to coincide with him/her; for Kristeva, the other remains a stranger even if she or he lives within us.

77 Walter Lowe, "The Bitterness of Cain," *Literature & Theology* 12 (1998): 382; see also Hirst, "Contexts of Eden in 'Don Juan' and the Mysteries," in *Approaches to Teaching Byron's Poetry* (ed. Frederick W. Shilstone; New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1991), 132.

78 For Levinas, the "face" as signifier is vital for the emphasis on the other who deserves protection and unconditional respect. Žižek, (*Violence*, 55–8) critiques the Levinasian emphasis on the "face" because it is an empty signifier. There is a danger in the belief in being able to coincide with the other because it means that the other disappears – or, as Spivak says, it is impossible to represent the other because it implies that the other cannot speak for and represent himself or herself ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *The PostColonial Study Reader* (eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin; London: Routledge, 1995), 24–8.

79 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 177–8.

80 "Oh, what a miserable, unlucky wretch am I!/ Please explain to me, heavens, given the way you treat me, what crime I committed against you with my birth; although if I was born, my crime is clear, and the severity of your sentence has sufficient cause, for birth itself is man's greatest crime" (*Life is a Dream*, Act 1).

81 Under totalitarian regimes, such as Nazism or Communism, obedience is to a great extent – although not entirely – ensured by fear.

82 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.

83 In this case, the poem follows some ancient interpreters who also suggest that God's pleasure was communicated through fire. The earliest is Theodotion's translation that rendered the verb שעה (to pay attention, Gen. 4:4) as ἐπύρισεν "he/it burned." This interpretation may be related with Pentateuchal stories about Aaron (Lev. 9:24), or Gideon (Judg 6:21), Elijah (1 Kgs. 18:38) and Solomon (2 Chr 7:1), in which fire consuming the sacrifice is the signal of God's pleasure with the offering and the one offering it. Other interpreters who also used this idea are: Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, 4:4–5; Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis*, 3.3.3. For English translations on these interpretations, see Kugel*, Traditions of the Bible*, 159. These interpretations then

answer the question: How did Cain and Abel know which offering was accepted? Since fire is a sign of approval in the stories already mentioned, Abel is then in the company of Aaron, Gideon, Elijah, and Solomon who received the deity's recognition for their offering. Cain is excluded because he does not offer his sacrifice in the correct way.

84 Harold Fisch, "Byron's Cain as Sacred Executioner," in *Byron, the Bible, and Religion: Essays from the Twelfth International Byron Seminar* (ed. Wolf Z. Hirst; Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), 34.

85 See Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 10–20, 143; William Klassen, *Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

86 As Mansfield says, in the symbolic order, "The tension between the endless desire that is the source of human motivations, and the hopeless demands that fail to appease it, is the very heart of the human tragedy, according to Lacan . . . All the demands we pursue arise only in the symbolic. They are doomed to inevitable frustration, because we cannot fulfill what desire really seeks from us: to return from the symbolic to the imaginary we have always already lost" (*Subjectivity*, 46).

87 Quinones, *Changes*, 95.

88 Ibid.

89 Hirst, "Biblical Heritage," 85.

90 Byron omits Cain's initial answer "I know not" quoted in Gen. 4:9 and adds a word to Cain's famous question so that it reads, "Am I *then* my brother's keeper?" These changes contribute to the poem's overall idea that Cain is genuinely concerned about his brother's whereabouts. However, even in the Bible Cain is not necessarily lying; he may be genuinely wondering where Abel is after his death.

91 On this idea, see also Hirst, "Biblical Heritage," 84; Larry Brunner, *Dramatic Speculation and the Quest for Faith in Lord Byron's Cain* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1995), 95, 117, 121, 123.

92 Fisch, "Byron's Cain as Sacred Executioner," 34. The mythological figure of the sacred executioner represents the person who slays another person and as a result is treated as both sacred and accursed. See Hyam Maccoby, *The Sacred Executioner: Human Sacrifice and the Legacy of Guilt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

93 Mark Canuel*, Religion, Toleration, and British Writing: 1790–1830* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 260. A cinematographic example of this insight is the film *The Mission* (UK, 1986). Spanish Jesuits in the eighteenth century try to protect a remote South American Indian tribe from falling under the rule of pro-slavery Portugal. They fail and die, and with them die most of the people of the tribe. In the last scene, Cardinal Altamirano questions one of the slavers, Don Holtar, whether the genocide was necessary. Don Holtar responds: "We must work in the world. The world is thus." The Cardinal objects: "No, thus have we made the world, thus have I made it." The problem of the conversionist religious mission to the world is its conflicting and most of the time violent side. All interventions, even those for the sake of equality with the other, may also be ones that change the world and destroy it. Canuel's perceptiveness is an expression of this problem, ignored most of the time under the assumption that since the mission is that of God it is therefore free by definition from nefarious consequences for the people who are the targets of the missionary activity.

94 This is a significant question, and there are many historical instances in which the answer is "no." Cain recapitulates the earlier fall of his family when he is expelled from the community living on the fringes of Paradise. For the early nineteenth-century intended audience of *Cain*, the closest significant historical example would have been the French revolution. Despite their thirst for a life that makes sense, the revolutionaries also fell prey to fratricide.

95 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 281.

96 There is no doubt that the biblical text gives priority to Gen. 1–3 as the paradigmatic myth of human origin. However, there are many parallels between Adam and Cain: exile, land becoming the source of a curse, sexual intercourse after the expulsion that initiates a line of descendants, new status marked by a visible sign (clothing in Adam's

case). For all intents and purposes, we have two "fall" stories, or two alternative myths of origins. Byron's seemingly unorthodox emphasis on Cain (and the concomitant inattention to Adam) is thus present already in the biblical account, perhaps as a latent narrative or subtext. In fact, Byron's Cain implicitly serves as a foil for Adam: while the latter hides from God after (passively) committing a transgression, the former boldly demands, "What/ Wouldst thou with me?" (3, 1, 497–8).

97 Cain is a rebel against God and God's words but also, and perhaps more importantly, against "a social order that is constructed around the word of God. It is primarily this social aspect of religion that Byron stresses" (Canuel, *Religion*, 260).

98 Some modern scholars believe that for the ancient audiences, Gen. 4:1–16 serves as an etiology of the origin and current status of the Kenites – a group closely associated with ancient Israel (Judg 1:16; 4:11, 17; 5:24; 1 Sam. 15:6) but separate from it. This is dubious at best given that in the overall framework of the biblical account all descendants of Cain must have perished in the flood.

99 My translation: "Juan Lopez and John Ward" by Jorge Luis Borges. Copyright © 1989, 2011 Maria Kodama, used by permission of the Wylie Agency LLC.

100 Frauke Gewecke, review of Stephen M. Hart, "César Vallejo: A Critical Bibliography of Research," *Iberoamericana* 16 (2005): 227–8. For Vallejo's biography, see César Vallejo, *The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition* (trans. and ed. Clayton Eshleman; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1–20.

101 José Carlos Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 252.

102 See Vallejo, *Poetry*, 2–4, for a comparison between Pablo Neruda's work and Vallejo's.

103 Mariátegui, *Interpretive Essays*, 254.

104 Vallejo, *Poetry*, 16.

105 Vallejo, *Poetry*, 135. *The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition*, by César Vallejo, edited and translated by Clayton Eshleman, © 2007 by the Regents of the University of California, Published by the University of California Press.

106 In Spanish, the possessive pronoun "my" can be placed after the noun "God," and this is what Vallejo does: *Dios mio*, literally 'God my.' Generally, the transposition is supposed to sharpen the sense of belonging, the closeness, physical and emotional, between the deity and a believer but in the poem, this is an expression of emptiness, both physical and emotional, in the poetic persona.

107 According to Robert Britton, "*Los heraldos negros* articulates what was to remain the permanent centre of Vallejo's poetry – his preoccupation with suffering as a precondition of individual existence in a random world that is ruled by arbitrary natural forces. In *Los heraldos negros* he systematically displaces God from the centre of the universe. The sense of personal alienation and spiritual disinheritance (summed up in the word *abandono*) revealed in the process is so acute that even love and family ties cannot blunt it, and the two emotions are presented as equivocal, though the philosophical implications of this position are not fully explored. The demolition of the old ideologies is achieved by a reductive trivialization of the symbols of Christianity and the notion of God as divine architect; one in which irony, both in ideas and language, is already at work." See "Love, Alienation, and the Absurd: Three Principal Themes in César Vallejo's 'Trilce,'" *The Modern Language Review* 87 (1992): 603–15.

108 Otherness is one of the characteristics of Vallejo's poems. As Stephen Mart says, "The projection of human identity presented in his poetry is that of a self that is not identical to itself, one in which the self is Other (to cite Rimbaud's now famous phrase 'Je suis un autre'). For example, most *vallejistas* accept that one of the intrinsic qualities of Vallejo's poetry is its projection of the self as divided." See, "Vallejo's 'Other': Versions of Otherness in the Work of César Vallejo," *The Modern Language Review* 93 (1998): 715.

109 The Spanish version uses the verb *pesar* ("to weigh down") to describe the bottomless regret of the poetic persona.

110 Since "Mary" is a common name in many Latin American countries, its pluralization may also imply the vicissitude of abandonment that each person experiences one way or another. As Octavio Paz says, all of us are orphans because to be born is to be expelled from our mother's womb. Birth is already a condition of orphanhood. See, *Los Hijos Del Limo: Del Romanticismo A La Vanguardia* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1974), 75, 77, 220.

111 In other words, in Vallejo's emphasis on pain and suffering there is no hidden pleasure. In the words of Martha Canfield, "Vallejo concedes nothing. Neither hedonism nor sensuality. No kind of delight. The complete adherence to a feeling of pain invades him. This is one of the reasons for Vallejo's originality and diversity. At the same time, these characteristics suggest Vallejo's way of feeling in an authentically Indian way." See "Muerte y redención en la poesía de César Vallejo," *INTI* 36 (1992): 40; translation mine.

112 This is the problem of using drones in war to control the population. When an operator, thousands of miles away, decides to transform a human being into a target, the machine sends a missile and destroys it. There is no connection with the other. It is in the moment when an absolute separation from the other is created, in which the relationship itself disappears, that one can play with the other as if that person were a die.

113 Mauricio Ostria Gonzalez comments: "Vallejo seems to stoically assimilate humanity (his and that of others), whose essential feature is its condition of orphanhood, intuited as loneliness without foundation," in "La americanidad como desgarramiento," *Revista Chilena de literatura* 42 (1992): 193–9, translation mine.

114 In Vallejo, the themes of abandonment and alienation are closely linked to his attitude about love and are intertwined with a philosophical conviction that humans are simply a form of animal life subject to the natural laws that govern a random, absurd universe. See Britton, "Love, Alienation, and the Absurd," 606.

115 Dice are conspicuous in the passion narrative: Roman soldiers throw them to divide Jesus's garments (Matt 27:35; Mk 15:24; Lk 23:34; Jn 19:23–24). From the symbolic standpoint, Cirlot asserts that the cube, perhaps the most common form of dice, stands for earth (Vallejo draws the same parallel) or for the material world of the four elements, which represent stability. See "Cube" in *A Dictionary of Symbols* (trans. Jack Sage; New York: Philosophical Library, 1971), 74. The symbolism of cubically shaped sacred places invites the visitors to pause and experience belonging and steadiness. See Federico Revilla, *Diccionario de iconografía y simbología* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2010), 180. By contrast, in the poem the dice accentuate the condition of human existence as the product of eternal chance. The poetic subject dares God to play the dice in order to determine the fate of humanity and the universe; this is an ultimate expression of conflict with life and of radical confrontation with the divine.

116 Concerning the Job passage, see, e.g., John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 94; Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (AB 15; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 30; David Clines, *Job 1–20* (WBC 17; Dallas: Word, 1989), 86.

117 Britton, "Love, Alienation, and the Absurd," 610.

118 In the Spanish version, the possessive "my" is plural, which probably is a deliberate challenge of the Christian tenet of a single God.

119 Since the die is Earth, the "immense tomb" whose hollow is the only place where it can stop brings to mind the cosmos full of dead worlds that Lucifer shows Cain.

120 Vallejo, *Poetry*, 343. *The Complete Poetry: A Bilingual Edition*, by César Vallejo, edited and translated by Clayton Eshleman, © 2007 by the Regents of the University of California, Published by the University of California Press.

121 As Canuel writes, "Religion does not consist only of a human's relationship with God but of one human's relationship with others" (*Religion*, 260).

122 Canfield asserts that the most basic characteristics of Vallejo's poems include originality of language, total expressive adherence to pain, personal vision of the revolution, and an idiosyncratic concept of death ("Muerte y redención," 39).

123 Hart states that Vallejo "deliberately uses his own name in order to suggest the separateness within himself, an alienation produced rather than simply described by

language . . . Vallejo's use of his own name to signal human identity as separate from the pain he is experiencing adds an uncanny dimension to the poem. There is a sense in which identified within the work there is a self that is separate from the name of the individual. This is to be understood, perhaps, in a Lacanian sense of the disjunction between the name of an individual as captured by the Symbolic Order and the identity of that individual as a sentient being inhabiting a region somehow outside the syntax of that Symbolic Order" ("Vallejo and Otherness," 717).

124 To quote Britton, "It is nevertheless this kind of experience – feelings such as love, fear, guilt, sorrow, pit, anger, and abandonment, the raw material of the human psyche – that Vallejo seeks to capture in words on the page . . . in *Poemas Humanos* we can trace the painful and gradual process by which he learned to universalize the intense emotion that, *Trilce*, remains highly personal in its tone and points of reference" ("Love, Alienation, and the Absurd," 605).

125 Such is Vallejo's utopian vision of understanding the suffering other. Ostria Gonzalez says that in Vallejo's oeuvre, there is an effort to put the world's pieces back together; he takes on this task especially in *Human Poems* ("La americanidad," 198).

126 Badiou, *Ethics*, 13. Ironically, Vallejo is himself an example of this trajectory: compassion for the poor and the exploited caused him to embrace Communism and with it the totalitarian Soviet regime, becoming an accomplice in the killing, torture, and enslavement of millions. Another example is the film *The Mission*, which I briefly discussed earlier in this chapter.

127 Ibid., 12–13.

128 In Canfield's words, "the concept of "neighbor" in Vallejo goes beyond the connotations of nationhood and race. Vallejo suffers with and next to all human beings . . . The clash with the other and his/her suffering is so strong for Vallejo that he flagellates himself in order to embrace the other. Yet by not being able to disappear altogether and make room for the other, Vallejo feels guilty" ("Muerte y redencion," 40, translation mine).

129 Kristeva, *Strangers*, 192.

130 *Human Poems* includes Vallejo's works written during the European period. His status as exile, a migrant, and thus an orphan of his Peruvian identity, is certainly a part of the socio-political circumstances in which he wrote the poem.

131 Badiou, *Ethics*, 13.

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4 Genesis 4:1–16

The paradoxical narrative

By going outside the guild of biblical studies and drawing on non-academic texts from different times and socio-political settings, I have studied the problematic character of brotherhood, fatherhood, chosenness, and rejection so prevalent in the symbolic world of Gen. 4:1–16. As we have seen, these notions inform the construction of positive contemporary social realities, such as nations, based on strong identities. At the same time, they conceal the difficult character of the other who is perceived precisely as *the other* inasmuch as she or he does not relate to the in-group by blood, citizenship, religious community, sexual orientation, or any other kind of traditional social bonding or socially accepted identity. Therefore, this other is commonly perceived as a threat to the social order. Yet, the identity of our very selves depends utterly on that other; our self can only be grasped in relation – be that of acceptance or rejection.

My theoretically informed analysis of the ways in which ancient and modern interpreters have read the Cain and Abel story has underlined the need for biblical exegesis to be politically responsible. I have adopted insights from literary and philosophical hermeneutics, above all from Agamben's political philosophy, to confront "the rhetorical stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism."[1] Contrary to the apolitical stance that despite the increasingly strong challenges mounted against it in the last few decades continues to dominate biblical studies, I have investigated the political dimension of the narrative's interpretations and sought to relate them to contemporary issues. The present chapter brings this hermeneutic and the theoretical frameworks consistent with it to bear on my own reading of Gen. 4:1–16. I will approach it as a migrant, especially as an "undocumented" immigrant, in other words, as one of the millions (in the final count, tens if not hundreds of millions) around the globe who live a life that in a sense is not there in that it is largely invisible to the host societies and rarely heard by them.[2]

To that end, I will first analyze the figure of God as the ultimate Agambenian father and sovereign by examining the arbitrary divine selection of Cain as a son of sorts and the equally arbitrary rejection of his sacrifice. Second, I will uncover, especially through a close reading of Gen. 4:7, the systemic and symbolic violence the deity uses to prepare the murder of Abel. Third, I will examine God's possible motivations in deploying this violence, as well as in haranguing Cain into admitting his guilt, by using the concepts of *homo sacer*, foundational

murder, and sacred executioner. My reading will thus be profoundly Agambenian although I will also seek guidance from other theorists, especially Žižek. My interpretation is by no means the only way of understanding the enigmatic and in many respects ambiguous account, and not even necessarily the best one, especially in other hermeneutical frameworks. It will, however, strive to remain plausible in every respect by closely keeping to the Masoretic text in its final form and avoiding presuppositions that are not based on this text.

Paradoxes of sovereignty

My reading begins with an observation that despite its obviousness hardly ever finds its way into modern studies of and commentaries on Gen. 4:1–16, to say nothing of ancient interpretations: in this text, Eve and Adam are migrants *par excellence*.[3] They have just been uprooted from a geographical space – apparently a quite limited one, as the designation "*Garden* of Eden" seems to imply – where they had lived all their lives and where they were perfectly integrated. They have nothing except for the garments that God had made for them (Gen. 3:21). With no shelter, they are radically exposed to the elements; with food available only through hard labor that teases it out of uncooperative soil (3:17–19), they are radically exposed to starvation. Adam and Eve are thus exhaustively characterized at this point by the very fact of their biological existence: they are *zoê*; they are bare lives. The subsequent narrative implies, first in Cain's words (4:14) and then in those of the narrator (4:16), that the family is in the deity's presence (literally, "to Yhwh's face," לפני יהוה), but the advantages – or otherwise – of this status are unclear; in any case, it does not seem to have any practical ramifications.

This condition is thrown into even starker relief when the couple has children. The only background information that the narrative provides about both Cain and Abel is that the former was a farmer and the latter a shepherd (4:2b); in other words, the means whereby they produce their food is all there is to know about them. Furthermore, the fact that both brothers made sacrifices without any order or even request signifies sober awareness that their existence is precarious – and that, among other things, there is no privilege of living in the divine presence unless the deity is offered a gift and thereby nudged to reciprocate.

This brings me to another simple observation that the vast majority of exegetes are reluctant to make and that is exceedingly important from the hermeneutical standpoint that I chose for the present reading of Gen. 4:1–16. My status as a migrant, especially as an "undocumented" immigrant, is an artifact of a sovereign that defines me as such. In other words, I would not be a migrant, certainly not an "undocumented" immigrant, if the political state on whose territory I reside or would like to reside did not define me as altogether undesirable (in the latter case), or at least as having more limited rights than those afforded to its citizens (in the former case).

The figure of a sovereign already looms in the story's background, given that Eve and Adam do not leave the Garden of Eden of their own accord or because of a natural disaster; it is none other than God that "sends them out" (3:23; שלח) or "expels them" (3:24; גרש – a stronger term). Within our narrative proper, the

deity's sovereign activity may already be implied by Gen. 4:1bβ, but it is when Cain and Abel make their offerings in verses 3–4 that all doubts are dispelled. The word מנחה that is used in both cases – by no means accidentally – is a *terminus technicus* for a certain type of sacrifice to the deity; yet, unlike all other such terms (e.g., זבח, עולה, כליל), it is also used of the tribute that is paid – voluntarily or not – to a temporal ruler, in other words, to a king or emperor. Especially telling in this respect is the use of the verb נשא – which, as I will argue in the next section of the study, is best translated in this case as "to bring," not "to forgive" or "to uplift" – and which in Gen. 4:7 and 2 Samuel 8:2, 6; (= 1 Chr 18:2, 6) – refers to the populations conquered by David as נשאי מנחה "tribute-bearers"; Judges 3:18 uses the same expression of the group of Israelites delivering tribute to their oppressor, King Eglon of Moab.

Even apart from the persistent notion of divine kingship in both Jewish and Christian traditions (cf., e.g., the reference to Jesus – God's son – as "king of the kings and lord of the lords" in Revelations 19:16 and note that in the midrashic fables Yhwh is always personified by a king), the concept of the deity as a sovereign in Gen. 4:1–16 is by no means anachronistic. In the ancient Near East, the ruling deities were routinely regarded not only as kings of the pantheon but also as humankind's ultimate sovereigns. The Egyptian text known as *Mankind's Deliverance from Destruction* is set at the time when the sun deity Re was "king of men and gods."[4] In the Babylonian composition *Enuma Elish*, the city's patron deity Marduk is referred to as "king" right after creating humans, and in the Ugaritic epic poem known as *Baal* a common appellation to the title character – a storm god whose manifestations (dark cloud, lightning, thunder) somewhat resemble those of Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Exod. 19:16; 1 Sam. 12:16–18) – is "Lord of the Earth."[5] The Hebrew Bible proper only rarely calls God a king (some examples include Deut. 33:5; 1 Sam. 8:7–8; Obad 21) but the deity's control over temporal potentates – the Pharaoh (e.g., Exod. 10:1), Sennacherib (2 Kgs. 19:21–28; Isa. 37:22–29), Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 25:9), Cyrus (Isa. 44:28–45:13), and others – leaves little doubt in this respect.

Since in Gen. 4:1–16 we are dealing with a single family with only four members, divine sovereignty is inseparable from fatherhood. In this respect, it is exceedingly important that the only male in the family's first generation, Adam, is almost entirely absent from the story. His role in the entire chapter – indeed, in the entire biblical narrative after Gen. 3 – is limited to sexual intercourse (4:1, 25; 5:4); he is at best a sperm donor. While in Gen. 1–2 the deity, whose grammatical masculinity is not in any doubt from the outset, acts in a certain sense as a mother in creating Adam and Eve, vis-à-vis the latter and in the near-total absence of the former, starting with Gen. 4, that deity is portrayed strictly as a father.

As such, God's first act is to establish an arbitrary difference between Cain and Abel. As indicated by Eve's words in Gen. 4:1bβ, this happens before they are even born. Whether we interpret these words as saying that Yhwh actually sired Cain or just that she translated her intercourse with Adam into a pregnancy, there is little doubt that she establishes a father-son relationship of sorts between the deity and her first son. Even if no such relationship actually existed, the fact remains that Yhwh either produced the impression it does or at least did not do

anything to dispel this impression (which would not have required much more than a terse but firm response to Eve's pronouncement).

That no comparable link is drawn with regard to Abel may have to do with the famously (or notoriously) economical nature of the biblical narrative, especially in the first chapters of Genesis; once laid down, the pattern does not have to be explicitly repeated in order to be implicitly present. It is, however, substantially more likely that God is deliberately portrayed here as an alternative or surrogate father of Cain but not Abel. Three considerations point in this direction. First, Eve fails not only to draw any connection between Abel and Yhwh but also to provide any kind of etymology for the name of the former – as though he were much less important to her than Cain. Confirming as much is the meaning of Abel's name – "futility" or "evanescence" – as well as Eve's comment upon Seth's birth, "God has established another seed for me instead of Abel whom Cain has killed" (Gen. 4:25). In her eyes, the expendable Abel can be easily substituted while Cain needs no replacement because despite being a fratricide he is still her son.[6] Second, the deity's interaction with Cain is much more extensive than with Abel (in the latter case, all God does is show preference for his sacrifice and allow his murder). Third, the narrator persistently refers to Abel as Cain's brother (seven times overall) but not the other way round – as though Abel is a footnote to Cain rather than a figure in his own right.

Clare Amos is therefore fully justified in pointing out that Yhwh's dealing with Cain and Abel does not "show him as the ideal father." Moreover, this seems to start a pattern, since "the theme of sibling rivalry runs through the Bible, often provoked by a father's favouritism."[7] God chooses Abraham for no apparent reason and then prefers Isaac to Ishmael and Jacob to Esau. Jacob's descendants, the Israelites, become the "chosen people," and as such the rightful owners of the land of Canaan, which the deity helps them to wrest from its native inhabitants. The model is repeated in the royal families of Saul (with David – a questionable character at best – chosen over Saul's descendants, even the saintly Jonathan) and David (with 2 Samuel 12:24 stating that Yhwh "loved" Solomon for no apparent reason). Even in 1 Chronicles that includes none of these accounts, the theme emerges with regard to the rise of Judah (5:1–2): although Reuben's demotion is justified by what looks like an allusion to Gen. 35:22, there is no explanation for why leadership devolved to Judah rather than to Shimon or Levi who preceded him in the order of primogeniture. Sibling rivalry and the father's inexplicable preferences thus become synonymous with human condition, and fraternity with conflict, competition, and sometimes violence. No wonder then that the motive persisted in post-biblical times, coloring the relationship between Judaism and Christianity: while self-understanding of early Jewish communities was not commonly couched in terms of primogeniture, early Christians did claim the status of "the assembly of the firstborn" (Heb 12:23) or "a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (James 1:18). In such a context, the well-known line "how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" (ESV) (Ps 133:1) sounds regretful if not sarcastic.

This brings us to Agamben's observations concerning the power of the father in a patriarchal family, and especially over male children. "This power," he writes,

"is absolute and is understood to be neither the sanction of a crime nor the expression of the more general power that lies within the competence of the *pater* insofar as he is the head of the *domus*: this power follows immediately and solely from the father-son relation."[8] Among other things, the father was absolutely free to kill or spare his son; this prerogative was different from the husband's right to put to death an unfaithful wife or a master's right to execute a disobedient slave in that the behavior of the potential victim did not matter: no situation either compelled the father's action or precluded it. The absolute power of the father over the son, distilled in the expression *vitae necisque potestas*, became the very model of political power because it attached "itself to every free male citizen from birth."[9] As a result, the condition of a male child as always exposed to death, in other words, as bare life, is what Agamben considers to be the originary political element of Roman law.[10] The ideal of a father in this context had nothing to do with his fair treatment of the male offspring; on the contrary, what makes a father ideal is absolute lack of consideration for obedience – or, for that matter, any kind of behavior – as a moral value or a reason to favor one of the sons. They are unconditionally at the father's mercy; in other words, they are *hominis sacri*.[11]

In ancient Israel, the situation was similar, if not identical, at least as far as succession and inheritance were concerned, "with fathers apparently free to give whatever preferences there might be to the son of their choice . . . Jacob could place his right hand over Ephraim rather than Manasseh, and David was entitled to appoint Solomon rather than some older son."[12] Significantly, in all these cases, as well as in those listed above, the apparently arbitrary choice of the successor is made by both father and God, separately or in concert. As Perry explains, what Eve says in Gen. 4:1bβ

> may be no more than the superimposition of the two roles, as in the important parallel story of Jacob's blessing of Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen. 48:14), where God's blessing is portrayed as flowing through the patriarch and even as guiding his hands. What is crucial, in any case, is that the empowered parent (or grandparent) and God exercise similar roles in conferring the prerogatives of birthright.[13]

Moreover, such passages as Gen. 22, Judges 11:30–40, and 2 Kings 3:27 presuppose that Israelite fathers had the power to sacrifice both sons and daughters. Although some texts denounce the practice (e.g., Deut. 12:31; Jer. 7:31; Ps 106:37), their issue is most likely with the mode of worship per se – and, of course, with veneration of the wrong deities – rather than with the father's prerogative to offer his children as victims if need be. In at least some of these cases the deity either demands the sacrifice (Gen. 22; note also Exod. 13:1–2, Lev. 24:10–23) or at least seems to accept it (Judg 11:30–40; 2 Kgs. 3:27).

If so, is it possible that the deity of the Hebrew Bible is the model of fatherhood precisely because fatherhood is not fair – or, rather, because it does not have to be fair? For Amos, Yhwh is "forcing Cain to 'grow up' before he is ready or able to do so."[14] Is it the failure to grasp that the deity is partial by definition that makes Cain an adolescent of sorts? Do the modern exegetes who chalk up

everything that happens in Gen. 4:1–16 to divine "freedom," "mystery," "inscrutability," or "oracular ambiguity" share the same failure? Yhwh is indeed free but there is nothing mysterious or inscrutable about it. Partiality is an assertion and exercise of God's sovereign power; moreover, for these purposes the more blatant the unfairness is, the better. Being impartial means being subject to a definition of impartiality, in other words, to a law of one kind or another; yet, as Schmitt and Agamben point out, being outside the law is the definition of a sovereign because otherwise he would not be able to assert that nothing is outside the law.

With that in mind, it becomes clear that God rejects Cain's sacrifice *precisely* because of the (arbitrarily) special relationship between them, initiated strictly by the former. Overall, vis-à-vis the sovereign deity both brothers are born and exist – as long as Yhwh permits them to exist – strictly as bare life, continuously in danger of being killed; the only possible difference is whether Abel's condition is also contingent on Cain's status or strictly on his own. Nothing they *do* matters because the divine father is constrained by neither material nor ethical dimensions of their behavior – which means the content of the sacrifices, their timing, and their intention are irrelevant. No matter what Cain and Abel actually offered, when, and why, there was a 50–50 chance of the deity preferring Cain's sacrifice to Abel's: the eternal die of Vallejo's poem was already rolling in primeval times. Obedience did not matter – in fact, in terms of Gen. 1:29; 3:17–19, Cain's behavior was much more obedient than Abel's – neither did Cain's primogeniture or his potentially special status as the son of God matter. The only guaranteed outcome was differentiation between the two sacrifices (God would neither reject nor accept both of them) because sovereignty cannot function without excluding somebody (some bodies!) – or, rather, including them only by means of their exclusion.

It is the latter consideration that rendered the rejection of Cain's sacrifice all but inevitable. Most readers assume that the brothers' offerings were more or less simultaneous as was the divine response to them (such is spectacularly the case in Byron's *Cain*). In fact, the Hebrew text is ambiguous at best on this matter: the two sacrifices are reported sequentially, in two separate sentences, and the Masoretic punctuation (which, of course, may itself be interpretive) even places them in two different verses. Moreover, the sentence reporting Abel's sacrifice (Gen. 4:4a) is governed by a *qatal* verb, which removes it from the chain of sequential developments reported by *wayyiqtol* forms, making it possible to hypothesize that Abel made his offering only when he saw the failure of Cain's.[15] A decisive signal, however, is that the narrator adds the words גם־הוא "he also" when recounting Abel's offering; the unmistakable implication is that it was supplementary to Cain's. It would appear, accordingly, that Cain was the first to make an offering and that Abel followed suit only when Cain's sacrifice was rejected. Were the first sacrifice accepted, chances are the second one never would have been made, leaving no room for differentiation. The logic of sovereignty thus demanded rejection of Cain's offering, and this is what actually happened. It is likely, moreover, that Cain was the first to make a sacrifice because, as the elder brother and the firstborn son, he felt particularly responsible for the family's well-being and because he counted on his special relationship with God to make the offering work. In other words, it is this relationship, whether actual or imaginary, that became his

undoing. The pattern is then repeated with a vengeance with regard to Abel: God does approve his offering but does not protect his life against violence provoked by this approval (see especially the next section of the present study). Cain, in his turn, fails to restore the special relationship with the deity by killing his brother, yet he is not punished for the murder he committed.

In Agamben's concept of sovereignty, this chain of incongruities is amply accounted for by the absolute power of the father. As such, the deity decides on the lives of Cain and Abel in a perfectly arbitrary fashion, so that the issue of whom he is actually protecting or rejecting becomes perfectly ambiguous. Did God actually reject Abel and choose Cain rather than the other way round – as assumed by ancient and modern interpreters alike? Did the acceptance of Abel's offering endanger his life? Did God do Abel a favor by permitting – even prodding – Cain to kill him?[16] Did Cain act as Abel's executioner and was he correct in believing that the deity – maybe even Abel – wanted him to be one?[17] Such ambiguities are by no means the exclusive domain of Gen. 4:1–16; they extend far beyond this narrative and in a certain sense even beyond the entire biblical account, because they are inherent in God's status as the sovereign and the father. What was the advantage of Abraham's chosenness if it had to be maintained by the near-sacrifice of his son – to say nothing of a myriad other vicissitudes, such as repeated famines in the promised land, and nuisances, such as circumcision? In what sense does the deity privilege Israel over other nations if it pardoned Nineveh upon repentance (in the Book of Jonah) but not Jerusalem (in 2 Kings 21–23)? What is to be made of the exodus from Egypt if the four-hundred-year bondage there had been planned by God all along – as Gen. 15:13 makes abundantly clear? Were the Jews in the Gospels (e.g., Matt 27:15–25) actually doing God's work in demanding the crucifixion of Jesus? If the first temple was destroyed because of the people's failure to observe the commandments of the Torah, why did the same fate befall the second temple, whose defenders were fighting to the death for the same commandments?

All this and more may have to do with the fact that in relation to the sacred the metaphor of God as a king is riddled with ambiguities because of its close proximity to the concepts of the ban and uncleanness, as Agamben notes in his analysis of William Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. Robertson Smith uses the latter as an example of the ambiguity of the sacred:

> Another Hebrew usage that may be noted here is the ban (Heb. *herem*), by which impious sinners, or enemies of the community and its god, were devoted to utter destruction. The ban is a form of devotion to the deity, and so the verb "to ban" is sometimes rendered "consecrate" (Micah 4:13) or "devote" (Lev. 27:8ff.). But in the oldest Hebrew times it involved the utter destruction, not only of the persons involved, but of their property . . . and only metals, after they had passed through the fire, were added to the treasure of the sanctuary (Josh. 6: 24). Even cattle were not sacrificed, but simply slain, and the devoted city must not be revealed (Deut. 13: 6; Josh. 6: 26). Such a ban is a taboo, enforced by the fear of supernatural penalties (1 Kings 16: 34) and, as with taboo, the danger arising from it is contagious (Deut. 7: 26); he that brings a devoted thing into his house falls under the same ban itself.[18]

Through its two related meanings, "devoted to destruction" and "rendered consecrate to God," the Hebrew term חרם signifies a profoundly liminal situation, in which the condition of ban excludes by including. Not only is there no clear border between inclusion and exclusion, but also the same person who lives as sacred is at the same time banned to destruction and rendered consecrated. One can think here of Abel's life as sacred: it is almost simultaneously included in God's acceptance of his offering but also destroyed in God's absence at the time of his killing. This corresponds, if perhaps imperfectly, to the definition of *homo sacer* – the figure that Agamben uses to understand the relationship between sovereign power and bare life in the contemporary juridical figure of authority, the nation-state. A similar figure – as Augustine has noted – is Jesus, the beloved son of the heavenly deity who is abandoned by the father and killed on the cross.

From an immigrant's standpoint, this arbitrariness of the sovereign in inclusively excluding bare life is reflected in immigration policies of modern Western states. One example is the treatment of migrants from Africa and the Levant by the countries of the European Union (EU). Current EU regulations that are binding for all its members bar summary deportations and require a hearing for anyone who sets foot on their territory in search of political asylum. As a result, the Mediterranean has turned into a table for a vast game of dice. Thousands of people are trying to cross it in order to reach the shores of the EU countries that line its northern perimeter, countries such as Spain, Italy, and Greece; those intercepted at sea are turned back while those who manage to sneak through are permitted to stay and apply for asylum. The outcome is entirely random, as the migrants, and even the professional smugglers, can do little to avoid interception, while the police, coast guard, and the military of the EU states do not look for any particular group but rather try to stop as many vessels as possible. The outcome is often deadly as tens, sometimes hundreds, of migrants die when their boats sink, become stranded, or are attacked by smugglers. The problem has become more acute in the last few years. On the one hand, political upheavals, wars, and the accompanying hardship in the Middle East and elsewhere swelled the stream of migration into a tide: the International Organization for Migration recorded the "total sea arrivals to Europe in 2015 at 1,004,356 or almost five times the previous year's total of 219,000."[19] On the other hand, economic downturn and the concomitant high unemployment and fiscal difficulties have hardened the attitude towards immigration in the EU countries and the differences between them on the matter. The sovereignty of the European nation-states is thus inscribed on a growing number of bare lives, some of which are lost (in a sense, indirectly killed without any consequences), some excluded, and some temporarily included, only to be subjected to a new game of dice, as the criteria under which asylum is granted are in turn largely arbitrary.

While the situation at the land borders of the U.S. is different (those persons without proper documents can be, and often are, deported immediately and without appearance before an immigration judge even if found on American soil), a very similar game of dice is played in the country's territorial waters. Migrants from the Caribbean, mainly from Cuba and Haiti – who also arrive in old, overcrowded boats and often die en route – are deported if intercepted at sea but permitted to stay if they manage to reach the shore (with Cubans for the most part

eventually granted asylum)[20]. In fact, even the sovereign's actions that are usually seen as unambiguously beneficial towards migrants, such as amnesties, still contain elements of arbitrary exclusion and inclusion. Thus, the recent executive order of the U.S. president has granted large groups of "undocumented" immigrants – such as parents of American citizens – reprieve from deportation and a possibility to work legally, but it only covers those who arrived in the country no later than 2009. In other words, the sheer luck of crossing the border on December 31, 2009 rather than January 1, 2010 is what makes the difference between their semi-inclusion and complete (if still inclusive) exclusion. What is more, just as in the case of Cain and Abel, trying to play by the sovereign's book is not only irrelevant but actually makes things worse: the executive order does not cover the parents of American citizens who are in the country legally but on a temporary visa. And, of course, the very attempt to solve the problem of "illegal" immigration by an executive order further underlines the migrants' state of exception since any future president, and even the same one, can overturn the policy by the stroke of a pen – to say nothing of Congress and the courts (in fact, one federal judge has already granted a request to suspend the current order).[21]

All that said, something else lurks under the surface of the arbitrariness with which the sovereign treats migrants and differentiates between them. This very arbitrariness may suggest that the actual differences may be smaller and less consequential than they seem, or even altogether nonexistent. God (and Eve) seems to differentiate between Cain and Abel, but that does not change the fact that the entire family lives in exile. Those who try to cross the Mediterranean or the Straits of Florida are all migrants regardless of who is caught in the dragnet and who is not. Even among the citizens of nation-states, most are migrants or descendants of migrants, and even those who are perfectly autochthonous (which is usually an exception rather than the rule) are, in a certain sense, exiles from the mythical paradisical spaces that lie in the ideological foundation of such states. Moreover, citizenship is itself beset with ambiguities: while supposedly protecting its citizens from external threats (including those associated with migration) a political state can also at any time send them to die in a war that does not benefit them or their families in any way. Further, those enjoying citizenship can be deprived of it arbitrarily and at a moment's notice; thus, Jews were included in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in European societies despite not being Christian but excluded in the 1920s and 1930s from many of the very same societies as "Semites." As Borges emphasizes in his famous poem, Juan Lopez and John Ward would be surprised to learn how much they have in common, and the main reason they do not realize it is the father-sovereign figure that tells them otherwise.

Paradoxes of desire

Interpreters of Gen. 4:1–16, ancient as well as modern, usually assume that Cain is the story's villain. Exceptions are few and far between among professional exegetes but, as we have seen in the previous chapter, are much more common in modern literary transmutations of the biblical narrative. Byron clearly identifies with Cain (while by no means idealizing him), and the poetic "I" of Vallejo's "The

Eternal Dice," while never explicitly identified with Cain, takes a stance vis-à-vis the deity that resembles him (and Lucifer) in Byron's poem.

From the beginning of this book, I have sympathized with Cain (to say nothing of Abel). Lack of such sympathy usually, and logically, goes hand-in-hand with either lack of attention towards God's role in the story or apology for the divine behavior, and critically examining this behavior has been one of my primary intentions. However, with the divine intervention in the lives of the primeval family now thoroughly explored both through the analysis of previous interpretations and in my own reading of the text, Cain's actions present themselves as the next object of scrutiny – in particular, the fratricidal murder that he commits. Gen. 4:1–16 may be bristling with ambiguities, but there is no doubt whatsoever that Cain perpetrated a willful act of violence that terminated the existence of another human being related to him by blood. ויקם קין אל־הבל אחיו ויהרגהו in verse 4.8bβ can hardly be translated as anything but "and Cain rose against Abel his brother and killed him"; the reality of killing is staring us in the face.

Žižek's analysis may be of use here: when faced with such a reality, he urges us to "step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent" and to study the contours of the backdrop that produces the outburst of violence.[22] He describes a triumvirate that includes the visible subjective violence and two objective kinds of violence. First, there is "systemic" violence having to do with the functioning of political mechanisms.[23] Second, there is "symbolic" violence inherent in language. The difference between objective and subjective violence can only be perceived by assuming different points of view. The subjective violence is Cain's murder of his brother that is seen as the perturbation of a "normal" state of things in which both brothers are performing a ritual to God. However, says Žižek,

> objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this "normal" state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent . . . It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seems to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence.[24]

In Gen. 4:1–16, Žižek's "zero-level standard" is represented, first and foremost, by the basic state of exception in which the primeval family found itself upon expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Their resources are scarce, and scarcity by definition invites competition that can easily turn violent (as has happened many times in history and still happens today in many countries, from South America to the Pacific islands and from Central Asia to Africa). Accordingly, it might be worthwhile to revisit the brothers' motivations for bringing the sacrifices. In the previous section, I described this act as an expression and recognition of their precarious condition as bare life, as migrants. From this perspective, both Cain and Abel were just trying to improve the family's chances of survival by involving the deity in a reciprocal relationship of mutual giving. Cain led with his sacrifice because as the firstborn (and possibly elder) brother he felt a greater responsibility

and because he counted on his special, if undefined, relationship with God to make the tribute work. Abel followed suit because he was concerned that the rejection of Cain's offering might portend disaster for the family (and especially for Cain) and therefore tried to stave off the disaster – or because he simply did not want to miss the slightest chance to improve the family's situation.

Yet, there is a very different and much less benign possibility. What is more important is that each of the brothers could have had this possibility in mind when evaluating the actions of the other. Farming and animal husbandry are spatially incompatible, and when land resources are limited, they tend to crowd each other out. Paradoxically, it could be the success of Cain and Abel in expanding their respective modes of production and thus in better providing for the family as a whole – a success that can be interpreted as a sign of divine blessing – that caused frictions between them. If so, by offering the products of his labor to God Cain could be seeking a manifest confirmation that what he is doing is right – as it indeed should have been in accordance with Gen. 1:29; 3:17–19 – and indirectly, that it confirms his special status. Abel, in his turn, could be pouncing on the chance to compensate for his inferior standing vis-à-vis the deity – in other words, to make up through achievement what he lacked by birth.

If so, God's special relationship with Cain – actual or imaginary – contributed in a major way to the systemic violence that underpinned Abel's murder: even if none of the brothers was actually competing with another, their unequal status all but guaranteed that each of them would see the actions of the other side in this light. And, of course, the arbitrariness of God in choosing one sacrifice over the other was yet another factor of the same kind: the very preference of the fruits of one person's effort over another – especially if there is no material difference in the outcome – is in itself a violent act that invites and encourages further violence. Since the biblical narrator uses a particle of negation to report God's reaction to Cain's sacrifice rather than Abel's, translations, commentaries, and studies usually construe the account as saying that the evaluation of the former was passive and that of the latter active. In other words, Yhwh displayed preference for Abel's offering rather than lack thereof for Cain's – as made especially clear by NAB: "The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering but on Cain and his offering he did not." Yet, given that the verb used in both cases is "pay attention" and that according to Gen. 4:14, 16, everything in the narrative takes place, to put it literally, "before Yhwh's face" (see the previous section of the study), in order to show its disregard for Cain's sacrifice the deity had to turn away or perhaps close its eyes. This turning away, far from being merely a lack of appreciation for Cain's effort, was the deity's public humiliation over that very effort. Even if Cain's motives in making the offering were perfectly altruistic, his resultant anger (ויחר לקין מאד) and dismay (ויפלו פניו) are more than understandable. With that in mind, a possibility presents itself that even with all other factors in place – such as God's persistent differentiation between the two brothers – even a small measure of tact might have prevented subjective violence on Cain's part. Since insensitivity – unlike differentiation – is not inherent to the divine modus operandi, suspicion arises that for one reason or another this violence had been a part of the divine plan all along.

What must have baffled and inflamed Cain even further was the lack of explanation as to why his offering had been treated in such a negative and humiliating way. This brings us to the second kind of objective violence as per Žižek's classification, namely, symbolic violence. Initially, it is manifested in our narrative by complete information blackout. First, the deity does not share, either with the story's characters or with the readers, why it chose to play a role in Cain's but not Abel's birth – or, at the very least, to let Eve believe as much. Second, neither Cain nor Abel receives any sacrificial instructions either before or after the fact. Even if Cain's sacrifice was objectively defective – something that, as I have previously argued, cannot be deduced from the biblical text proper and therefore requires various readings-in (such as calendric speculations) or assumptions (such as Augustine's conjecture about Cain's intentions) – Cain's anger and dejection suggest that he had no idea. Accordingly, God had to be tough to the point of unfairness to hold it against him conspicuously and publicly – unless, of course, there was an ulterior motive. Conversely, if Abel hit the sacrificial jackpot purely by accident, there would be no justifiable reason to commend him. Indeed, when the deity finally decides to communicate, one of the first things to come out of its mouth is a confirmation that the quality of the offerings is of no consequence.

This confirmation plays a central role in God's famously (or notoriously) ambiguous address to Cain in Gen. 4:6–7. Most exegetes and translators construe verse 7a as a combination of two identically constructed compound sentences.[25] In the first, covering verse 7aα, שאת is the main clause and אם־תיטיב is the conditional subordinate clause; in the second (v. 7aβ-γ), the corresponding members are לפתח חטאת רבץ and אם לא תיטיב. To put it in a different way, the common understanding is that the first sentence predicts the consequences of Cain doing something described by the verb יטב, usually "to do well, to do or become better," and the second, those of him failing to do it. Standing in the way of this interpretation is the fact that שאת is an infinitive construct, that is, a *nomen verbale* and as such is ill suited to forming a clause all by itself.[26] A Hebrew sentence אם־תיטיב שאת would be in every respect just as awkward (if not altogether impossible) as its literal English equivalent, "if you do well – forgiving" – which is why all translations without exception add words that the biblical text neither spells out nor even presupposes, for example, "if you do what is right, will you not be accepted?" (NIV) A much better solution then is to read the entire verse 7aα-β as a single conditional clause, with שאת functioning as a complement of both אם־תיטיב and ואם לא תיטיב. Of course, in such a case שאת cannot be translated "forgiving," "uplifting," or "accepting" as in most English Bibles but the basic meaning of נשא, "to carry, to bear," attested elsewhere in conjunction with מנחה, would work well: "Whether you do well in bringing [the sacrifice] or not, sin lurks at the door."[27] God thus tells Cain that there is no reason to be upset about the failure of his offering because it is of no consequence; excelling in it would not change the outcome. The deity thus can be plausibly understood as acknowledging what the present study has argued on multiple occasions: contrary to a host of ancient and modern exegetes, the contrasting results of the brothers' sacrifices had nothing to do with their quality or the intention with which they were made.

If so, why is the inevitable outcome of any sacrifice described as לפתח חטאת רבץ and how are the two sentences that follow – ואליך תשוקתו ואתה תמשל בו – connected to it? It is at this point that the divine discourse attains the heights of Orwellian doublespeak, and by no means accidentally, since herein lies the thrust of the entire pronouncement. Since the plain meaning of חטאת is "sin, transgression," Yhwh can be understood as saying in verse 7aγ that even the best of sacrifices cannot remove either the transgression of Adam and Eve that landed their family in exile or the much more fundamental sin of human existence per se – in Eagleton's words, "the fact that before God we are always already in the wrong."[28] Yet, already here there are some incongruent details. First, it seems unusual, if not downright bizarre, to describe sin or transgression as "reposing," "lying down," or "lurking" – as suggested by the attested meanings of the verb רבץ. Second, and much more important, רבץ is clearly masculine while חטאת is just as clearly feminine (in the three cases that the concordance of Abraham Even-Shoshan lists together with Gen. 4:7, Exod. 29:14; Lev. 4:24; 5:9, masculinity of חטאת is indicated only by Masoretic vocalization of הוא).[29] Both semantics and grammar thus conjure a different subject of the clause – masculine and capable of lying down or reposing – that is, corporeal.

The same subject apparently serves as the antecedent of the two masculine suffixes in verse 7b (possessive in תשוקתו and accusative in בו), closely linked to verse 7aγ by the opening *waws* of its two terse sentences. The conclusion of the divine discourse can thus serve as a clue to the identity of this mysterious subject that is now decisively disassociated from חטאת. Appealing as it might have been to Augustine (*City of God*, XV, 7, 443–445), the idea of sin or transgression as a subject of volition inherent in the sexual or quasi-sexual attraction signified by the term תשוקה (cf. Cant 7:11) is foreign to the Hebrew Bible. Instead, the carefully sculpted wording points to a human agent; as noted already by Augustine in *City of God* (XV, 7, 447), as a whole Gen. 4:7b is an inversion of Gen. 3:16b. In the latter case, Eve is told that her desire (תשוקתך) is towards her husband but he would – or should – rule (ימשל) over her; in the former, and Cain is told that the desire (תשוקתו) of the masculine subject is towards him but he would – or should – rule (תמשל) over this subject. Since Gen. 3:16b deals with relations within the family, for Cain – who could conceivably be familiar with the formulaic phrase and its context – the exceedingly transparent allusion would unmistakably suggest that the elusive "he" over whom he is supposed to rule is none other than his brother Abel. A momentary glance back at Gen. 4:7aγ would confirm as much: the root רבץ is by far most commonly used (at least eighteen out of thirty-four occurrences in the Hebrew Bible) of shepherds and their animals (e.g., Gen. 29:2; Jer. 33:12; Cant 1:7). Indeed, even the use of חטאת as a cipher makes perfect sense in view of Abel's occupation that was by its very nature a violation of the divine decrees formulated in Gen. 1:29; 3:17–19.

The divine pronouncement in Gen. 4:6–7 thus turns out to be double-edged. While discounting sacrifice, even of the best, most sincere kind, as a way of doing well – in other words, as a path towards *bios* – God hints that such a path still exists. In order to attain *bios*, to become more than just *zoê*, Cain should subjugate Abel who blocks his path by reposing (or lurking?) on it.[30] And what subjugation

could be more lasting – not to mention clear the way once and for all – than elimination? In a textbook instance of symbolic violence, the deity pushes Cain to murder his brother while retaining full deniability by never explicitly mentioning either Abel or a violent act of any kind.

Of course, even with all systemic and symbolic violence in place, Cain still had the option of declining to engage in subjective violence, but that would have taken an almost superhuman effort. What is more, from Cain's standpoint there was no good reason to apply such an effort. First, he was not aware that murder is wrong; on the contrary, as Byron astutely notes, the apparent success of Abel's sacrifice could easily give him the idea that while Gen. 1:29–30 implicitly prohibits the killing of living beings for food, it may be permissible and even commendable for other purposes. Second, he had no reason to believe that Abel's elimination would disrupt the primeval family. No one would miss him: as mentioned in the previous section of the study, Adam is simply not in the picture and Eve seems to lack interest in Abel (something that Cain could hardly fail to grasp); the name that she gave him is interpretable as a prediction, if not a wish, that he will not last long. Thus, from Cain's standpoint, without Abel the family would be more cohesive, more homogeneous, with no differentiation by occupation or status vis-à-vis the deity and therefore no political potential; put differently, it would be an ethical community à la Rancière.

This brings us to what may have been Cain's primary motivation in murdering Abel – his desire to do well, to attain *bios*.[31] He wants not just to exist but also to live in a right way; being nothing but *zoê* leaves him incomplete. This, in particular, could explain why he chose to follow the letter of the divine command in Gen. 3:17–19 by sticking to farming, and this could be his primary reason for making an offering – which is why its failure hurt him so much. After all, with nothing but individual and communal survival at stake, he could be expected to cheer Abel's apparent success just as wholeheartedly as his own; only a feeling of having done something wrong by trying to do something right would result in anger and dejection. That, in turn, means that God's dismissal of sacrifices as inconsequential in Gen. 4:7a must have come as a major relief for Cain, thereby priming him for the positive part where he finally hears what he should do and making compliance all but unavoidable.

Yet, even this does not complete the list of pressures that Cain had to withstand in order to desist from killing Abel. As we have seen, in Byron's *Cain* the primeval family is tormented, among other things, by the unquenchable longing for the lost Paradise that remains within their view, desirable but inaccessible. This feeling is typical for migrants; even those who leave their home country voluntarily often suffer from nostalgia, and among those who are dislocated by force, intimidation, or unbearable living conditions it is a rule rather than an exception. With that in mind, it may not be accidental that the biblical narrative can be interpreted as saying that Cain was born while Eve and Adam were still in the Garden of Eden. The *qatal* verb ידע that governs Gen. 4:1a may be just a structural signal that marks the beginning of a new story, but it may also signify that Cain's conception and birth took place before the events reported in the preceding verses, namely, before the expulsion of Eve and Adam from the garden (3:22–24).[32] It is

therefore possible that Cain's desire to do well was undergirded by hope – a by no means unreasonable suggestion, given Aristotle's link between *bios* and *polis* emphasized by Agamben – that doing well will buy him a ticket back to Paradise. What is more, God may be playing on his nostalgia by describing the ambiguous masculine subject of Gen. 4:7aγ-bα as reposing by – and therefore potentially blocking – an entrance (פתח): at this point in the narrative, the only explicitly mentioned enclosed space is the Garden of Eden. In Lacanian terms, Cain's desire promises to restore his unified complete self but at the same time subverts its promise because Cain's subjective center of gravity is grounded outside of him, in Abel – the signifier from which he gained a sense of separation/rejection and acceptance/chosenness. In short, Cain's selfhood is alien to him and he is radically decentered by God's intervention.

Under such circumstances, it is little wonder that Cain chooses to attack Abel; indeed, it is much more surprising that he does not do so right away. Instead, he speaks to Abel (Gen. 4:8a). Since there is no direct speech after the apparent *verbum dicendi* ויאמר, ancient translations and interpretations try to fill the perceived gap in a variety of ways – from the terse "Let us go to the field" in the Septuagint to a long theological discussion in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan.[33] Modern scholars usually limit themselves to pointing out that "the original must have contained Cain's statement."[34] It is possible, however, that there is no gap – or, rather, that the gap is deliberate: by withholding a quotation the narrator may be trying to highlight the bare fact of Cain talking to Abel – for the first and only time in the entire narrative – right after listening to the deity's discourse. By this, Cain indicates to God – without ever saying so and thus mimicking the obliqueness of the divine speech – that he has grasped the identity of the ambiguous masculine figure the deity wants him to dominate. His apparent presumption is that God will let him know if the identification is wrong – and, accordingly, he interprets the deity's silence as a nudge and a wink. Regardless of whether or not this interpretation is accurate, the concomitant assumption that Yhwh will give Cain a free hand with regard to Abel proves correct: despite apparently taking place "before God's face" (as already pointed out, Cain "exits" the divine presence only in 4:16), Abel's murder is committed with no intervention from above.

Hostile attitudes towards migrants are generated in a similar nudge-and-wink way. Today's nation-states, certainly those in the West, rarely issue explicit calls to violence against the other – the newcomers or the autochthonous minorities. Yet, since all these states are based on a myth of perfect congruence of the political, the ethnic, the cultural, the linguistic, and often the religious, by their very nature those states and their myths generate a desire for a homogeneous and orthodox society – truly a Rancièrian ethical community. The resulting impetus is to exclude those who do not fit – or do not seem to fit – in a radical way, blotting them out or at least rendering them invisible. These may be Jews in Germany of the 1920s and 1930s, "undocumented" immigrants from Mexico and Central America in contemporary United States, guest workers from the former Soviet republics of Caucasus and Central Asia in Vladimir Putin's Russia, or Muslims in (supposedly) secular France – the patterns are similar regardless of the group's primary identity factor or any other characteristics.

What makes things much worse is that the desire to eliminate the other cannot be satisfied by peaceful absorption, such as assimilation, because a nation-state is by definition a political state – a sovereignty – which, according to Agamben, cannot exist without inclusive exclusion. It is the sovereign that imposes upon migrants and other strangers the traits that make them especially conspicuous, one might even say annoying, in their difference. Abel probably branched into animal husbandry, thereby violating divine decrees and inevitably emerging as Cain's competitor, because he had no other choice: Adam's prerogative to farm as per Gen. 3:17–19 went to Cain as the firstborn son and the family badly needed to harness all available sources of sustenance. Similarly, Abel likely brought his sacrifice because the rejection of Cain's left him with no choice but to do what he could in order to forestall a possible threat to the entire family, Cain included. In a similar fashion, European Jews were particularly active in finance and trade – which brought upon them charges of parasitism – because for centuries they had not been permitted to engage in anything else; "undocumented" immigrants in the U.S. compete with unskilled American citizens for low-end jobs because the status of the former precludes them from finding "decent" employment; "southern" *Gastarbeiter* in Russia form criminal gangs because this is the only way they can deal with equally criminal state bureaucracy; and Muslims in France stick to their religion because the secular majority keeps them at arm's length. A nation-state then simultaneously creates a desire and makes it impossible to realize, resulting in radical decentering and inviting violence against the other as the source of this desire.

Paradoxes of guilt

The only tangible outcome of Abel's murder is that Cain builds a city – the world's first (Gen. 4:17). This brings us to a highly ambiguous figure generated by the activity – indeed, by the very existence – of the divine sovereign-father, that of the sacred executioner.[35] We have already mentioned this concept with regard to Cain's portrayal in Byron's poem, but it can be glimpsed already in Augustine, who makes much of the similarities between the biblical brothers and the Roman myth of Romulus and Remus. He carefully enumerates the differences between the two stories but also considers them archetypally related because in each a city is founded as a result of fratricide (XV, 5, 600). Just as Romulus builds Rome after (and because of) killing Remus, Cain builds Hanoch – which, as we already know, represents for Augustine the city of men – after (and because of) killing Abel. Far more importantly, by that act of bloodshed Cain also founds the city of God because although Abel belonged there from the outset (according to Augustine), it is only his death that truly makes him the city's first citizen. This pattern is best understood in the light of Maccoby's interpretation of the sacred executioner mythology: it possibly explains the sending of an "ambassador to the upper world who would act as tutelary spirit of the new city and intercede for it with the gods at closer quarters than any mortal being could command."[36] Regina Schwartz asks, "What would have happened if [God] had accepted both Cain's and Abel's sacrifice instead of choosing one, and had thereby promoted cooperation between

the sower and the shepherd instead of their competition and violence?"[37] What if the deity had let the brothers cooperate rather than competing? What if they had decided to ignore the divine provocation? With the sacred executioner archetype in mind, the answer is: there would be no cities, either actual (Hanoch) or metaphorical (the city of men and the city of God as per Augustine).

The sovereign chooses Abel's sacrifice, but Abel is murdered and Cain, his chosen/unchosen brother, founds the city of men. Abel is bare life, for he is included as a citizen in the city of God but only through Cain's murderous act that excludes him from the city of men. Therefore, he indeed is chosen . . . for death? In that sense, we can fairly say that Cain's hand was either guided or prodded by God's, or that the divine agency – even as embodied in divine absence – cannot be disentangled from Cain's. Just as is the case with Cain, divine mercy already points to the double exclusion of Abel in relation to God. Abel is included in this mercy as bare life, that is, by his abandonment and ultimately, killing. This is the reason why Augustine finds it scandalous to interpret God's words to Cain as an invitation to dominate his brother; it is as though he tries hard not to see the need for Abel's death that undergirds his discussion of the two cities. By indeed subjugating his brother to death, Cain is the one called upon to develop the city of men on Earth. In order to divide humanity between the two cities, the sovereign in Augustine's reading needs the death of Abel at Cain's hands. Only then can the city of God be founded on the fratricidal deed, for it is this deed that paves the way for the beginning of the city of men on Earth, without which its heavenly opposite simply cannot exist.[38]

Perhaps this is the reason why Cain in some respects resembles the biblical patriarchs, especially Abraham, marrying, having descendants, founding a city, and passing on the apparent blessings to his offspring, who in Gen. 4:17–22 also have children and create various manifestations of civilization. In terms of foundational fratricide, Cain's act is meritorious, just like the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham would have been had God allowed it. The fact that in Gen. 22 God substitutes a ram for Isaac implies that both lives are equal; as Lacan would put it, one signifier replaces or displaces another within the unchanged framework of fulfilling the divine command, from whose standpoint Isaac is another bare life abandoned by God. Moreover, in both narratives it is the youngest life that is destroyed or nearly destroyed: in Gen. 4, Abel is the youngest son of Adam and Eve (until verse 25), and in Gen. 22, Isaac is Abraham's youngest son. Yet, Isaac's fate is different from Abel's: Why did God not also replace Abel with a lamb or ram? The answer, perhaps an unexpected one, is: this is the clearest indication that despite its sacral foundational function Abel's killing was not a sacrifice. In the latter, the victim does not ultimately matter as long as the deity receives something it finds acceptable. In the former, only a brother would do. Abel is thus a perfect *homo sacer*: he cannot be sacrificed, and his killer does not incur any legal responsibility. Here I radically part ways with Augustine, who identifies Cain as bare life in a state of exception; in my reading, Abel is such a bare life.

This, in turn, would help explain why a close examination of the Genesis account shows that Cain is overall a far more important character than he might appear at first blush. Although the narrator seems preoccupied with Seth's line

(5:6–32), which, as Augustine, among many others, has noted (XV, 20), is much longer and provides much more detail, specifying the lifespan of each figure and the age at which he begat the successor, it is significant that much of this line is an exact or approximate duplicate of Cain's (4:17–22). As Maccoby notes, two names – Enoch (Hanoch) and Lamech – appear in both lines unchanged, and four names do with slight variations (Cain – Kenan, Irad – Jared, Mehujael – Mahalalel, Methushael – Mathuselah; the first pair is particularly remarkable, not only because it features Cain himself but also because in Hebrew the only difference is duplication of the final consonant). Another similarity is that each list ends with three sons of the same father even though the names are different (Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain in 4:20–22; Shem, Ham, and Japheth in 5:32). Apart from these, only three names appear in Seth's line but not Cain's: Seth and his son Enosh in the beginning (5:6–8), and Noah at the end (5:28–29). The name Enosh is significant because it also functions as a generic term for humanity and therefore as an alternative to Adam. That leaves only two extra figures, Seth in the beginning and Noah at the end, both of which link the list to the narratives that frame it: Seth is explicitly introduced in 4:25 as a substitute for Abel, and Noah is the central character in the flood account (chaps. 6–9). So it appears that overall the genealogy of Gen. 5 is in fact that of Gen. 4 with some contextual adjustments.[39] Given that the former leads to Noah and his family, who become the progenitors of all nations the biblical narrator knew about or cared to list, the implication is that ultimately, all of humankind is rooted in Cain and his deed, whose foundational nature thus attains cosmic proportions.

Therefore, the concept of Cain as a sacred executioner shows that under the sovereign rule of the divine father the relation of exclusion and inclusion is inherent in the human condition. In Agamben's words, "bare life remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion."[40] As we already know, in Augustine's interpretation, the heavenly city of God is based upon inclusive exclusion of the bare lives of Cain and his descendants. Yet, our discussion above (also) demonstrates that according to the Bible what Augustine would describe as the city of men is based upon inclusive exclusion of Abel's bare life. The relation is reciprocal, and it is coeval with sovereignty; apart from abolishing the latter, there is nothing to be done about the former.

What is more, Cain performs a service to God not only by executing the task (of executing Abel) but also by taking upon himself the concomitant guilt. This, too, is carefully orchestrated by Yhwh. Deafeningly silent – not to mention passive – at the moment of the murder, the deity comes to life immediately thereafter: the last word of Gen. 4:8 is ויהרגהו "and he killed him," and the first two words of verse 9 are ויאמר יהוה "and Yhwh said." Cain is not afforded a single moment to come to his senses, severely weakening his resistance to the relentless barrage of divine queries and pronouncements, especially potent due to their ambiguous, deceptive, or unverifiable nature. Already God's first question contains an element of pretense: given that everything in the analyzed narrative happens לפני יהוה "before Yhwh's face," the deity could not possibly be clueless as to Abel's whereabouts. And since Cain doubtless knows as much, the inquiry is also useless

as an oblique invitation to confess the crime. At the same time, it is highly useful – together with the feigned bewilderment of מה עשית "What have you done?" in the beginning of the next verse – in clarifying to Cain that God has no intention of taking or even sharing responsibility for what has just happened.

Even more misleading (actually or potentially) is the deity's relatively long – on the scale of the terse narrative under discussion – discourse concerning Abel's blood and earth's response to its shedding (Gen. 4:10b-12). First, Cain has no way of making sure that there is indeed a scream coming from earth (v. 10b), which he apparently does not hear. Second, given the deity's complicity in the murder, should צעקים אלי (v. 10) be understood, with virtually all translations, commentaries, and studies, as "crying to me" or perhaps as "crying *at* me" (or both)? Third, the statement that Cain is ארור מן־האדמה literally "cursed from the earth" (v. 11) is suspect regardless of whether it is understood as saying that earth cursed Cain or that he is cursed to be removed from it: according to Gen. 3:17 earth itself is cursed. Fourth, while the prediction – or sentence? – that it will not yield its strength to Cain may sound ominous on its own, it does not go far beyond what Yhwh told Adam in Gen. 3:17–18 and thus does not explain why unlike the latter Cain will have to נע ונד "move about and wander" (4:12b).

With the divine about-face taking him by surprise, Cain initially appears to offer some resistance: his response in 4:9b is either defiant ("My brother's keeper? Who, I?") or, at the very least, incredulous ("Am I, now, my brother's keeper?"). In either case, he may be implying, via an allusion to the concept of the deity as a guardian reflected in such biblical texts as Gen. 28:15, Numbers 6:24, and Psalm 121 (where the root שמר is used six times in eight short verses), that God should accept at least part of the blame.[41] Yet, as a result of the deity's long discourse in Gen. 4:10b-12 it seems to dawn on Cain that nothing he had heard prior to the murder can be unequivocally construed as an incitement to commit it; indeed, by addressing him God could be trying to prevent violence. With language letting him down in the worst way imaginable and the possibility of a terrible mistake staring him in the face, Cain admits his guilt (Gen. 4:13) – which in turn exposes him to *lex talionis*. In Agambenian terms, the moment he makes a major step down the path that supposedly leads to *bios*, the deity pulls him back into *zoê*.

This is a crucial moment, arguably more so than the murder itself. In a certain sense, Abel's life was forfeit from the moment the deity chose to forge a special relationship with Cain but not with him. Now, Cain is browbeaten into proclaiming that his life is forfeited as well; it is up to Yhwh to take it – or to permit its taking as a compensation for Abel's. By throwing himself at God's mercy, Cain constitutes his self as bare life.

Herein lies a major mistake, one that costs Cain dearly – and ultimately his descendants too. Had he refused to allocute, the deity would still have had the choice of either destroying him or letting him be; after all, Abel's murder has already amply demonstrated that Yhwh does not need the slightest provocation in order to have somebody killed. Yet, in both cases Cain would have been free – and if he had lived, his line would have been free as well. His admission gives God a third option: Cain is neither pardoned nor executed; he is banished but provided with a sign of protection. As implicitly promised by Gen. 4:7, he does attain a *bios*

of sorts but at the expense of being permanently – and crushingly – burdened with guilt (as emphasized by מנשא in verse 13). Both he and his descendants are now fully and forever dependent upon the deity; the mark that they bear signifies that Yhwh owes the line by abandoning it.

What is more, chances are that this is what God wanted all along – as indicated, above all, by the relentless shaming of Cain in verses 10–12. The deity does not implicitly but firmly refuses to accept or even share blame for Abel's murder because responsibility is not of any concern to it. As the sovereign, God is both inside and outside the law and therefore cannot possibly transgress any moral imperatives. It is, however, important for the deity that Cain internalize his guilt – and, judging by his words in verse 13, he does.[42] What makes him especially susceptible to divine manipulation is that apparently he still does not understand how the sovereignty operates; in particular, his concern that being hidden (אסתר) from God's face would expose him to violence shows that he has not learned much from Abel's murder happening in the deity's full view. Amos's metaphor of Cain as a confused teenager remains fully applicable.

Yet, even more consequential from my perspective as a migrant is the fact that from the humanistic – and humanitarian – standpoint Cain's guilt is highly commendable. For no matter how much objective violence was brought to bear on his choices, ultimately they were his own, and he cannot and should not avoid responsibility for them. Yet, the deity uses this admirable guilt to successfully manipulate him. This raises disturbing questions about the role that the discourse of human rights plays in today's world. Earlier, I pointed out that by pursuing the noble goal of eliminating pain and suffering, this discourse often makes things worse for the most vulnerable because full sympathy with the suffering of the other is not achievable. The close reading of the story of Cain and Abel offered in the present chapter suggests that this dynamic becomes especially dangerous with the figure of the sovereign-father in the background. By saddling the citizens of a nation-state (for that matter, of any political state) with guilt over the treatment of migrants, suspected terrorists, and others, recognition of the latter as fellow humans makes the former ever more vulnerable to manipulation by the government. Instead of leading migrants to *bios* in the "heavenly" welfare state, it reduces the citizens of this state to *zoê*.[43]

This is precisely the situation that is created by Gen. 4:1–16. Cain's family hunkers down in the city that he builds and scores some impressive achievements. But at the same time – if Lamech's words in Gen. 4:23–24 are a fair indication – his family is increasingly paranoid and therefore prone to violence.[44] The rest of the primeval family – which continues through Seth – fails to develop any accoutrements of civilization or even to keep up the (doubtless beneficial) division of labor initiated by Abel. It lives in God's presence, for what it is worth, but in constant fear of Cain's violent brood lingering on the fringe. Although the former branch represents *bios* and the latter *zoê*, they are equally dependent on God for their very existence; Agamben's definition of bare life applies to both.

Yet, eventually signs of hope seem to emerge. Jabal, the son of Lamech and Adah, becomes "the father of those who live in tents and breed cattle" (Gen. 4:20). This means that he not only ventures beyond the city walls but also adopts

Abel's profession and the appropriate lifestyle. As if to underline that we are dealing here with the incipient reconciliation between the two branches of the primeval family, the term for cattle used by the narrator, מקנה, is a cognate of the verb קנה from which Cain's name was derived according to Gen. 4:1. The trend is possibly amplified in Gen. 6:1–4: although traditional exegesis has for the most part identified בני־האלהים, literally "sons of god(s)" who consort with "daughters of Adam" as fallen angels, based primarily on the word נפלים in verse 4a (see especially 1 Enoch 6–8), Augustine (XV, 22–23) argues that the piece describes intermarriage between the lines of Cain and Seth.[45] Interestingly but by no means unpredictably, the result is the first-ever tangible threat to the divine power: the mixed couples give birth to "heroes, men of renown" (v. 4b), and God has to resort to drastic measures culminating in the flood.[46] The same pattern can be seen in the Tower of Babel story: incomplete and imperfect as it always is, human solidarity inevitably brings about something tall and notable – and sends the sovereign-father into a panic mode.[47]

Notes

1 Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 4.
2 I undertake this task with full awareness that it cannot be properly accomplished because although I am a Colombian national legally residing in the U.S., my situation is highly privileged compared to that of the overwhelming majority of migrants in this country and worldwide. I try to give them voice but my voice is not truly theirs.
3 The idea is implied in the title of the book by J. Severino Croatto, *Exilio y Sobrevivencia: Tradiciones Contraculturales en El Pentateuch* (Buenos Aires: Lumen, 1997), which in English can be translated as "*Exile and Survival: Countercultural Traditions in The Pentateuch*." Nevertheless, Croatto does not apply the critical perspectives of exile and survival to his reading of Gen. 4:1–6; see also Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 50. In her analysis of the relationship between land and Israelite identity formation, Schwartz asserts that "a particular people are not banished from a particular land; rather, humankind itself is condemned to a general exile from a perfect land." In other words, exile is the condition that everyone inhabits.
4 Mankind's Deliverance from Destruction, translated by John A. Wilson (*ANET*, 11).
5 *Marduk*, translated by Ephraim Avigdor Speiser (*ANET*, 68); Stephanie Dalley (ed.), *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20–62; *Baal*, translated by H. L. Ginsberg (*ANET*, 135); Michael D. Coogan and Mark S. Smith, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 116.
6 Byron thus seems to radically break with the Bible by emphasizing Eve's preference for Abel and her readiness to curse Cain.
7 Clare Amos, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Epworth, 2004), 29.
8 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 87–8.
9 Ibid., 88. For more on this formula, see Raymond Westbrook, "Vitae Necisque Potestas," *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 48 (1999): 203–23.
10 *Patriarcha*, Sir Robert Filmer's longer political treatise, likely from before the Civil War, and used extensively in early modern discussions of kingship in Europe, justified the divine right of kings using the same argument of the absolute power of the father over his son(s) and the natural propensity of all creatures to monarchy. This was also the foil Locke used in his own political interpretations of scripture. Sherwood's *The God of Abraham*, gives some attention to Locke's work. See Johann P. Sommerville, ed., *Patriarcha and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 16, 18, 20–4.

11 I have discussed in Chapter 3 the meaning of the father's mercy in the Agambenian framework. To be banished means to be at the mercy of the sovereign and at the same time at one's own will. This is what Agamben defines as the basic relation of the law to life, or the father to his son: it applies not in its application but in its abandonment.
12 Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5–6. Tellingly, his examples of the Bible bestowing upon the father arbitrary power over the children include God's preference for Abel's sacrifice in Gen. 4.
13 Perry, "Cain's Sin," 259.
14 Amos, *The Book of Genesis*, 29.
15 On the interaction between these verbal forms, see Frolov, *The Turn of the Cycle: 1 Samuel 1–8 in Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives* (BZAW 342; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 40, 54–6, and references there.
16 As we have seen earlier, Augustine would likely give an affirmative answer to this question.
17 Žižek asserts that the story of Cain and Abel is a constituting myth of Islam's secret history. In the Islamic reading of the story, Cain may be the hero of the story, not an atheistic murderer because he is the one who draws Abel's sins upon himself. On the other hand, Abel invites violence on himself to rid himself of his sins and send his brother to hell. See Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 103–26; Mahdi Tourage, "The Erotics of Sacrifice in the Qur'anic Tale of Cain and Abel," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 5 (2011): 1–18.
18 Quoted in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 76–7.
19 Daniel Esdras, "IOM Counts 3,771 Migrant Fatalities In Mediterranean in 2015," n.p. [cited April 11, 2017]. Online: www.iom.int/news/iom-counts-3771-migrant-fatalities-mediterranean-2015
20 Note the unexpected change of the policy by the Obama administration in his last day as president, which exacerbates the condition of migrants as *homo sacer*, included and excluded.
21 Michael D. Shear, "Dealt Setback, Obama Puts Off Immigration Plan," n.p. [cited April 11, 2017]. Online: www.nytimes.com/2015/02/18/us/obama-immigration-policy-halted-by-federal-judge-in-texas.html?_r=0
22 Žižek, *Violence*, 1.
23 Ibid., 2.
24 Ibid. Perry appears to invert the concept of symbolic violence when he asserts that Cain did not understand God's ambiguous oracle because he was driven by distorted passions that funneled into his outburst of violence. See Perry, "Cain's Sin," 270.
25 Here and below I ignore the opening הלוא of verse 7 because it does not seem to affect the syntax or meaning of what follows; its only function is to shape God's discourse into a quasi-Socratic didactic pronouncement.
26 See GKC §114.
27 The translation of שאת as "you will be accepted" etc., commonly found in English Bibles since KJV, seems to stretch the semantic range of the root נשא.
28 Eagleton, *Aesthetic*, 182.
29 Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1988), 359.
30 Although תמשל can be interpreted as prediction ("you *will* rule over him/it"), a command or at least advice ("you *should* rule over him") would better fit the context (on this function of *yiqtol* verbs, see Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*, The Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Livonia: Dove Booksellers, 1998), 43–5). As I will explain in greater detail soon, at this point Cain is not interested in knowing what will happen but rather in how he should proceed after the rejection of his sacrifice. Indeed, even having an upper hand

over Abel is not in and of itself something he seeks – unless it happens to be the right thing to do.

31 There may be a subtle recognition of this in the divine discourse: although the desire mentioned in Gen. 4:7b is directed *towards* Cain, in 3:16b it is that of the addressee whose counterpart in chapter 4 is Cain.

32 Christian interpretive tradition generally regards sexuality as a major ramification of the "fall" (in part due to the association with nakedness) but in fact it is already presupposed by Gen. 2:24: "Therefore a man would leave his father and his mother and cling to his woman, and they will be one flesh."

33 Byron keeps the brothers in a continuous conversation since well before the offerings are made, with no verbal intervention from the deity until well after Abel is killed.

34 Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, *Genesis*, AB 1 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 30. He expresses a common opinion when he says that "the text was accidentally omitted in MT, owing, no doubt, to the repeated 'outside' (literally 'the field')" (pp. 30–1). Yet if the scribe's glance skipped from שדה in verse 7a as presupposed by the Septuagint and other ancient versions to שדה in verse 7b, extant in the Masoretic text, the words ויהי בהיותם would also be missing.

35 Quinones notes the presence of "a hero – a Sacred Executioner who endures evil in order to save the state" in Machiavelli's permutation of the Cain and Abel story (*Changes*, 78).

36 Maccoby, *The Sacred Executioner*, 11.

37 Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 3.

38 In Borges's short story "Three Versions of Judas," the titular character is the real redeemer of humanity because he takes the blame on himself so that Jesus may fulfill his fate. Žižek also comments on the role of Judas as the ultimate hero of the New Testament, one who was ready to lose his soul and accept eternal damnation so that the divine plan could be accomplished (*The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 16–19).

39 Maccoby, *The Sacred Executioner*, 18.

40 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 11.

41 We can recall here Vallejo's poetic "I" who in "The Eternal Dice" claims that he is God because he is the one who suffers: "Indeed, man suffers you; God is he!" In discussing this poem, I made the connection between the guilt of the poetic "I" and the sacrifice of Christ. The poetic persona feels guilty of the crucifixion because this event represents the deep pain of the human condition as the crucified who endures both the suffering on the cross and the paternal divine authority that nails him to it for all eternity.

42 In a similar fashion, Winston Smith in George Orwell's *1984* considers himself free – and is recognized as such by his antagonist, O'Brien – even when arrested, tortured, and threatened with execution. He decisively loses his freedom only when, in the final pages of the novel, he internalizes his guilt before the Big Brother.

43 In other words, without a critique of sovereignty as offered by Agamben and others, the quest for human rights can be, and often is, counterproductive.

44 In modern terms, Lamech claims monopoly to violence and thus behaves as a typical leader of a political state.

45 For Augustine, the "sons of God" are, of course, the descendants of Seth; yet, a plausible case can be made to see it the other way round: the women whom they marry are born as a result of humans multiplying על־פני האדמה literally "on earth's surface" (Gen. 6:1) whereas Cain had been banished מעל פני האדמה (4:14).

46 All along, the deity continues to play favorites. The characterization of Noah as a "wise, pure man in his generations" who "walked with God" (Gen. 6:9) might explain why he was singled out for survival but curiously, he finds "favor in Yhwh's eyes" already in Gen. 6:8. After the flood, the exclusion of the Ham-Canaan line is explained in Gen. 9:20–27 but the choice of the Shem-Abraham line is not. The continuum of sovereign arbitrariness then runs without interruption from Cain to Abraham and thence to the arbitrary choices listed earlier.

47 Note especially the word שם in the sense of "renown" in Gen. 6:4; 9:4.

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Epilogue

If the present study has demonstrated anything, it is that assumptions matter, and major theological or historical assumptions matter to biblical interpretation in major ways. The assumption that the deity of the Hebrew Bible cannot be anything but perfectly benevolent – or at least that the biblical author(s) could not possibly believe otherwise – has made it impossible for both ancient and modern exegetes to answer difficult questions raised by Gen. 4:1–16 without reading heavily into the narrative or offering dead-end references to "divine freedom" or "inscrutability."[1] Conversely, with such assumptions discarded and the divine behavior in the story not only scrutinized but also problematized and critiqued at will, both the story itself and the history of its interpretation open up to a potentially rich and productive analysis.

Informed by recent theoretical frameworks, such as Agamben's theory of bare life as foundation of sovereignty, Rancière's concept of ethical community, and Kristeva's notion of foreignness to the self, my examination of Gen. 4:1–16 was not designed merely as a contribution to biblical scholarship. Instead, I have sought to address the socio-political realities that affect the lives of millions and especially the present and pressing issues of human rights and migration. In formulating my questions and looking for plausible and edifying answers, I have tried to remain aware of power relations in the text, the history of interpretation, and religious and academic institutions. Among other things, this has allowed me to trace how primary presuppositions about God and derivative presuppositions about Cain and Abel have been translated into political realities of discrimination and oppression by foreclosing the possibility of knowing the other, who is hastily assigned a mark of exclusion. One case in point is Augustine's reading of the story. Self-contradictory and full of gaps (in particular, he never explains how apparently capricious predestination of some people for the city of God and others for the city of men fits in with the assumption of divine beneficence), it nevertheless not only exerted long and prevailing influence on Christian exegesis of Gen. 4:1–16 but also had far-reaching consequences with regard to the status of the Jewish other under Christian sovereignty.

At the core of my concern is thus the relation with the other, be that a person of a different gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, health, ability, or citizenship status, and the ways in which the figure of the sovereign-father, today represented in particular by nation-states, distorts this relation, leading to

violence, separation, and death. How we relate to each other is a part of the triangle in which the sovereign establishes the rules of the interaction. In the case of Gen. 4:1–16, God's intervention in first establishing a special relationship with Cain and then rejecting his sacrifice leads to Abel's murder and locks both brothers in a state of double exclusion and inclusion in relation to their sovereign father. A consistently political examination thus makes it possible to unlock many enigmatic or ambiguous details of the story, rendering the difficult and seemingly obsolescent biblical text not only easier to understand but also highly relevant to the discussion of today's pressing problems.

Note

1 The (possible) intent of the biblical author(s) lies beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, these authors did not necessarily share the ideas about divine disposition that dominate – but do not fully control – post-biblical Jewish and Christian traditions. In the ancient Near East, as well as in Hellenistic and Greco-Roman cultures, gods were not necessarily benevolent; the same is true of Yhwh in a variety of biblical texts. Furthermore, the character called "God" in a given narrative is not necessarily the deity in which its author believes. Consequently, it is impossible to sustain the implicit or explicit assumption of many, if not most, exegetes of the historical-critical school that the divine behavior in Gen. 4:1–16 cannot be questioned because this is something its author would not do.

Index