

THE OFFERING OF ABEL (GEN 4:4): A HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

JACK P. LEWIS*

The name *Hebel* (Gen 4:2, 4, 8-9, 25; pausal *Hābel*, 4:2) is unexplained in the OT, but a substantive *hebel* occurs seventy-three times in the MT signifying "breath, vapor, vanity."¹ Whether there is a connection between the name and the substantive is debated. The Great Bible, the Geneva Bible and the Bishops' Bible spelled the name "Habel," but the Douay used "Abel" as did the KJV and the major English Bibles since.

The story of Abel's offering, presupposing without narration the practice of sacrifice, is told simply. Abel is a keeper of sheep: "Abel brought the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering" (4:4). A hiphil form of *bôʿ*, a verb that is by no means limited to sacrificial contexts but occurs too often in them to need listing,² describes the "bringing" of both Cain's and Abel's offerings. The Greek renders both cases by an aorist form of *pherō*, while the Latin uses different forms of *offero* in each case.

The Hebrew narrative uses two key words describing Abel's offering not found concerning Cain's offering of "fruit of the ground." They are "firstlings" (*bēkōrôt*; cf. Exod 34:19; Deut 12:6; 14:23) and "fat" (*hēleb*; cf. Num 18:17). Both, joined by a conjunction that possibly is explanatory,³ are significant words in later Torah sacrificial instructions. The narrative has a double chiasmic arrangement, beginning and ending with mentioning Cain (Gen 4:1-5).

The verb *šāʿā* ("gaze intently") occurs fifteen times in the OT with God as the subject (Job 7:19; 14:6; Ps 39:14; etc.).⁴ Theodotion used a form of *empyrizō* ("burn"), probably due to confusing *yšʿ* with *ʾšh*.⁵ In the text the Lord regards both Abel and his offering but does not regard either Cain or his offering.

Apart from this episode (Gen 4:3-5) *minḥâ* ("offering") occurs in Genesis for gifts like those Jacob offered Esau (32:14, 19, 21-22; 33:10) and those

* Jack Lewis is professor of Bible at Harding Graduate School of Religion, 1000 Cherry Rd, Memphis, TN 38117

¹ K Seybold, "hebel," *TDOT* 3 313-320, V P Hamilton, "hebel," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (ed R L Harris, Chicago Moody, 1980) 1 204-205, see Isa 49 4

² H D Preuss, *bôʿ*, "TDOT 2 25

³ See GKC 154a, 1b

⁴ C Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis Augsburg, 1984) 296, H J Austel, *šāʿā*, *Theological Wordbook* 2 944-945 The verb *šāʿā* expressing human concern occurs in Exod 5 9, Isa 17 7-8

⁵ LSJ 549

Jacob's sons took to Egypt (43:11, 15, 25–26) but does not appear again in a worship setting.⁶ The term, which without distinction describes both Cain's and Abel's offering, may mean "tribute" (1 Kgs 4:21 [5:1]; 10:25). It usually is used of cereal offerings (cf. Lev 2:1–3; etc.) when in worship settings, but it also may refer to an animal offering (cf. 1 Sam 2:17; 26:19; Mal 1:10, 13; 2:13).⁷

Following Abel's murder by Cain, the blood of Abel is said to cry out from the ground (Gen 4:10). Seth is seen by Eve as a replacement for Abel (4:25). Since Abel had no descendants, his name occurs in no Biblical genealogies. His sacrifice is not mentioned again in the OT.

In the LXX the verb for God's reception of the offerings of both Cain and Abel is *epeiden*, and the *minhâ* becomes a plural of *dōron* for Abel's offering while Cain's is a *thysia*. In the Vg the verb *wayyisša*^c is rendered *respicere*, and the *minhâ* becomes *munus* in both cases. The LXX rendering of Gen 4:7 suggests that Cain has been guilty of a ritual fault: "If you made your offering rightly, but did not divide it rightly (*orthos de mē dieles*), did you not sin?"

I. EARLY JEWISH WRITERS

Abel is not included in Ben Sira's survey of the notables of the past. His sacrifice is not mentioned in either *1 Enoch* or *Jubilees*, but Raphael shows Enoch the hollow places created for the souls of the dead. There the spirit that sent forth Abel makes suit against Cain.⁸ First, *Enoch* allegorizes the Cain and Abel story as a vision by Adam in which he sees a black bull that gores a red bull. Black symbolizes sin, while red symbolizes martyrdom. Eve as a cow seeks the red bull, does not find him, and laments with great lamentation.⁹ In *Jubilees* the slaughter of Abel is placed in the first year of the third jubilee with the explanation given for the death: "because (God) accepted the sacrifice of Abel and did not accept the offering of Cain."¹⁰ This work designates one a sacrifice and the other an offering without explaining the difference. Adam and Eve mourn Abel four weeks of years.¹¹

Abel is treated extensively by Philo of Alexandria.¹² Abel's name stands for one to whom things mortal are a grief and things immortal are full of happiness.¹³ The sacrifices of Cain and Abel are the subject of an entire treatise (*De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini*) by Philo, only a part of which is relevant to this study. Philo finds Abel mentioned before Cain in Gen 4:3, though he is younger, because virtue is older in point of worth (though not in time) than vice is. He allegorizes virtue as pressing its claims upon the

⁶ J Pedersen, *Israel*, III–IV (London Oxford University, 1940) 330

⁷ G L Carr, "minhâ," *Theological Wordbook* 1 514–515

⁸ *1 Enoch* 22 7

⁹ *1 Enoch* 85 4–6

¹⁰ *Jub* 4 2

¹¹ *Jub* 4 7

¹² See E Stein, *Philo und der Midrash* (Giessen A Topelmann, 1931) 10–12

¹³ Philo *De Migratione Abrahami* 74 [13]

mind. The mind becomes a shepherd as Abel was, controlling the unreasonable faculties.

Philo, assuming the whole matter from the absence of mention of first-fruits in the Genesis text, characterizes Cain as keeping the firstlings of his husbandry and offering "merely the fruits at a later time." Abel brought the firstborn younglings of the flock, not the afterborn, and by his action confessed that "causes that come higher in the chain of causation owe their existence to the Cause which is highest and first of all."¹⁴

Philo, developing the phrase "after some days" (Gen 4:3), which he contrasts with "at once," accuses Cain of making his offering at an improper time. Arguing from the wording of the Greek version, he also faults Cain for offering "of the fruit" (*apo ton karpon*) and not of the earliest fruit (*apo ton prōton karpon*), "or in a single word the firstfruits" (*prōtogenēmata*).¹⁵ Philo distinguishes between "the firstlings of the fruits" and the "first-fruits," seeing Cain giving first honor to created being and rendering only the second honor to God.¹⁶ Allegorically, Philo sees Moses expressing under the name of Cain the mind, feeling that all things are its own rather than God's possession.¹⁷

Philo's mention of Abel's offering of the firstborn of the sheep leads him into homilies on the offering of the firstborn in Exod 13:11–13 that need not be detailed here. That brings him to the word "redeemed" and to a digression on the subject as related to redemption of the Levites.

He again mentions Abel and his offering, commenting that the firstlings and the fat show "that gladness and richness of the soul, all that protects and gives joy, should be set apart for God."¹⁸ Philo connects "fat" with the fat, kidneys, and lobe of the liver of sacrifice (Lev 3:3 ff.) and promises to speak of them separately. But he diverges to comment that the brain (the seat of the dominant principle) is unmentioned in the sacrificial ritual. Only when the brain has been purged of its tendencies to lapses will it be admitted as a proper part of the whole burnt offering.

In his *Questions and Answers on Genesis* Philo again asks why Scripture first describes the work and approval of the younger man. His answer is that

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 labors and takes care of living beings even though they are irrational, gladly undertaking the pastoral work which is preparatory to rulership and kingship. But the other occupies himself with early and inanimate things.¹⁹

Philo finds one of the participants to be a lover of self and the other a lover of God. He finds the words "after some days" rather than "immediately" and

¹⁴ Philo *De Confusione Linguarum* [25] 124.

¹⁵ Philo *De Sacrificis Abelis et Caini* [13] 52; cf. [20] 72

¹⁶ Philo *De Mutatione* 195

¹⁷ Philo *De Cherubim* 65

¹⁸ Philo *De Sacrificis* 136

¹⁹ Philo *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1.59 (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1953) 36.

"from the offerings" instead of "from the firstfruits" to be indicative of great wickedness on Cain's part. Abel "offered the firstborn and elder animals without any delay at all or rejection by his Father." "Abel's offering was living, Cain's was lifeless. Abel's was first in age and value, Cain's but second. Abel's had strength and superior fatness, Cain's had but weakness."²⁰

Philo also wants to know why Cain is mentioned second in Gen 4:4-5. He decides against time being the reason, but first is "he who comes in his time and with sound morals." There were two persons, one good and one evil. God turned toward the good man, looking on him because he was a lover of goodness and virtue. First seeing him to be more inclined toward that side in the order of nature, God turned from the evil man. Philo makes a distinction between God's seeing the offerings and his seeing those who were offering the gifts. People look at the quantity of gifts and approve them, but God looks at the truth of the soul and turns aside from arrogance and flattery.

Philo, working from the Greek text (which has *dōron* and *thysia*), next asks what the difference is between a gift and a sacrifice. His answer is that the one 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. The lover of self is a divider as Cain was,²¹ while the lover of God is a giver as Abel was. Philo's case later influenced Ambrose. While not explaining how Abel knew his gift was accepted, Philo has Cain perhaps know that his was rejected by his grief: "For joy and gladness ought to come to him who sacrifices something purely and blamelessly."²²

Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* covers the Cain and Abel period by merely listing the sons and daughters of Adam. It further notes that "Cain dwelt in a land of trembling, as God had appointed for him after he had killed Abel his brother."²³

Josephus,²⁴ in narrating the story of Cain and Abel, moralizes, contrasts the two brothers, and notes that the name of Abel means "nothing," an etymology that is not in Genesis. But *ouden* does render *hebel* in Isa 49:4 where *hebel* is not a name. Josephus praises Abel: "Abel, the younger, had respect for justice, the practice of virtue, and, believing that God was with him in all his actions, paid heed to virtue; he led the life of shepherd." Cain is "altogether wicked," had an eye only for gain, and was the first to think of plowing the earth. Josephus diverges from the LXX and describes Cain's offering as coming from the fruits of the tilled earth and of the trees. In the Pentateuch, fruit of trees could be used for the Lord after the third year and eaten in the fifth (Lev 19:23-25).

²⁰ Philo *De Sacrificis* 88 [27]

²¹ Philo is exegeting the Greek text, which, taking *lappetah* as an infinitive, translates "rightly divide" (*orthos de mē dieles*) in v 7. See *Agricultura* 127-128.

²² Philo *Questions and Answers* 1 62-63

²³ Pseudo-Philo *Bib Ant* 1 1, 2 1 (*APOT* 2 304-305)

²⁴ Josephus *Ant* 1 2 1 §§52-55, T W Franksman, *Genesis and the "Jewish Antiquities" of Flavius Josephus* (BibOr 35, Rome: Biblical Institute, 1979) 65-68

Josephus explains the murder of Abel as follows:

The brothers having decided to sacrifice to God, Cain brought the fruits of the tilled earth and of the trees, while Abel came with milk and the firstlings of his flocks. This was the offering that 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.

Josephus shows independence of the Greek Bible by his different vocalization of *h/b* ("fat"), which he reads as *hālāb* ("milk"). Obviously in Josephus' view there is intrinsically something better about offerings from the herd than by the greedy action of plowing the earth to plunder its riches.²⁵ A like view is later expounded in the midrashim.²⁶

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT

Abel gets a notice in the eschatological chapters of Matthew and Luke as the first of the righteous whose blood was shed (Matt 23:25; Luke 11:49–51). The writer of Hebrews contrasts the blood of the new covenant as speaking "more graciously than the blood of Abel" (Heb 12:24)—that is, than blood crying from the ground for vengeance (cf. Gen 4:10).²⁷ The writer of Hebrews includes Abel as the first in his list of the faithful with Abel by faith offering a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain (Heb 11:4).²⁸ "He received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts; he died, but through his faith he is still speaking."

The writer of 1 John 3:12 warns: "Do not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous." Jude also considers Cain to be evil (Jude 11–12).

III. EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Early Christian writers were more concerned about the murder of Abel than about the interpretation of his sacrifice. Clement of Rome, in giving admonition on jealousy, notes the case of Cain and Abel with Abel offering the firstborn of the sheep and of their fat. The writer, following the Greek text, has God "look on" (*epeiden*) Abel and his "gifts" (*dōrois*) while "having no respect" (*ou proseschen*) for Cain and his "sacrifices" (*thysiais*).²⁹ Justin argues that if circumcision were necessary, God would not have been pleased with Abel and his gifts offered when he was uncircumcised.³⁰

²⁵ J L Kugel, "Cain and Abel in Fact and Fable Genesis 4 1–16," *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament*² (ed R Brooks and J J Collins, Notre Dame University of Notre Dame, 1990) 175

²⁶ *Gen Rab* 22 3

²⁷ K G Kuhn, "Abel-Kain," *TDNT* 1 6–8

²⁸ See "polys," BAGD 689

²⁹ *1 Clem* 4 1–2

³⁰ Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 19 3

Irenaeus finds Abel's offering respected because he offered with single-mindedness and righteousness whereas Cain was divided with envy and malice.³¹ God, when reproving Cain's hidden thoughts, said, "Though you offer rightly, yet, if you do not divide rightly, have you not sinned? Be at rest" (Gen 4:7 LXX). Irenaeus proceeds with a homily on hypocritical sacrifice in which Cain becomes like the Pharisees, who had jealousy like him. Though counseled by God to keep quiet, Cain, "because he had not made an equitable division of that share to which his brother was entitled, but with envy and malice thought he could domineer over him, not only did not acquiesce, but even added sin to sin, indicating his state of mind by his action."³² Abel, the righteous man who perishes, is a prefiguring of the Lord.³³

The Valentinian gnostics allegorized the Genesis story, making the characters represent traits of human nature. The material nature reprobate to salvation is assigned to Cain, the animal nature poised between divergent hopes is assigned to Abel, and the spiritual nature preordained to certain salvation becomes Seth. Achamoth infuses this spiritual nature by grace among superior beings like rain into good souls.³⁴ The sacrifice is not discussed.

In the *Apocryphon of John*, Abel is the seventh aeon created by the first Archon.³⁵ The chief Archon named one of the sons (whom he begot out of Eve) Yave, who is over the fire and wind. This righteous one is called Abel with a view to deceive.³⁶ The *Hypostasis of the Archons* has Abel bring in an offering from among his lambs and has God look upon the votive offerings of Abel.³⁷

For Tertullian, impatience lay at the root of Cain's problem and led him to kill his brother. Stirred by the refusal of God to accept his sacrifice, Cain became angry.³⁸ Tertullian affirms that Abel, while uncircumcised and unobservant of the Sabbath, had his sacrifice "offered in simplicity of heart." Cain, who was not rightly dividing what he was offering, was rejected.³⁹ Tertullian, arguing that spirit and sacrifices are foreshadowed from the beginning, makes the offering of Cain to be a picture of the offerings of the Jewish people and those of Abel to be those "of our people," meaning Christians.⁴⁰

According to Theodotion's Greek translation, fire came down from heaven and consumed Abel's offering but not Cain's.⁴¹ This view, which rests on a confusion of Hebrew words, was known to Jerome and to Procopius of

³¹ Irenaeus *Adv Haer* 4 18 3 (ANF 1 485)

³² *Ibid* 3 23 4 (ANF 1 456)

³³ *Ibid* 4 34 4 (ANF 1 512), *Demonstration* 17

³⁴ Tertullian *Against the Valentinians* 29 2 (ANF 3 517)

³⁵ *Ap John* 2 1 10, 36 (*The Nag Hammadi Library in English* [ed. J. M. Robinson, San Francisco: Harper, 1981] 104), cf. *Gos Eg* 3 2 58 [17] (*Nag Hammadi* 201)

³⁶ *Ap John* 2 1 24–25 (*Nag Hammadi* 112)

³⁷ *Hyp Arch* 2 4 91 (*Nag Hammadi* 156)

³⁸ Tertullian *On Patience* 5 (ANF 3 710)

³⁹ Tertullian *An Answer to the Jews* 2 2 (ANF 3 153)

⁴⁰ *Ibid* (ANF 3 156)

⁴¹ F. Field, *Origenis Hexapla* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1875, reprinted, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964) 1 17

Gaza.⁴² Whatever its source, it was very influential through the medieval commentaries.

The third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum*, by a strange perversion, deduced a prohibition of an altar from the wording of Exod 20:25 and Deut 27:5 and affirmed that Cain and Abel were not commanded to sacrifice but that they of their own accord presented offerings. Their offerings achieved a brother's murder.⁴³

Ephraem the Syrian declared that light was the symbol of Abel (the World Savior). Ephraem is interested in the typological meaning of the Abel story, and he moves from Abel the sacrificer to Abel the sacrificed lamb, which to him is a picture of Christ as the lamb. The death of Abel typifies the death of Christ.⁴⁴

Cyprian of Carthage (AD 200–250) follows Tertullian in making Cain an example of impatience: "And in order that Cain should put his brother to death, he was impatient of his sacrifice and gift."⁴⁵ Cyprian, discussing threats and terrors, notes that in the beginning of the world it was none other than a brother who slew righteous Abel.⁴⁶ Cyprian affirmed that in the sacrifices of Cain and Abel God looked not at their gifts but at their hearts

so that he was acceptable in his gift who was acceptable in his heart. Abel, peaceable and righteous in sacrificing in innocence to God, taught others also when they bring their gift to the altar, thus to come with fear of God, with a simple heart, with the law of righteousness, with the peace of concord.⁴⁷

In a homily on peace (Mark 11:25) Cyprian remarked: "For God had not respect unto Cain's offerings; for he could not have God at peace with him, who through envious discord had not peace with his brother."⁴⁸

Hippolytus of Rome points out that the Peratae sect in their allegory describe Moses in the wilderness as denominating the gods of destruction as serpents. They have them withstand Moses in Egypt in the magicians' rods becoming serpents. The universal serpent is the mark set on Cain, whose sacrifice the god of this world did not accept. But he approved the gory sacrifice of Abel. The ruler of this world rejoices in the offering of blood.⁴⁹

Methodius of Olympus (d. AD 312) also attributes Cain's act to jealousy: "Wherefore I dare ask you to listen to me with ears free from all envy, without imitating the jealousy of Cain."⁵⁰ Methodius does not discuss the nature of Abel's offering.

⁴² V Aptowitzer, *Kain und Abel in der Agada, den Apokryphen, der hellenistischen, christlichen und muhammedanischen Literatur* (Wien und Leipzig R Lowit, 1922) 42

⁴³ R H Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford Clarendon, 1929) 220

⁴⁴ T Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian* (Lund Gleerup, 1978) 135–149

⁴⁵ Cyprian *Treatise* 9 "On the Advantage of Patience" 19 (ANF 5 489)

⁴⁶ Cyprian *Ep* 54[59] 2 (ANF 5 339)

⁴⁷ Cyprian *Treatise* 4 "On the Lord's Prayer" 24 (ANF 5 454)

⁴⁸ Cyprian *Treatise* 1 "On the Unity of the Church" 13 (ANF 5 425)

⁴⁹ Hippolytus *The Refutation of All Heresies* 5 11 (ANF 5 62–63)

⁵⁰ Methodius of Olympus *Concerning Free Will* (ANF 6 356)

In the *Acts of Thomas* the serpent is the one who kindled and inflamed Cain to kill his own brother.⁵¹

Eusebius denies the Greek contention that early men did not offer animal sacrifices but only vegetable ones and that animal sacrifices came in the next stage of wickedness. Eusebius points to the account in the Hebrew Scriptures of the story of Cain and Abel with animal sacrifices at the beginning of this life. There the one who sacrificed an animal was more accepted by God than the one who brought the fruits of the ground (the text of Genesis does not state whether Cain's offering was firstfruits). Eusebius states that such sacrifices ceased with the sacrifice of the Christ.⁵² Eusebius gives the meaning of the name "Abel" to be "sorrow" (*penthos*), an etymology earlier suggested by Philo,⁵³ because Abel became the cause of such suffering to his parents. Eusebius saw the name given by the parents at Abel's birth through divine insight.⁵⁴

Ambrose wrote a homiletical treatise on the Cain and Abel story.⁵⁵ Assuming that Abel's offering needs little comment, Ambrose centers on Cain's offering. Influenced by Philo and Origen he assumed a threefold sense of Scripture, but as a preacher he favors the moralizing and allegorizing interpretation. Ambrose's allegorical method enables him to hang his homilies for edification on the Biblical story rather than deriving them from it.

Ambrose has Abel ascribe to the Creator everything he had received from him, while Cain, whose name means "getting," got everything for himself. The two are types of two schools of thought, only one of which recognizes God as Creator and submits to his guidance.⁵⁶ But they are also types of the Church that cleaves to God and of the Jews who crucified the Lord.⁵⁷ Abel is mentioned first in Gen 4:3 because he is superior in virtue. Tilling the soil is of lower prestige than is shepherding.⁵⁸ In the mystical interpretation, Abel's being a shepherd teaches that the virtuous principles and deeds foolish men avoid are offerings suitable for God.⁵⁹

Ambrose finds Cain at fault in the time of his offering in that it was fruits of the ground, in that it was of inferior quality and not of the firstfruits, and in that it was not divided into parts.⁶⁰ As contrasted with examples of speedy devotion, he faults Cain for delay in offering. The delay is an indication of his negligence and presumption.⁶¹ No early writer seems to have recognized that "in the course of time" could also describe the time of Abel's offering. From the absence of mention of firstfruits, Ambrose as-

⁵¹ *Acts of Thomas* 32

⁵² Eusebius *Proof of the Gospel* 1 10 [34d]

⁵³ Philo *De Migratione Abrahami* 74 [13]

⁵⁴ Eusebius *The Preparation of the Gospel* 11 6 24 [p 518b] (GCS 43 2 17)

⁵⁵ Ambrose *De Cain et Abel* (CSEL 32/1 339–409, FC 42 359–437)

⁵⁶ *Ibid* 1 3–4

⁵⁷ *Ibid* 1 5

⁵⁸ *Ibid* 1 11

⁵⁹ *Ibid* 1 24

⁶⁰ *Ibid* 1 25, 2 21

⁶¹ *Ibid* 1 40

sumes that Cain used the first for himself and left the remainder for God.⁶² He allegorizes the firstfruits into firstfruits of the soul, which are emotions associated with all good thoughts and acts. Abel's firstlings were sleek and fat, corresponding to the later demands of the Law (cf. Exod 13:11–13).⁶³ He found it significant that the offering was of living beings. The living thing comes first and is endowed with a spirit. Ambrose notes that "fat" conveys the idea of "finest" and contrasts with thin and scrawny.⁶⁴

From the Lord's statement to Cain in Gen 4:7, Ambrose deduces that "God is not appeased by the gifts that are offered, but by the disposition of the giver."⁶⁵ Cain's sadness bears testimony to his consciousness of right and is an indication of his failure. Cain did not make a just and righteous division of his gift. Ambrose sermonizes that what belongs to heaven should take precedence over what is of the earth.⁶⁶

Ambrose contrasts the characters of Cain and Abel. Abel—just, innocent, loyal—died while still a youth. Cain—unjust, evil, disloyal—lived to a ripe old age, suffering the punishment of a life of guilt after being driven from the presence of God.⁶⁷

Augustine divided people into two groups: those who live according to man, and those who live according to God. He mystically calls them two cities. Abel, who signifies "grief," belongs to the city of God.⁶⁸ Augustine assumes that there doubtless was some visible sign (which he does not elaborate) distinguishing God's attitude toward the two offerings. Augustine turns his attention to Cain's fault, saying that he was not rightly living and was being unworthy to have his offering received.⁶⁹ Augustine says that Abel, the shepherd of the sheep, prefigures Christ. Cain, on the other hand, prefigures the Jews who slew Christ. Cain was the founder of the earthly city.⁷⁰

The Syriac *Book of the Cave of Treasures* has Cain wishing to marry his twin sister (which is contrary to the plan of Adam who is proposing his marriage to a different daughter [Abel's twin], and Cain's desire is denounced as a transgression by him). But the treatise has the two sons being instructed by Adam to take fruits of trees, and the young of sheep, and to go into the Cave of Treasures and offer up offerings. While Cain is going, Satan enters him and persuades him to kill Abel. His jealousy of Abel over the girl and the rejection of his offering are blamed for his deed.⁷¹ The *Testament of Adam* echoes the same legend.⁷² Isaac prays in the *Testament of*

⁶² Ibid 1 41

⁶³ Ibid 1 42

⁶⁴ Ibid 2 17

⁶⁵ Ibid 2 18

⁶⁶ Ibid 2 23

⁶⁷ Ibid 2 37

⁶⁸ Augustine *City of God* 15 1, 18

⁶⁹ Ibid 15 7

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ E A Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* (London Religious Tract Society, 1927) 69–70

⁷² *Testament of Adam* 3 5 (*The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [ed J H Charlesworth, Garden City Doubleday, 1983] 1 994)

Isaac: "May the God who provided for our father Adam and Abel . . . be . . . with me also. Receive my offering from me."⁷³

IV. JEWISH INTERPRETATION

Targum Onqelos makes no significant addition to the narrative of the MT. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* has Cain bring "the seed of flax, an obligation of first things before the Lord." Of special notice is that this targum calls the offering "first things." While the two call Cain's presentation an "offering," *Targum Neofiti I* first calls Cain's a "gift." But all, including *Neofiti* and *Targum Yerušalmi*, use "offering" (*qorbān*) when speaking of the Lord's acceptance or rejection.⁷⁴ *Targum Neofiti* has no striking addition to the actual narration of the sacrifices but then has an entire conversation between Cain and Abel in the field, in which Cain insists that justice is corrupted.⁷⁵ Abel replies, insisting that matters are arranged in keeping with people's good deeds: "For it was because my deeds were better than yours that my sacrifice was accepted with favor and your sacrifice was not." Cain replies that there was no judgment and no divine judge. It is obvious that the targumist is supplying contemporary motifs of his own time to the narrative.

It is likely ultimately under Jewish influence that the *Qurʾān* tells how one of the sons of Adam killed the other because his own sacrifice was refused when his brother's was accepted.⁷⁶

In the *Life of Adam and Eve*, Eve has a dream about the fate of Abel. After that, Adam and Eve make Cain a farmer and Abel a shepherd so that they will be separated, but the act is in vain.⁷⁷ Issachar in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* alludes to the Lord's blessing the saints with the firstfruits from Abel until the present time.⁷⁸ Benjamin has Cain condemned on account of Abel his brother as a result of all his evil deeds.⁷⁹ In *Mart. Isa.* 9:8, 28 Isaiah sees "the holy Abel" in the seventh heaven. He sees Adam, Abel and Seth worshiping the Lord. Fourth Maccabees 18:11 speaks of "Abel, slain by Cain." In the book of Wisdom, Cain is designated "an unrighteous man" who departed from Wisdom in his anger.⁸⁰

Synagogal prayers dating between AD 150 and 300 speak to the Lord: "You received the gifts of the righteous in their generation; Abel, espe-

⁷³ *Testament of Isaac* 4 37–38 (*Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 1 908)

⁷⁴ G. Vermes, "The Targum Versions of Genesis IV 3–16," *ALUOS* (1961–62) 80–83

⁷⁵ See B. Chilton, "A Comparative Study of Synoptic Development: The Dispute Between Cain and Abel in the Palestinian Targums and the Beelzebul Controversy in the Gospels," *JBL* 101 (December 1982) 553–562; J. M. Bassler, "Cain and Abel in the Palestinian Targums," *JSL* 17 (June 1986) 56–64; S. Isenberg, "An Anti-Sadducee Polemic in the Palestinian Targum Tradition," *HTR* 65 (July 1970) 433–444

⁷⁶ *Sura* 5 27–30

⁷⁷ *The Life of Adam and Eve* 23 (*Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 2 266)

⁷⁸ *T. Issachar* 5 4

⁷⁹ *T. Benjamin* 7 4

⁸⁰ *Wis* 10 3

cially—you beheld and accepted his sacrifice.”⁸¹ Another prayer addresses the Lord: “And while indeed from Abel, as a devout man, you favorably received a sacrifice, from the brother-murderer Cain, you turned aside the offering as from an accursed person.”⁸²

Rabbinic exegesis faults Cain for having a passion for agriculture and maintains that Cain brought produce of the poorest quality like one who eats the first ripe figs but honors the king with late figs.⁸³ The meaning of the term “their fat portions” was debated, with differing views held.⁸⁴ Abel was in the world not more than fifty days.⁸⁵ He was stronger than Cain but was deceived by him, leading to his death.⁸⁶ Cain was considered avaricious. He wanted to control the world, and that led him to kill Abel.⁸⁷

Pirque Rabbi Eliezer has the two brothers feeding each other from their respective produce. On the evening of the festival of Passover, Adam suggested to them that they bring offerings to the Creator. Cain brought the remnants of his meal of roasted grain and the seed of flax. Abel brought the firstlings of his sheep. He also brought the fat of male lambs that had not been shorn of their wool. This case is developed into an explanation of the prohibition of mixing flax and wool in cloth.⁸⁸

Rashi (twelfth century AD) found Abel becoming a shepherd and ceasing to cultivate the earth because it was cursed. He only comments on the verb *wayyīšša*^c, which he finds meaning the same as *pānā*: “He turned to.” The same verb with the negative, describing the rejection of Cain’s offering, means “turned from.” Rashi cites parallel occurrences of *pānā* in Exod 5:9; Job 14:6. For Rashi, fire comes down from heaven and licks up Abel’s offering.⁸⁹ The same legend occurs in Ibn Ezra and in various midrashim.⁹⁰ I have not been able to trace the source of this tradition, which earlier was in Theodotion and Jerome. Aptowitz conjectures that the tradition passed from Christian and Muslim legend into the haggadah but also conjectures that before Theodotion it must have been a Jewish legend that intermediate Jewish sources ignore.⁹¹ He conjectures that it arises from *Sepher ha-Yashar* or the *Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim*.⁹²

Nahmanides comments that Cain and Abel understood the secret of the sacrifices and of the meal offerings, as did Noah. He also feels that the first

⁸¹ “Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers” (*Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 2 684)

⁸² *Ibid* 2 693

⁸³ *Gen Rab* 22 5 The idea earlier occurs in Philo *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1 60 “One of them took for himself the fruit of the firstfruits and impiously thought God worthy (only) of the second fruits”

⁸⁴ *b Zebah* 116a

⁸⁵ *Gen Rab* 22 4, *Exod Rab* 31 7

⁸⁶ *Num Rab* 22

⁸⁷ *Gen Rab* 22 4

⁸⁸ *Pirque R El* 21

⁸⁹ J H Lowe, “Rashi” on the *Pentateuch Genesis* (London Hebrew Compendium Publishing, 1928) 81

⁹⁰ Aptowitz, *Kain* 145 n 181

⁹¹ *Ibid* 42–43

⁹² *Ibid* 43

man sacrificed an ox and a bullock. He contends that these matters should stop the mouth of those who speak nonsense on the reason for the sacrifices.⁹³

The *Apocalypse of Sedrach*, which received its final form after AD 1000, asserts that divine love dwelt in Abel.⁹⁴

Along the way the sacrifices of Cain and Abel became an art motif. Two sarcophagi of Arles depict Abel with his lamb and Cain with his produce before the Lord.⁹⁵ Other depictions are listed by P. F. Hovingh⁹⁶ and in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* in the article on "Cain."

V. THE MIDDLE AGES

In the Armenian *Adam Cycle*, dating somewhere between the seventh and fourteenth centuries, Adam suggests to his sons that they should set aside a portion of their labors for God. Abel chooses a lamb with 1001 speckles that he offers with a prayer: "O Lord God, Creator and Author of all good things, I pray you, accept this sacrifice that I am offering to you as a portion of your well-created gifts that you have distributed among us. From those good things you have distributed I am offering to you for your good pleasure" (v. 11). Immediately a gentle breeze blew, a light shone from heaven and illuminated Abel's face, and a voice from heaven said, "Your prayers are heard, and your offering is accepted." A shining light became a protection to Abel and took Abel's lamb to heaven.⁹⁷

Stephen Langton stated that God's recompense is based not on the amount given but on the amount from which it is given, as in the cases of Zacchaeus, the widow, or Cain and Abel.⁹⁸

VI. THE REFORMATION

Martin Luther expounded the Cain and Abel story as an illustration of his doctrine of salvation by faith alone. God did not have regard for the quantity of the work or its quality or value but only for the faith of the individual. God is not interested even in the works he has commanded when they are not done in faith.

The MT *minhâ* (though first mentioned here in Genesis) suggests to Luther that sacrifice has existed from the beginning of the world. Sacrifice was a sign of grace, implying that humankind was still a concern of God. Luther sees Cain's position as a farmer to be the place of a lord while Abel's position of tending sheep is that of a servant. Cain, puffed up by his

⁹³ J Newman, *The Commentary of Nachmanides on Genesis Chapters 1-6* (Leiden Brill, 1960) 81

⁹⁴ *Apocalypse of Sedrach* 1 18 (*Old Testament Apocrypha* 1 609)

⁹⁵ F Cabrol and H Leclercq, *Dictionnaire D'Archeologie Chretienne et de Liturgie* (Paris Letouzey et Ane, 1907) 1 61-62

⁹⁶ P F Hovingh, "La Fumee du sacrifice de Cain et d'Abel et L'*Alethia* de Claudius Marius Victorius," VC 10 (1956) 43-48

⁹⁷ W Lipscomb, *The Armenian Apocryphal Adam Literature* (Atlanta Scholars, 1990) 158-161

⁹⁸ S Langton, "On Will and Deed" (LCC 10 358)

primogeniture, despises the instruction his father had given him and supposes that God will approve his act because of his prestige. Abel, as his name implies, is nothing and makes his offering in the faith of the promise (cf. Heb 11:4).

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

While acknowledging that the text does not state how God showed his favor to Abel's offering, Luther conjectures that it was by fire from heaven consuming the offering. God looked on the heart of Abel. As Augustine had done (*City of God* 15.1), Luther makes Abel to be the beginning of the city of God while Cain is the beginning of the city of the world. Cain wants to be the pope and father of the Church.

Luther sees in the manner of expression of Gen 4:4 that the person rather than that person's work is acceptable to God. If people are good, their work pleases the Lord; if not, their work displeases the Lord. God had regard for Abel but had no regard for Cain and thereby had no regard for his offering. The work pleases because of the person, not the person because of the work. Luther found his position to be in harmony with Heb 11:4. Cain would not have displeased God had he had faith.⁹⁹

John Calvin reasons that Abel's offering by faith (Heb 11:4) implies prior divine instruction about sacrifice and that at that time, as in all times, obedience is better than sacrifice (cf. 1 Sam 15:22). Though God was not pleased with mere carnal and external worship, yet he deemed these sacrifices acceptable. God, when taking away the tree of life, declares himself to be propitious to people by other means.

Calvin notes that the word *minhâ* is used but finds no hindrance in it to his concept that the command of sacrifice was given from the beginning. In sacrifice all confess that they are God's property and that all they have is received from him. Also, the divine command of sacrifice admonishes all of their need of reconciliation with God. When people sacrifice cattle, they have death before their eyes while being reminded that God is propitious.

The text mentions that God has respect for Abel, signifying that God will regard no works with favor where the doer is not approved and acceptable to him. God looks on the heart (cf. 1 Sam 16:7). He abhors the sacrifices of the wicked. All works done before faith were nothing but mere sins offensive to the Lord. Faith is a gracious gift of God.

Calvin finds Cain conducting himself as a hypocrite and wishing to appease God by external sacrifices without the least intention of dedicating himself to God. God detects the hypocrisy and rejects Cain's works with contempt. Cain's rejection was not for offering defective products but for impurity of heart. Abel's offerings, being pervaded by the good odor of faith,

⁹⁹ M. Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," *Luther's Works* (ed. J. Pelikan, St. Louis: Concordia, 1958) 1:246-259.

had a sweet-smelling savor. Thus Calvin finds the difference in the offerings not in what is offered but in the condition of the offerer.¹⁰⁰

VII. THE MODERN PERIOD

With Abel's offering fully in keeping with the later demands of the Law, the offering of the flock and its fat drew little comment from ancient expositors. It was the firstfruits that drew their attention. Those who did not explain the reason for the Lord's choice from the character of the two participants reasoned from the lack of mention that Cain's offering was not of firstfruits.

Adam Clarke favors a view he attributes to Kennicott based on the words *hēbî² gam hū²* that Abel, in addition to his *minhâ* from his fields, also brought a sacrifice. Clarke understands the *pleiona* of Heb 11:4 to mean "more" or "greater" rather than "more excellent" (KJV). He also finds the view of multiple offerings confirmed by the plural *dōrois* (11:4). He sees the offering to be typical of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. By his offering Abel acknowledged himself to be a sinner.¹⁰¹

Keil and Delitzsch found the offerings coming from the free impulse of the brothers' nature rather than from a command. The difference in the sacrifices was in their state of mind toward God. They reject the idea of a bloody sacrifice compared to a nonbloody one. They prefer the case that distinguishes between offering firstfruits against offering just a portion of the fruit.¹⁰²

A. Dillmann has Cain recognize the preference given Abel "by some one of those outward signs of which sacrifices in ancient times had abundance" that the author did not think it necessary to describe. Rejecting all other proposals, Dillmann finds the difference in the disposition presupposed, and he appeals to Heb 11:4.¹⁰³

The twentieth century dismisses as sheer legend Theodotion's (and his followers') suggestion that Abel knew of the acceptance of his offering by fire coming down to burn it (cf. Judg 6:21; 1 Kgs 18:28; 2 Chr 7:11), by the ascending of the smoke, by the increasing fertility of the flocks and the decreasing productivity of the land,¹⁰⁴ or by the happiness of the offerer. But von Rad's conjecture—"Since the entire ancient orient learned about the acceptance or rejection of sacrifice by examining the victim, one must suppose some such method here"—is not a great deal more convincing.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses* (1847, reprinted, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 193–196.

¹⁰¹ A. Clarke, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: A Commentary and Critical Notes* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, n.d.) 1:58–59.

¹⁰² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 1:110.

¹⁰³ A. Dillmann, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1897) 1:184–185.

¹⁰⁴ S. H. Hooke, *The Siege Perilous* (London: SCM, 1956) 68.

¹⁰⁵ G. von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL, London: SCM, 1961) 101.

Hovingh and A. Scheiber contend that the motif of smoke ascending to heaven as the sign of the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice is to be traced back only to twelfth-century literature and art.¹⁰⁶

Extended discussion has made little new contribution to the perplexity concerning the difference between the two offerings. It is agreed that the truncated nature of the story does not supply the data to answer this question any more than it explains the nature of the mark on Cain (Gen 4:15). The answer proposed depends on what the expositor is importing into the story. Proposals continue to go in a multitude of ways, each rejecting the other.

Westermann, Brueggemann and Huffmon find the ways of God to be capricious or unexplainable.¹⁰⁷ The story is saying something immutable. It is fated by God to be so and must remain unexplained.¹⁰⁸

Another trend has argued that the narrative came down through those who favored shepherds over farmers,¹⁰⁹ a position hard to maintain since the earlier narrative gives agriculture as the occupation assumed for Adam. Most would find the two occupations equally viable.

Some would assume that God already knew that Abel had a better attitude than Cain (cf. Prov 21:27), which the rejection of the sacrifice only brought to clearer light.¹¹⁰ For this case, OT passages that stress right spirit over sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22; Ps 50:8–15; Isa 1:11–17) are influential. U. Cassuto can be taken as typical:

Whilst Abel was concerned to choose the finest thing in his possession, Cain was indifferent. In other words, Abel endeavored to fulfill his religious duty ideally, whereas Cain was content merely to discharge his duty.¹¹¹

"Our passage reflects the view that sacrifices are acceptable only if an acceptable spirit inspires them."¹¹² Readers of the NT find further suggestion in the declarations that Abel offered by faith (Heb 11:4) and that Cain's deeds were evil while Abel's were righteous (1 John 3:12).

¹⁰⁶ Hovingh, "La Fumee" 44–48, A. Scheiber, "A Remark on the Legend of the Sacrificial Smoke of Cain and Abel," VC 10 (1956) 194–195

¹⁰⁷ C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11 A Commentary* (Minneapolis Augsburg, 1984) 1296, W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta John Knox, 1982) 56, H. B. Huffmon, "Cain, The Arrogant Sufferer," *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* (ed. A. Kort and S. Morschauer, Winona Lake Eisenbrauns, 1985) 109–113

¹⁰⁸ Westermann, *Genesis* 1297

¹⁰⁹ E. W. Altwater, "Cain and Abel Gen 4 3–8," *The Biblical World* 32 (October 1908) 277–280, H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Gottingen Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1910, reprinted, 1964) 43, Pedersen, *Israel* 665

¹¹⁰ H. E. Ryle, *The Book of Genesis* (Cambridge Cambridge University, 1914) 71, R. F. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1991) 61, N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966) 29. Sarna concludes that Abel demonstrated a quality of heart and mind that Cain did not have: "Abel's act of worship was an inward experience, an undergirding, open-hearted, concentrated devotion. Cain's noble purpose was sullied by the intrusion of self, a defect that blocked the spiritual channels with God."

¹¹¹ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem Magnes, 1961) 1205

¹¹² *Ibid* 1207

B. Waltke finds the rejection of Cain's gift to be due to Cain's flawed character, which led him to offer only a token gift.¹¹³ J. D. Heck stresses that Cain's problem is one of attitude.¹¹⁴

Some would continue the ancient suggestion based on the silence of the passage that Abel in the firstborn of the flock brought a better quality offering than Cain did.¹¹⁵ But if we wish to make much of silence, we might observe that only in connection with Cain's offering is it said to be brought "to the Lord." Though certainly to be understood, such is not specifically stated for Abel's offering. Goldin rejects the effort to find inferior quality in Cain's offering,¹¹⁶ but Hamilton suggests that "their fattest parts" may suggest that Abel's offering was of the finest quality in contrast to Cain's.¹¹⁷

Yet again it has been suggested that the Lord preferred the smell of flesh cooking over that of vegetables cooking.¹¹⁸

While the advocates of all of the above theories reject the claim that Abel's offering was accepted because it was a blood sacrifice, still others vigorously champion the theory that the offering was accepted for that very reason.¹¹⁹ Its proponents note that "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb 9:22). But the case has to reckon with the fact that no prior sins for the brothers have been hinted at in the narrative. The case is dependent on the fact that the NT (Heb 11:4) is following the LXX in its use of *thysia* in rendering *minhâ* for that which is brought. Without *thysia*, likely the case would not have been made. It should not be forgotten, however, that *thysia* in the Greek Genesis designated Cain's offering, not Abel's.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The winding trail we have followed illustrates the futility of supplying by conjecture data that have not been given by the Biblical writer. But it also shows something of how much influence translation has on exegesis. Had the LXX not used *thysia* for the offering of Cain, and had it not used *orthos de mē dieles* ("divided rightly," Gen 4:7) for his action, the history of interpretation might have been quite different.

¹¹³ B K Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," *WTJ* 48 (Fall 1986) 363-372

¹¹⁴ J D Heck, "Was Cain's Offering Rejected by God Because It Was Not a Blood Sacrifice? No," *The Genesis Debate* (ed R F Youngblood, Grand Rapids Baker, 1990) 130-147

¹¹⁵ E A Speiser, *Genesis* (AB, Garden City Doubleday, 1964) 30 "The manifest contrast is between the unstinted offering on the part of Abel and the minimal contribution of Cain" Ryle (*Genesis* 70) and Skinner are less willing than the ancient rabbis to deduce from the silence of Scripture that Cain's offering was not of the firstfruits See J Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC 2d ed, Edinburgh T and T Clark, 1930) 104

¹¹⁶ J Goldin, "The Youngest Son, or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong," *JBL* 96 (March 1977) 33

¹¹⁷ V P Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1-17* (NICOT, Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1990) 223

¹¹⁸ S Levin, "The More Savory Offering A Key to the Problem of Gen 4 3-5," *JBL* 98 (March 1979) 85

¹¹⁹ H H Hobbs, "Was Cain's Offering Rejected by God Because It Was Not a Blood Sacrifice? Yes," *Genesis Debate* 130-144