Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-17): An Exploration of Jewish Interpretation from the Rabbinic and Medieval Eras

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This thesis is dedicated to my brothers: Herbert and Robert

From the Wedding Charge of Herbert and Ali Rosen – October 21, 2018

Two brothers were watching experimental interpretations of bible stories at camp. The makeshift theatre started pitch black, and then a strong and vibrant red backlight revealed two silhouettes: the brothers Cain and Abel. The silhouettes began fighting and an older brother in the crowd turns and whispers to his younger brother, "That will never be us."

Biblical Text of Genesis 4:1-17 with English Translation[1]

א) וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת־חַוָּה אִשְׁתּוֹ וַתַּהַר וַתֵּלֶד אֶת־קַיִן וַתֹּאמֶר קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת־יְהוָה׃

4:1) The man [Adam] knew his wife [Eve]; she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain, saying, "I have made a man with God."

ב) וַתֹּסֶף לָלֶדֶת אֶת־אָחִיו אֶת־הָבֶל וַיְהִי־הֶבֶל רֹעֵה צֹאן וְקַיִן הָיָה עֹבֵד אֲדָמָה׃

4:2) She additionally gave birth to his brother Abel. Abel became a shepherd, while Cain tilled the soil.

ג) וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ יָמִים וַיָּבֵא קַיִן מִפְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה מִנְחָה לַיהוָה׃

4:3) Over the course of time, Cain brought from the fruits of the ground as a gift to God.

ד) וְהֶבֶל הֵבִיא גַם־הוּא מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאנוֹ וּמֵחֶלְבֵהֶן וַיִּשַׁע יְהוָה אֶל־הֶבֶל וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ׃

4:4) Then Abel also brought from the first of his flock and their fat parts. God noticed Abel and his offering,

ה) וְאֶל־קַיִן וְאֶל־מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה וַיִּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד וַיִּפְּלוּ פָּנָיו׃

4:5) but did not notice Cain and his offering. Cain was very angry and his face fell.

ו) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־קָיִן לָמָּה חָרָה לָךְ וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָנֶיךָ׃

4:6) God then said to Cain, "Why are you so angry? Why has your face fallen?

ז) הֲלוֹא אִם־תֵּיטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם לֹא תֵיטִיב לַפֶּתַח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ וְאֵלֶיךָ תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל־בּוֹ׃

4:7) Surely if you do well there is uplift. If you do not do well, sin crouches at the door and it craves you, but you can control it."

ח) וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל־הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיְהִי בִּהְיוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיָּקָם קַיִן אֶל־הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ׃

4:8) Then Cain said to his brother Abel. Then, they were in the field. Then, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

ט) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־קַיִן אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי׃

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[1] This translation was created through consulting the following texts: Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, ed. Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) and W. Gunther Plaut and David E. S. Stein, eds., The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition (New York: CCAR Press, 2015).

4:9) Then God said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”

י) וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן־הָאֲדָמָה׃

4:10) God said, “What did you do? The voice of your brother’s bloods cries to me from the ground.

יא) וְעַתָּה אָרוּר אָתָּה מִן־הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת־פִּיהָ לָקַחַת אֶת־דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ מִיָּדֶךָ׃

4:11) Now you are cursed from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s bloods from your hands.

יב) כִּי תַעֲבֹד אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה לֹא־תֹסֶף תֵּת־כֹּחָהּ לָךְ נָע וָנָד תִּהְיֶה בָאָרֶץ׃

4:12) When you till the ground, it shall no longer give its strength to you. You shall become a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

יג) וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל־יְהוָה גָּדוֹל עֲוֹנִי מִנְּשֹׂא׃

4:13) Cain said to God, “My punishment is too great to bear!

יד) הֵן גֵּרַשְׁתָּ אֹתִי הַיּוֹם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה וּמִפָּנֶיךָ אֶסָּתֵר וְהָיִיתִי נָע וָנָד בָּאָרֶץ וְהָיָה כָּל־מֹצְאִי יַהַרְגֵנִי׃

4:14) You have banished me today from the face of the ground and I must hide from your face. I am to become a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who finds me might kill me!”

טו) וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יְהוָה לָכֵן כָּל־הֹרֵג קַיִן שִׁבְעָתַיִם יֻקָּם וַיָּשֶׂם יְהוָה לְקַיִן אוֹת לְבִלְתִּי הַכּוֹת־אֹתוֹ כָּל־מֹצְאוֹ׃

4:15) “No,” said God. “If anyone kills Cain, he will be avenged sevenfold.” God gave Cain a sign so that anyone who came upon him would not kill him.

טז) וַיֵּצֵא קַיִן מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ־נוֹד קִדְמַת־עֵדֶן׃

4:16) Cain went away from before God and settled in the Land of Nod, east of Eden.

יז) וַיֵּדַע קַיִן אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וַתַּהַר וַתֵּלֶד אֶת־חֲנוֹךְ וַיְהִי בֹּנֶה עִיר וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הָעִיר כְּשֵׁם בְּנוֹ חֲנוֹךְ׃

4:17) Cain then knew his wife, who became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch; he became the founder of a city, and he named the city after his son, Enoch.

Chapter 1
Introduction and Preliminary Analysis

If the Bible is to serve as God's vehicle for commanding Jews, it is reasonable to expect that the text can be understood. This intelligibility is essential when valuing this text as a guide for proper conduct. Given this premise, ambiguities and gaps in the text demand further exploration to allow for reliable teachings. In the Cain and Abel narrative in Genesis 4, the unadorned narrative raises issues about family, sin, and piety. Although this narrative does not contain any mitzvot, Jews have used the brothers as symbols. In many ancient and medieval Jewish interpretations of the first half of the narrative, the section prior to the murder of Abel by Cain, the brothers are constantly compared to each other as two contrasting personalities. In general, these interpretations posit that Cain, the sinner, appears to act with selfish intentions and fails to heed the warnings of God, whereas Abel shows true devotion through his sacrifice. Examining these interpretations can provide Jews with a clearer and more robust story to guide their actions. In terms of studying the narrative, having the expansive material from these interpretations allows Jews to explore different avenues through which to consider the character of the brothers and the interactions between Cain and God.

In Chapter 1, I examine textual issues which arise from gaps and ambiguities in the biblical narrative as they have been identified by modern biblical scholars with the tools of academic critical inquiry. These issues provide structure for the subsequent chapters. In chapter 2, I survey interpretations of the Cain and Abel narrative found in rabbinic literature (ca. 2nd c. – late 9th c.). Finally, in chapter 3, I examine medieval commentaries (ca. late 9th c. – mid 16th c.).

In order to proceed, it is appropriate to highlight some of the biblical narrative to explain the basis for the extensive body of interpretation. Gen. 4:1-3 introduces Cain and Abel, the first

sons of Adam and Eve. Both brothers offer sacrifices to God in accordance with their occupations. Cain is a farmer who offers fruits, whereas Abel is a shepherd who offers the fat of his firstborn sheep. Gen. 4:4–5 states that God accepts Abel's offering but not Cain's. God notices and inquires after Cain's distress in Gen. 4:6, following with this statement in 4:7, "Surely if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin crouches at the door. Its [sin's] urge is toward you, but you can be its master." God's discussion of sin is then followed by Cain killing Abel in the field (4:8). Finally, when God asks what happened to Abel, Cain gives an obfuscating answer, and then is punished by God when the murder is inevitably discovered (4:9-17).

In Gen. 4:7, when God discusses sin, God tells Cain that it can be "mastered". However, an issue arises from this statement, as there is no explicit instruction concerning what it means to master sin, or even what sin he is expected to master. We should ask: Can the instruction be deduced from the surrounding narrative? Gen. 4:7 comes after God ignores Cain's sacrifice in Gen. 4:5, which may imply that Cain committed a sin related to his attempted offering. However, it is unclear how Cain and Abel would have known how to sacrifice, as there are no sacrifices prior to this episode in the Bible. With Abel's murder immediately following Gen. 4:7, perhaps God made that statement because Cain was now more vulnerable to commit additional sin after he failed to provide an acceptable offering. Additionally, if sin is crouching at the door as God describes, does that imply that there is some type of force that may affect whether a person commits sin?

In Gen. 4:9, God questions Cain regarding the whereabouts of Abel. This creates an opening for interpreters to create a theological discussion concerning how closely God pays attention to human actions. By inquiring after Abel, Cain's refusal to state the truth implies that

he may have believed himself able to get away with the murder. In this way, the text does not assert God's omniscience. However, in contemporary Judaism, ideas regarding God's omniscience often inform beliefs regarding God's judgment. Because the Bible seeks to teach obedience to God, it is important to define God's knowledge in this passage, so Jewish readers can better understand the motivation to learn from biblical instruction. These questions about God's omniscience were a concern of many medieval philosophers, warranting a greater exploration of how the development of this philosophy contributed to attitudes in interpretations of this passage.[2]

In light of these and other issues, it is important to provide a basis for understanding the very project of biblical interpretation regarding this pericope. Making observations on a variety of Jewish biblical interpreters from different periods in time, James Kugel makes four assumptions about how they approach the text. First, they propose that the text is purposely cryptic.[3] This assumption insinuates that the text is not meant to be taken only at face value, inviting the reader to read between the lines. In Gen. 4:10, God displays awareness of Cain's murder when Abel's bloods cry out from the ground. Rabbinic literature and the medieval commentators offer a variety of interpretations of Abel's blood being mentioned in the plural including that its multiplicity refers to Abel's blood spilled in various locations.

Second, exegetes propose that the biblical text should be interpreted as a lesson meant for the reader in the reader's own time.[4] In other words, the biblical text is not only relevant for the original audience; its lessons may be used as guides for the present and future. While the story of Cain and Abel occurs shortly after creation, its teachings about sin, family, and honesty are

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[2] Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 351.
[3] James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now,* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 41.
[4] Ibid 41–42.

applicable throughout history. For example, the second chapter of this thesis, which covers rabbinic interpretations of Cain and Abel, uses a variety of interpretations to explore the dangers of civil war for the Jewish community in Palestine under Roman rule.

The third assumption of interpreters states that there are no mistakes or contradictions in the text.[5] Relevant to this assumption is God's warning from Gen. 4:7, in which a disagreement in gender between the word for sin and the corresponding participle makes the verse grammatically complicated, to say the least. Yet interpretations such as those found in Genesis Rabbah accept the disagreement as instrumental in showing the growing strength of sin. Following this premise also allows readers to look closely at any given interpretation to identify where the interpreter sees an issue that needs to be addressed.

The final assumption identified by Kugel states that biblical text is the word of God.[6] With this assumption, Kugel mentions that even when God is not the direct speaker of the text, interpreters read it as if the words are still divinely inspired.[7] Thus, because of this assumption, the interpreters on which Kugel comments would lead us to believe that even when God is not immediately mentioned as present in the Gen. 4 narrative, the story and its lessons are being offered by God. Even for readers who do not believe in the divinity of the text, this statement about the text's inspiration still allows them to identify it as powerful and purposeful teaching. In other words, for Jews who do not believe in the physical existence of God, or believe the Bible to be historically true, this argument conveys the centrality of the text in religious practice.

Kugel's assumptions help explain why it is important to explore biblical interpretations. In this thesis, I will put these interpretations into conversation with one another to enhance how

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[5] Ibid 42.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

Jewish readers understand the Cain and Abel narrative. In his book, *A Song to Creation*, Eugene Mihaly states,

> Torah emerges dialectically, not as a series of suspended, theoretical absolutes which may be recorded for all times, but as an ongoing dialogue within the religious consciousness of a community – a dialogue between a past and a future, the moorings and the reach.[8]

In creating a conversation between interpretations of Cain and Abel, I will create an invitation for dialogue with this piece of Torah. I hope that this study will enable Jewish readers to find their own personal connections with Genesis 4 and the interpretations as well. Being able to navigate these texts will continue to foster a dialogue within the Jewish community about how we approach the lessons offered by Cain and Abel.

[8] Eugene Mihaly, *A Song to Creation: A Dialogue with a Text* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1975), 17.

Chapter 2
Issues in the Biblical Text

Introduction

Before looking at some interpretations, it is appropriate to explore modern textual analysis to identify what portions in the narrative has warranted critical concern. As mentioned in the introduction, many interpretations on the first half of the narrative portray Cain as a sinner and Abel as a righteous man. However, there are no qualitative words in the biblical text to describe their personalities. These interpretations are instead based upon the brothers' actions, namely, their sacrifices to God. Scholars have used the differences in the qualitative descriptions of their respective actions to make claims about the brothers' characters.

In the middle of the narrative, the warning in Gen. 4:6–7 contains grammatical inconsistencies that make it difficult to comprehend the exact meaning of God's warning. Additionally, the warning's mention of the evil inclination is unclear from the use of masculine verbs and pronouns that refer to the feminine word for sin. In Gen. 4:8, scholars note awkward gaps in how the murder occurs. By comparing the language in Gen. 4:8 to similar constructions elsewhere in the Bible, scholars can identify where interpreters would see avenues to add detail.

In Gen. 4:9–10, theological questions are raised based on how God interrogates Cain regarding the whereabouts of his brother. A comparison of this exchange with other instances in which God questions a biblical figure may be used to clarify what the Bible says about God's knowledge of human actions. At the conclusion of the narrative, there is debate among interpreters over whether God receives Cain's outcry in Gen. 4:13–14 as honest repentance or complaining. One's views of this reception influence how one interprets Cain's reflection on his actions. Similarly, the outcome of reading these verses informs how God's mercy is understood

in Gen. 4:15–17. In this section, Cain is given protection and allowed to settle. This happens despite his initial punishment, which includes his destiny to wander ceaselessly. All of these textual curiosities are important to identify while creating a foundation for a survey of how rabbinic and medieval interpreters perceive the narrative.

2.1 Genesis 4:1–2 – Two Brothers

When studying the brother's names, the text gives greater attention to Cain by mentioning Eve's reasoning about his name, but not Abel's. Cain's name comes from the root קנה, meaning acquisition. Eve is excited over the acquisition of her firstborn and the name connects him to the creation narrative itself. While in Eden, God commands Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. By giving acknowledgement to God, Eve connects Cain's birth to God's wish to have humankind participate in the act of creation. The word את in 4:2 can also be translated as 'with' so that the verse reads "I have acquired a son *with* God.[9]

Abel's name, on the other hand, does not receive such elaborate treatment. His name is given without any description. Karolien Vermeulen argues that the omission of an explanation for Abel's name is a deliberate *argumentum ex silentio* for the reader.[10] In other words, the text's silence on Abel's name illustrates its meaning by purposely leaving it out.

Many commentators connect the name in the text, הבל, to the idea of vanity or worthlessness as found in Ecclesiastes.[11] Others say that Cain is a stronger character at the

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[9] This is the Translation used in the JPS and Plaut Commentaries. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, ed. Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 33. W. Gunther Plaut and David E. S. Stein, eds., The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition (New York: CCAR Press, 2015), 27.
[10] Karolien Vermeulen, "Mind the Gap: Ambiguity in the Story of Cain and Abel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 1 (2014): 32-33.
[11] Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 42., Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 16.

beginning, in contrast to Abel, who is associated with weakness and treated as an afterthought.[12] Even throughout the text of the story, Abel is often referred to as Cain's brother, rather than by his own name. Thomas Brodie suggests that the contrast between the brothers is meant to exhibit a literary "element of tense expectation."[13] Siblings in conflict is a common literary element in the Bible, appearing, for example, in the stories of Esau and Jacob and the story of Joseph and his brothers. In Genesis 4, because the author constantly refers to Abel as Cain's brother, the importance of the sibling relationship in this story is highlighted through Brodie's "element of tense expectation."

In exploring the sibling theme, it is important to observe that in the stories of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers, it is the younger brother that becomes victorious. Frederick Greenspahn argues that the promotion of the younger sibling symbolizes biblical Israel's position above other nations.[14] Biblical Israel often fights uphill battles verses larger and more powerful civilizations, yet the Bible describes how Israel overcomes many of them. Greenspahn calls the symbolism behind this literary motif the "self-reassuring triumphalism of a weak and unsuccessful tribe."[15]

This tension is also emphasized through the use of a chiasm in this section of the passage. At their birth, the Bible talks about Cain as the firstborn who is then followed by Abel. However, when describing their occupations, Abel is mentioned first as a shepherd and then Cain is identified as a farmer. This chiasm found in the order of the mentions of the brothers will repeat

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[12] Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, & Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 153.
[13] Ibid. 152.
[14] Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 109.
[15] Ibid.

later in the story when they offer their sacrifices in 4:3–5. Cain brings an offering and is followed by Abel, but God will take note of Abel's sacrifice before ignoring Cain's. This literary device lends further significance to the comparison of the brothers within the passage. According to T.A. Perry, the presence of the chiasm hints at how Abel becomes favored in the story.[16] Similarly, Vermeulen notes how this occurs later in 4:3–5 to show that favoritism towards Abel plays out in God's acceptance of his offering.[17] Because Cain holds birthright as the eldest brother, the order switching to list Abel first catches our eye and highlights the tension between them. This tension comes from Cain's point of view, because the preference towards Abel threatens Cain's preeminence.

Another tension to consider in this narrative regards the brothers' occupations of farmer and shepherd. While the narrative does not focus on their occupations, the contrast does lead to some curious observations on how the Bible views farmers and shepherds. Abel's occupation as a shepherd relates him to other heroes in the Bible who were shepherds, such as Jacob, Moses, and King David. W. Gunther Plaut comments that the Bible's use of shepherds may be read as a polemic against the sedentary life, "Nomads considered settled people such as farmers or city-dwellers as slaves to possession and prone to corruption, a tradition that even in modern times has considered rural morals as superior to those practiced in the city."[18] In contrast, Jonathan Klawans notes that archaeological evidence indicates that in ancient Israel, farmers and shepherds worked together and that the ancient Israelite economy did not favor one over the other.[19] With this difference between the literary portrayal and the archaeological record of these

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[16] T.A. Perry, "Cain's Sin in Genesis 4:1-7: Oracular Ambiguity and How to Avoid It," *Prooftexts* 25, no. 3 (2005): 260, doi:10.2979/pft.2005.25.3.258.
[17] Vermeulen, *Mind the Gap,* 37–38.
[18] Plaut, *The Torah,* 39.
[19] Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 62.

occupations, exploring later interpretations of this passage will give insight into how important the brothers' occupations are to the narrative.

2.2 Genesis 4:3–5a – Sacrifices to God

This passage is the first portrayal of sacrifice in Genesis. In order to compare this iteration of sacrifice to others, we must form a standard of biblical sacrifice against which to measure this episode. So far in the biblical narrative which Genesis begins, there have been no commandments or standards given regarding sacrifices. How would the brothers know the proper way to sacrifice? According to Nahum Sarna, the absence of instruction for sacrifices "assumes the willingness to sacrifice and worship to be innate in man, to be the utterly natural, instinctive and spontaneous expression of the spirit of religious devotion."[20] Taking Sarna's viewpoint as a starting point, it would be difficult to judge the quality of the two brothers' sacrifices because there are no standards to measure them against except each other.

According to Sarna's statement, we may infer that the quality of the sacrifice should reflect the degree of devotion to God. An important element of Sarna's analysis is that the sacrifice is not only "instinctive" in method but also spontaneous, or unrequested. The Hebrew used for the sacrifices is *minha* (מנחה), which the Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon (BDB) translates as a gift.[21] Synthesizing BDB's statement about *minha* with Sarna's statement concerning sacrifice being instinctive and spontaneous, the offering of a *minha* reveals how both brothers, not just Abel, willingly display devotion to God. Furthermore, Ellen van Wolde argues that there

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[20] Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 29.
[21] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (BDB), *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 10th ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 585. Bruce K. Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 367.

is no support for any observation that Abel's sacrifice was actually better in quality than Cain's.[22] In the text, there are no adjectives describing the attitude with which Cain and Abel present their offerings. Additionally, there is no description of the quality of the sacrifices themselves. Perry concludes that the reading of Cain's sacrifice as being of poor quality is forced upon readers through the ambiguity of God's acceptance and denial of the respective sacrifices.[23]

However, the details of the sacrifices are contrasted before God notices Abel's and ignores Cain's. Sarna states that this contrast is meant to display how Abel "demonstrated a quality of the heart and mind that Cain did not have. Abel's act of worship was an inward experience, an ungrudging, open hearted, concentrated devotion."[24] In Sarna's reading, it is important to explore the difference in quality of the sacrifices because it provides more insight into the quality of the person. There are four elements of the passage to consider when considering sacrifices: the sacrifices themselves, the presence of גם הוא to describe Abel's act of sacrificing in 4:4, the verb שעה in 4:5, and the chiastic structure.

Cain brings produce from his harvest and Abel brings from the firstlings of his flock, including their fatty parts. God's favorable acknowledgement of Abel's sacrifice prompts an exegetical consideration concerning whether God prefers vegetable or animal sacrifices. Even though the text seems to force us to compare Cain's vegetables to Abel's animals as sacrifices, we must acknowledge the fact that both brothers' offerings are drawn from their specific occupations. Bruce Waltke states:

> A person brought a gift appropriate to his social standing and vocation. Appropriately, Abel, a shepherd, brought some of his flock (that is, from the fruit of the womb of sheep and/or goats) and Cain, a farmer, brought from the fruit of the ground. Furthermore,

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[22] Ellen Van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16, no. 52 (1991): 29, doi:10.1177/030908929101605202.
[23] Perry, *Cain's Sin in Gen. 4:1-7,* 261.
[24] Sarna, *Understanding Genesis,* 29.

> would God reject the eldest son's tribute because it came from the ground that he himself had commanded Adam to work?[25]

Waltke's objection to this comparison of the sacrifices agrees with Cain's negative emotion in the latter half of verse 5.

There is discussion among scholars about whether the Cain and Abel story is intended to show preference for animal sacrifices. According to John Skinner, "It is quite conceivable that in the early days of the settlement in Canaan the view was maintained among the Israelites that the animal offerings of their nomadic region were superior to the vegetable offerings made to the Canaanite Baals."[26] Maria-Zoe Petropoulou notes that the Bible prefers animal sacrifices over vegetable sacrifices because they are more numerous in the text and are accompanied by more description than vegetable sacrifices.[27] Jonathan Klawans argues that this preference is a great misconception, noting that vegetables often accompany animal sacrifices in the text.[28] Furthermore, we should again take into consideration Klawans' mention of archaeological evidence which indicates that farmers and shepherds coexisted and cooperated to contribute to the ancient Israeli economy.[29]

Waltke also attributes this misconception to an exploration at the word *minha*. Waltke defines *minha* as a gift from an inferior person to a superior. Furthermore, *minha* may fall under the category of voluntary sacrifice and is described in the priestly writings as a grain offering.[30] Thus, because both brothers offered *minha*, both brothers displayed devotion to God. Also,

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[25] Waltke, *Cain and His Offering,* 367.
[26] John Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis: International Critical Commentary, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910) 106.
[27] Maria-Zoe Petropoulou, *Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism, and Christianity, 100 BC to AD 200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 118–119.
[28] Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple Symbolism and Supersessionism,* 61–62.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Waltke, *Cain and His Offering,* 366.

because Genesis 4 uses the word *minha* for both sacrifices, it is unsatisfying to conclude that God disdained Cain's offering because it was not an animal sacrifice.[31] This argument emphasizes how the difference in quality between the brothers' sacrifices could not have been made on the basis of the content of the offerings. We must search for another element differentiating the two.

The text further distinguishes the brothers' sacrifices by stating that Abel's sacrifice was from the firstlings of his flock. Waltke states that Israel's gifts to God come from the first fruits of the ground (Deut. 26:11) or from the first born of animals Ex. 13:2, 12; 34:19), and the latter option is explained by God's slaying of the first-born of Egypt.[32] Abel's sacrifice is in harmony with this theological explanation, whereas Cain's sacrifice has no theological justification. Hyam Maccoby notes in his commentary that animals would be preferred because they have firstborn,[33] yet the description of *bikkurim* in Deuteronomy 26:11 negates that observation because the first produce of a harvest are also commanded to be sacrificed. The mention of fat in Gen. 4:4 is another element of Abel's sacrifice that sets it apart from Cain's. In Leviticus 3:14–16, the text states that the fat inside an animal sacrifice belongs specifically to God. In contrast, the Genesis text does not describe any further qualifying characteristics of Cain's sacrifice.

The Bible's lack of a description of Cain's sacrifice does not provide sufficient evidence to state that his sacrifice was lacking in quality; there is too much ambiguity in this passage to support this kind of statement. Regardless, the contrast in descriptions or lack thereof invites the reader to consider why one brother may be favored over the other. Previously, we noted that Vermeulen argued that the lack of a description for Abel's name was instrumental in illustrating

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid. 368.
[33] Hyam Maccoby, "Cain and Abel," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 16, no. 1 (1982): 25, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41442737.

its meaning. The same *argumentum ex silentio* is present here to contrast descriptions of the brothers' sacrifices.

In the section in 4:4–5, the verb used to denote God's acknowledgement of the sacrifice is שעה, which can be translated as "to notice". In the Anchor Bible Series, E.A. Speiser notes that this verb is related to the Akkadian *šeû*, which signifies the idea of looking closely into a matter.[34] Using Speiser's observation alone, we see that Abel's sacrifice is noticed because it is intriguing. Expanding how Abel's sacrifice is more worthy of God's attention, Joel Lohr explores how שעה is translated in the Septuagint (LXX). Lohr highlights how the Greek word ἐφοράω, used to translate how God notices Hagar's struggles in the wilderness (Genesis 16:13) as well as Israel's suffering in Egypt (Exodus 2:25), is the same Greek used when God notices Abel and his offerings in Genesis 4.[35] He goes on to say that the use of this verb suggests the LXX's desire to communicate the favor God had towards Abel, and he also notes that there is a contrasting verb to convey God's rejection towards Cain.[36] Taking Lohr's reading of the Cain and Abel narrative in LXX into account, we see that Abel's offering to God was more noticeable than Cain's. Cain's sacrifice did not necessarily lack in quality; it simply did not attract God's attention.

When Abel sacrifices Genesis 4:4 mentions that he "also brought" (גם הוא) a sacrifice just as his brother did. Waltke suggests that this גם הוא is intended to contrast the efforts of Cain and Abel.[37] He argues that a more engaged reading of this verse reveals how the text shows that Abel's efforts were significantly greater than his brother's, therefore leading God to notice Abel

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[34] E.A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 30.
[35] Joel N. Lohr, "Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (July 2009): 487, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43709808.
[36] Ibid. 488.
[37] Waltke, *Cain and His Offering,* 368.

as opposed to Cain. As Cain's sacrifice lacks qualitative description, so too is his action not emphasized.

The final factor to consider in contrasting the brothers' sacrifices is the reappearance of the chiastic structure in narrating the brothers' actions and their results. Cain offers first followed by Abel, but Abel's sacrifice is noticed first before Cain's is ignored. As was stated in the previous section, Perry notes that this chiastic structure is meant to highlight the tension in comparing the two brothers. Normally, with the firstborn being regarded as the future head of the household, we would assume that Cain's actions would take precedence. However, the text uproots that structure in favor of Abel. According to Brodie, Cain's negative reaction from this episode comes from God's reversal of the birth order, which he perceives God as being unfair to him.[38]

Exploring this section of the narrative has displayed how there is ambiguity in determining the quality of Cain's sacrifice. However, some interpreters like Allen Ross wish to display Cain as having poor intentions by not taking the sacrifice seriously. Ross states that Cain's intention was not as appropriate as his brother's was and that Cain's actions were insulting.[39] However, as stated before, there is no evidence in the text to identify Cain's attitude when offering his sacrifice to God. Furthermore, Perry argues, "If God were personally and permanently displeased, there would be no point to the ensuing lecture on mending one's ways in verse 7."[40] Perry's statement is important for recognizing that Cain is not necessarily punished for his sacrifice not being noticed by God. Even if interpreters state that Cain had poor intentions in offering a sacrifice to God, the next few verses show God counseling a troubled Cain in order

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[38] Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue,* 153.
[39] Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 157.
[40] Perry, *Cain's Sin in Gen. 4:1-7*, 262.

to encourage improved action. God's counseling of Cain does show warning, but also compassion in recognizing the negative effect on Cain.

2.3 Genesis 4:5b–7—A Curious Conversation

The phrase ויחר לקין in 4:5b is important to discuss in examining Cain's reaction to his rejected sacrifice. ויחר, comes from the root חרה, translated by BDB as to be angry.[41] In BDB's entry for this word, they also reference Exodus 32:11, where the same verb is used to show God's wrath against the people after they worshipped the golden calf. Gunkel reflects this same understanding and notes that it conveys Cain's jealousy and rage against his brother.[42] Nahum Sarna, in contrast, states that the presence of the preposition לקין connotes that it is not the same type of anger as occurs in Exodus 32. Sarna makes this statement based on the fact that the expected preposition used with this verb to refer to this type of anger would be אף.[43] Sarna goes on to conclude that this usage of חרה refers to being distressed.

Mayer Gruber offers an alternative reading of this passage, arguing Cain's burning anger is associated with depression.[44] The significance of Gruber's statement is that Cain's reaction to his rejected sacrifice is not anger at God or his brother, but sadness that he was not acknowledged for putting forth effort. Seeing how Cain's devotion did not lead to any acknowledgement from the master he is seeking to please, Gruber imagines that Cain may have felt worthless. Gruber's argument is that Cain's anger is then secondary and is a result of his sadness, not that he was initially angry. God's statements in 4:6–7 then serve to rouse Cain from

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[41] BDB, s.v. "חרה".
[42] Gunkel, *Genesis,* 43.
[43] Sarna, *JPS: Genesis,*33.
[44] Mayer I. Gruber, "The Tragedy of Cain and Abel: A Case of Depression," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 69, no. 2 (October 1978): 91, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1454050.

this depression, reassuring him that he has the capacity to act in accordance with divine desire and then experience acknowledgement and acceptance. Additionally, 4:5 concludes with Cain's face falling (ויפלו פניו). Taking Gruber's interpretation of Cain suffering from depression into account, the literal translation of Cain's "face falling" appears to fit very well with the theme of sadness. The falling of his face emphasizes the magnitude of his depression, which contributes then to the irrational anger that follows.

Moving on to God's comments to Cain in 4:6–7, Cain has the opportunity to evaluate his situation in order to find a path better than dwelling on negative emotions. Verse 7 then serves as a solution to Cain's distress. In the sacrifice portion of the narrative, the chiastic structure that reverses Cain and Abel shows how God disrupts the traditional notion of birthright by displaying God's preference for Abel. Perry then sees Cain's distress as a result of Cain questioning whether God supports his birthright.[45] In 4:7, God mentions that there is possibility for שאת (uplift) if he corrects his actions. Perry notes that the root שאת also appears in Genesis 49:3 in reference to Reuben's birthright: "This textual allusion is threatening to Cain both as a verbal hint of the endangered birthright and, in its specific reference to Reuben as a reminder that in the world of Genesis, primogeniture can be bypassed in favor of other factors such as good deeds."[46] According to Perry, Cain's birthright is already endangered because God has already shown consideration to the "other factors" through the acknowledgement of Abel's sacrifice.

Van Wolde offers an alternative opinion, suggesting that the word שעת conveys how Cain ought to lift his face from a fallen position to show the desire to have a good relationship with Abel as opposed to viewing him as a threat. By perceiving his birthright as endangered by Abel, Cain no longer sees him as his brother but as his competitor for God's approval. In God's

[45] Perry, *Cain's Sin in Gen. 4:1-7,* 264.
[46] Ibid. 265.

statement to Cain in 4:7, van Wolde states that Cain not only needs to perform well to receive divine acceptance, but he needs to do better to remember his brother as family and not as an enemy.

Another factor to consider in 4:7 comes from the word describing sin as "crouching", רבץ. In conjunction with Cain's face falling in 4:5b, many scholars view this as Cain appearing to be in a "crouching" state. Van Wolde highlights how רבץ is associated with wild animals crouching in a threatening manner.[47] Just as sin crouches, threatening to overcome people made vulnerable by their own negative emotions, Cain appears as a crouching animal, threatening to pounce upon his brother. God's warning to Cain then indicates God's recognition of Cain's potential to commit terrible actions.

Another issue regarding this warning is the textual corruption in 4:7. The verse is problematic because the word for sin, חטאת, is a feminine noun, yet the following verb for "crouching", רבץ, is in a masculine form. Perry asserts that the ambiguity presented by the corrupt language makes God complicit in Cain's downfall, as it allows Cain to easily misread God's message.[48] At the conclusion of 4:7, God states that Cain can "control it." (ואתה תמשל בו). The בו at the end of the verse is a masculine pronoun, so it is unclear if God is telling Cain to control sin or is referring to Abel. Similarly, Cain could even misread this statement to conclude that Abel is lying in wait, seeking control over him.[49] Cain is already in a state of distress from the rejection of his sacrifice, meaning that he hears this ambiguous statement with clouded judgment.

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[47] Van Wolde, *The Story of Cain and Abel,* 31.
[48] Perry, *Cain's Sin in Gen. 4:1-7,* 262.
[49] Ibid.

2.4 Genesis 4:8-10 – Murder and Aversion

One of the more confusing portions of this narrative comes in Genesis 4:8, in which it appears that Cain has some type of conversation with Abel. The text states that Cain said something to Abel, but the topic of the conversation is not mentioned. Additionally, the text does not mention whether Abel said anything, or what level of emotions were exchanged between the brothers. Some translations, such LXX and the Vulgate, include an additional phrase where Cain invites Abel to join him in the field, but that is still not a sufficient description to explain to us what exactly happened before the murder. The details of this conversation are important, because they would provide insight into how Cain came to ultimately murder his brother.

Additionally, the text does not describe whether the murder was premeditated or if it resulted from a spontaneous moment of rage that very well could have resulted from something that one of the brothers said in the conversation in 4:8. Pamela Reis explores the use of the word אמר in Genesis 4:8, noting that an alternative translation of the verse could convey how the murder was the result of premeditation from the sacrifice episode. Reis notes, “Despite the adversary’s [Abel’s] innocence and absence of provocation, a person can become convinced by churning resentment over time that hatred is appropriate and aggression justified."[50] Through this reading, Reis then seeks modify the translation of 4:8 to mean that Cain was speaking, either out loud or in his thoughts, against Abel and then sought to act against him. Reis supports her argument with the observation of the three parts of the verse (speaking to Abel, the Brothers being in the murder, and Cain rising up to kill Abel) would allow for Cain’s resentment to build.[51] This reading then compliments Genesis 4:7 well, in that it shows how despite God’s

[50] Pamela Tamarkin-Reis, "What Cain Said: A Note on Genesis 4.8," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27, no. 1 (September 2002): 107, doi:10.1177/030908920202700106.
[51] Ibid. 113.

warning, Cain ignores the danger of the crouching beast that is sin.

The exchange in 4:9–10 is also ambiguous since God's questioning of Cain raises the issue of the extent of God's knowledge. This concern is raised as God asks Cain where Abel is in 4:9. Is God ignorant of the episode or is his questioning of Cain in 4:9 rhetorical? Many scholars view the exchange as rhetorical based on other instances where God asks similar questions, such as when God is looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when they hide after eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Even if the question is rhetorical, it allows for Cain to admit to what he has done. However, Cain displays an inability to answer the question truthfully, instead responding with the famous phrase in 4:9, "Am I my brother's keeper?" When Cain is punished after God expresses knowledge of the murder, it hints at how Cain's response was not what God wanted. The verse warrants further interpretation to determine Cain's attitude in his response.

2.5 Genesis 4:11-17 – Punishment and Possible Repentance

As we move to look at the punishment and the conclusion of the narrative, perhaps the most interesting question will be why Cain is shown any mercy after murdering his brother. However, before we come to the idea of mercy towards Cain, we must explore the nature of the punishment itself. Cain is forced into exile, with God telling him that the ground on which he farmed and on which Abel's blood is spilled he killed Abel is cursed and that it will no longer yield produce for him. Eventually, Cain sets out towards Nod (נוד), which ties closely to Cain's punishment as a wanderer (נד) through near-homophonic language.

Before he begins his wanderings, Cain comprehends the magnitude of his punishment and begs for mercy, noting that the punishment is too harsh. God answers with mercy and gives him a mark so that he will be protected against danger now that he is forced from the security of

his home. A major contextual issue is that Cain, his parents, and the animals on earth are the only other living beings known in the text. Who is Cain worried about if there are no other human beings on earth? Why would God need to give him protection from people who do not exist? Another issue with the sign is that the text does not elaborate on what the sign actually is. Is it a physical sign on Cain's body or something separate from his person?

Regarding the meaning of Cain's mark given by God, there is an English idiom for the mark of Cain that usually signifies a criminal. The issue with this idiom is the fact that mark was given to Cain as a result of mercy, not as punishment. In the land of Nod, Cain eventually marries, has a family, and builds a city, naming it after his son. By having a family and building a city, it appears that Cain learns proper human relations and shows signs of improvement from his previous behavior. Is, therefore, the fact that Cain begins a family an indicator of Cain's repentance? Exploring interpretations on whether Cain shows repentance greatly affects the moral message of this passage. If the end of the passage may be interpreted as Cain displaying repentance, that would change the way Cain's character is experienced by the reader. Furthermore, it would provide the reader a model for how to redeem oneself after committing a terrible crime.

Another aspect to consider in this passage is that Cain settles in Nod in Gen. 4:16 after being expelled by God, yet a few verses earlier, in Gen. 4:12, Cain is doomed to wander ceaselessly. Here, Cain appears to receive some mercy, as a part of his punishment no longer applies. Important to note is the punishment for accidental murders as stated in Num. 35:11 and Deut. 19:4–5 is banishment. This comparison brings up a question: Did Cain actually intend to murder Abel?

James Kugel raises one more issue to consider regarding what happens to Cain after the Genesis 4 narrative. With Cain appearing to receive protection and mercy from God, and since his death is not mentioned following the narrative, Kugel asserts that early readers of the Bible would be "curious to know the circumstances under which the archetypal murderer had met his own demise."[52] Kugel's comment highlights how Cain's destiny affects how readers experience his character.

Conclusion

These textual ambiguities yield many avenues for interpretation. In the beginning of the narrative, noting the chiasm in the display of the brothers' births and occupations in Gen. 4:1–2 draws attention to how the Bible seeks to contrast their personalities. The same chiastic structure repeats in the sacrifice episode in Gen. 4:3–5. Perry argues that the repeated chiasm shows how Abel comes to upset Cain as the favored brother. Regarding their vocations, scholars link the brothers with other characters who held similar professions. Some believe that this distinction is meant to demonstrate how shepherds are better than farmers. However, Jonathan Klawans' statement about farmers and shepherds working together to contribute to the economy suggests that the distinction might not be social commentary. Rather, the different occupations serve as symbols for the different character traits.

In addressing the sacrifices in Gen. 4:3–5, Ellen van Wolde comments on how the differences in their qualitative descriptions allow for an argument from silence regarding Cain's character. Although the biblical text does not explicitly mention that Cain's sacrifice was bad,

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[52] James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 159.

the absence of any qualitative description of Cain's sacrifice in comparison to Abel's hints at his inferiority. Additionally, Bruce Waltke's association of Abel's sacrifice with the theology behind sacrificial rules shows Abel as having a superior character. Waltke makes this observation by analyzing sacrificial commandments elsewhere in the Torah. After Cain's sacrifice is rejected, Herman Gunkel and Mayer Gruber make observations on how his anger and depression illustrate his troubled nature.

Exploring the grammatical difficulties in Gen. 4:6–7, scholars struggle to ascertain the precise meaning of the verses. Despite this predicament, there is consensus on how the verses are meant to instruct Cain to improve his conduct and attitude. Similarly, scholars agree that should Cain fail to heed the warning, he will fall prey to his evil inclination. Continuing the conversation regarding Cain's anger and depression, Gruber notes that the warning in Gen. 4:7 was meant to arouse Cain to improve his character. However, his poor state of mind inhibits his ability to comprehend the warning. Therefore, he leans towards his evil inclination. Perry and van Wolde share a similar analysis. They note that Cain's poor state of mind causes him to misread God's warning, causing him to seek the need for drastic action to defeat Abel.

Cain's fall to the evil inclination is also pointed out in readings of Gen. 4:8. Pamela Reis notes that the word אמר, to speak, can also be read to convey Cain's thinking and churning resentment against Abel.[53]

Examining the exchange between God and Cain in Gen. 4:9–10, the link to God's questioning of Adam in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3) leads to the possibility that the questioning of Cain is meant to be rhetorical. Thus, God was testing Cain to see if he would tell the truth.

[53] Additionally, comparison with the LXX shows how the field is used to show how Cain lures Abel into danger.

This association has implications for how readers receive God's knowledge. Also, the existence of a rhetorical exchange infers that Cain misses an opportunity for honesty and repentance.

There is also confusion about how God receives Cain's complaint in Gen. 4:13–14 and the appearance of mercy in 4:15–17. Understanding these statements are important to determine how God carries out justice and why the paradigmatic sinner deserves compassion. James Kugel states that interpretations of God's mercy can solve how the reader might expect the archetypal murder to be killed as punishment. With Cain being allowed to live with protection, Kugel notes that readers would be curious to see what happens to him after the narrative concludes.

Having identified crucial points in the narrative that evoke further interpretation, we have established a foundation for the exploration of rabbinic and medieval literature. In the conclusion of the thesis, I compare the survey chapters with the textual issues raised to identify similarities between the two eras. Pinpointing these trends also provides a foundation for modern interpretation and teaching the narrative.

Chapter 3
Rabbinic Literature

Introduction

The rabbinic treatment of the Cain and Abel narrative highlights a God who simultaneously exhibits mercy and judgment. In order to promote this idea of God, the rabbinic literature portrays Cain as a paradigmatic sinner but also, eventually, as penitent. These descriptions complement each other and allow the texts to focus on God's responses to two different types of person through Cain's various actions. The interpretations of Genesis 4 found in rabbinic literature are not only concerned with theological issues but also understand Cain and Abel as symbolic for discussing in-fighting within the Jewish community under Roman rule.

Within this first section which explores Cain as both archetypal sinner and penitent person, I examine rabbinic exposition following the narrative order of Genesis 4. I have separated much of the exposition on Genesis 4:8 to a separate section because it pertains most to the discussion of Jewish communal in-fighting preserved in rabbinic literature. In examining the interpretation of each section of the biblical narrative, I organize the rabbinic material chronologically unless the similarity of content in two different collections makes comparison worthwhile.

The following sources are used in this exploration: the Palestinain Targums (ca. 2nd–3rd century – Palestinain),[54] Targum Onkelos (Onkelos - ca. 3–4th century, Palestinian/ Babylonian),[55] Genesis Rabbah (GenR) (ca. 4-5th century, Palestinian), Peskita deRab Kahana

[54] Paul V.M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction,* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 81.
[55] There are different opinions regarding the composition of Targum Onkelos. One option involves a two-step formation with "proto-Onkelos written in the first two centuries in Palestine and later revised in the third or fourth centuries in Babylonia. Another opinion is that Targum Onkelos was composed in communities between Palestine and Babylonia. However, there were no known Jewish communities in this region known for this writing. See, Flesher and Chilton 84–85.

(PRK) (ca. 5th century, Palestinian), Babylonian Talmud (BT) (ca. 6th century, Babylonian), Tanhuma Yelamdenu (TanY) and Tanhuma Buber (TanB) (ca. early 9th century, Palestinian), Pesikta Rabbati (PesR) (ca. late 9th century, Palestinian), and Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer (PRE) (ca. late 9th century, Palestinian).[56] I have chosen to focus on the above sources for their extensive interpretations of the narrative. Many of these sources include halakhic and aggadic midrash, which proved to be powerful forces of creativity and development in Jewish law.[57] Examining citations of the Cain and Abel narrative in halakha is important in order to analyze how the biblical text is used by the early rabbis to create a Jewish order of conduct.

3.1 Cain as Paradigmatic Sinner

Rabbinic literature uses Cain's character to promote the idea that God is just and merciful. Cain, the sinner, is presented in contrast with Abel, the pious, who exhibits proper behavior towards God. PRE 21:2 expounds on the birth of Cain by explaining that he is conceived by Eve and the snake from the Garden rather than with her husband, Adam. Abel, in contrast, is the son of Eve and Adam. PRE makes this interpretive leap based on Eve's previous interactions with the snake when discussing sexual intimacy conveyed in Gen. 4:1. As the son of the snake, Cain is linked with the wickedness that seduced his parents into disobeying God's commandments. This link explains Cain's future wicked behavior in the narrative.[58] PRE 22

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[56] Dating provided from: Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).
[57] Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, trans. Bernard Auerbach and Melvin J. Sykes. Vol. 2. 4 Vols. (Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 286–287.
[58] Gerald Friedlander, trans., *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer (The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer, the Great): According to the Text of the Manuscript Belonging to Abraham Epstein of Vienna* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), 150. Furthermore, the Oxford MS of PRE includes Rabbi Ishmael stating how all righteous people descended from Seth and the wicked from Cain. See 151 Note 5)

even describes Cain's horrible descendants by linking them to the wickedness described in Gen. 6:5 which causes God to destroy the world with the flood.[59]

GenR 22:3 explores the brothers' vocations in order to define their personalities. This section links Cain to Noah and King Uzziah, who are both identified as having a "passion for agriculture."[60] The section continues to state that "no good was found in any of them" as Cain becomes a murderer, Noah becomes a drunkard, and Uzziah becomes a leper.[61] By making this association with Noah and Uzziah, GenR shows how Cain's vocation highlights his negative qualities. While this section does not comment upon Abel's vocation, the negative view of Cain implies GenR's more positive view of Abel.

Discussions of the brothers' personalities is continued in rabbinic interpretations of Cain's offering. The flaws attributed to Cain's actions in rabbinic literature highlight his selfish and careless nature. GenR 22:5 attempts to explain why Cain's offering in Gen. 4:3–5 is not accepted by God. It is important to recall that the biblical text uses no adjectives in describing the quality of Cain's sacrifice. The text only mentions that his sacrifice consists of פרי האדמה, the fruits of the ground. GenR. 22:5 states that "Cain brought of the fruit of the ground: of the inferior crops, he like a bad tenant who eats the first ripe figs but honors the king with late figs." Knowing that figs are fruit that grow from trees, the parable notes that Cain picked the good ripe ones for himself. The figs given to God, in contrast, are not fresh because they had fallen to the ground. According to Harry Freedman, GenR makes this claim by comparing Cain's offering to

[59] Friedlander, *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer,* 159.
[60] Harry Freedman, trans., Edited by Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, vol. 1. 2 vols. (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 181.
[61] Ibid. See Note 6.

Abel's, which consists of the firstlings of the flock and their fat parts (Gen. 4:4). In this way, Cain's sacrifice is inferior because it lacks any qualifying explanation.[62]

PRE offers a similar interpretation but adds that the brothers brought the sacrifices on Passover, a holiday which frames Israel as God's firstborn.[63] By linking Abel's sacrifice with Passover, PRE explains that Abel's offer is accepted because his use of first-born sheep acknowledges Passover's theology. These interpretations solve a textual issue by explaining God's rejection of Cain's sacrifice, although no reason is explicit in the biblical text. This display of Cain's impiety in the sacrifice episode teaches how the paradigmatic sinner is understood to be selfish and lacking piety.

TanY[64] and PRE[65] use interpretations of Cain and Abel's offerings to explain and justify the halakha of *shatnez*, the forbidden mixing of different materials for fabric as described in Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:9–11. This halakhic connection helps promote textual continuity between a story from Genesis and the laws in other books of the Torah. For these rabbis, Cain's attempted sacrifice is so terrible that it inspires a prohibition in the halakha.

The Palestinian Targums portray Cain as initially not believing God's ability to exercise justice and mercy simultaneously. These qualities are exhibited in the Palestinian Targums' depictions of Cain and Abel's exchange in Gen. 4:8, all of which directly lead to violence.[66] In the portrayal in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Cain states that there is divine mercy but denies the existence of divine justice. Cain also denies the existence of rewards for the righteous and

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[62] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis I,* 182.
[63] Friedlander, *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer,* 153.
[64] Samuel A. Berman, trans., *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu With an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1996), 28.
[65] Friedlander, *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer* 154.
[66] Although the various Palestinian Targums appear to share a common translation of the Bible, variants may be ascribed to the use of different dialects among various . See Flesher and Chilton, *The Targums,* 80–81.

punishment for the wicked, because his sacrifice yielded no reward. In contrast, Abel's story confirms the existence of both mercy and justice and highlights the importance of future retribution and reward.[67] A similar formulation is found in the Cairo Geniza Targum manuscripts, as Cain denies divine justice and Abel argues for it.[68] Neofiti and the Fragmentary Targum offer a different dramatization, with Cain denying both the existence of divine mercy and justice. In contrast, Abel accepts the existence of both.[69]

Jouette Bassler notes that the style of presentation of the narratives in the Palestinian Targums is commonly used in rabbinic literature to defy objections that challenge the oneness of God. Bassler explains that the position of Cain echoes the gnostic heretics mentioned in the rabbinic literature who claim that there are two deities who exhibit mercy and justice respectively.[70] This interpretation takes targumic discourse regarding Cain and Abel to be anti-Gnositic.[71] Although Cain's claims vary amongst the Palestinian Targums, he invariably challenges God's capacity to exhibit both justice and mercy. Bassler notes, however, that scholars argue about whether the arguments in the targums about Gen. 4:8 are also polemicizing against Sadducees or the Epicureans.[72] The Sadducees are a possibility because they deny the existence of the afterlife; in this view, a Pharisaic or rabbinic mindset is represented by Abel while Cain represents the Sadducees. Cain could also represent the Epicureans as they also deny the existence of mercy and justice as divine attributes, because the world is created and sustained

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[67] J.W. Etheridge, trans., *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee: Genesis and Exodus* (New York: Ktav, 1968), 170–171.
[68] Michael L. Klein, comp., *Genizah Manuscripts of Palestinian Targum to Pentateuch*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1986), 10–15.
[69] Jouette M. Bassler, "Cain and Abel in the Palestinian Targums," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 17, no. 1 (1986): 62.
[70] Ibid. 58.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid. 62.

randomly without divine providence as well. Rabbinic literature does contain other polemics against the Epicureans.[73]

Additionally in the Palestinian Targums the brothers' arguments all result in violence, with Cain murdering Abel. This outcome and its interpretations highlight a concern for how debate on these topics should not escalate to endanger the safety of the community. This concept will be explored in more depth in the latter section of this chapter.

Another factor to consider in examining Cain's heretical positions as represented in the Palestinian Targums is his in relation to Elisha ben Abuya (Acher), another heretical character in rabbinic literature. Like Cain, Acher challenges the unity of God when he travels to *Pardes*, the realm of God's throne in heaven, with three other rabbis. Approaching God's throne, he sees the angel Metatron sitting on it instead of God. Troubled by this sight he asks, "Are there two powers in heaven?" Metatron is punished by other angels for sitting in the throne and then punishes Acher by erasing his merit.[74] In addition to challenging the unity of God, by questioning the structure of the divine powers, Acher challenges divine justice and belief in the afterlife.

Similarly, in BT Kiddushin 39b, after witnessing the death of an observer of Torah, Acher states that "There is no justice and there is no judge (לית דין ולית דיין)." Following this, he denies compensation and the resurrection of the dead.[75] Henry Fischel notes that similar language is used by Cain when he too denies divine attributes, compensation, resurrection of the dead, and the afterlife in Neofiti.[76] As Alon Goshen-Gottstein notes, Acher's proclamation

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[73] E.g. Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1 and Tanhuma Yelamdenu Vayera 1:1.
[74] BT Hagigah 15a.
[75] BT Kiddushin 39b.
[76] Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy: A Study of Epicurea and Rhetorica in Early Midrashic Writings,* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 36–37.

defines him as a sinner who does not understand Torah, which teaches the importance of compensation, resurrection of the dead, and the afterlife.[77] By linking Acher to Cain, the Palestinian Targums warn of the dangers of these heretical positions by putting them in the mouth of the first murderer in the Bible.

Additionally, the Palestinian Targums link the same heresy to Esau. According to Robert Hayward, "The association of the two characters was bound to arise, given that both hated their righteous brothers, and could therefore be made to represent all that was opposed to Torah."[78] In Neofiti's expansion of Genesis 25, Esau shares a similar view to Cain as he too denies resurrection and the world to come.[79] Neofiti also uses the same terminology to describe Cain's rejected sacrifice and the rejection of Esau after Jacob steals his birthright and the blessing from Isaac. In addition, this text then presents Esau contemplating the murder of his brother.[80] Through this association, Cain is then viewed as the lesser brother, just as Esau is to Jacob.

Returning to GenR, the discussion in 22:8 uses Gen. 4:8 to show a different element of wickedness by having Cain take advantage of Abel's display of mercy. The passage explains that when Gen 4:8 describes how Cain rose up (ויקם) to kill his brother, it was because Abel had pinned him down. Cain begged for mercy and Abel released him, thus providing the wicked brother the opportunity to kill him. The midrash follows with a warning, "Do not do good to an evil man, then evil will not befall you." GenR 22:9 then cites Psalm 37:14, "The wicked draw their swords, bend their bows, to bring down the lowly and needy, to slaughter upright men."[81] Whereas the Palestinian Targums have Cain challenging God's mercy, the use of Psalm 37 in

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[77] Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 74–75.
[78] Robert Hayward, *Targums and the Transmission of Scripture into Judaism and Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 99. Hayward notes that this influence comes from Philo's statement in *Sacr.* 3–4.
[79] Ibid. 99.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis,* 188.

this passage helps convey how the wicked disdain the merciful by manipulating their compassion as a means to overcome them. In synthesizing this passage with the interpretations in the Palestinian Targums, Cain's use of Abel's mercy to kill him disdains the notion of mercy altogether, including that of God. This also implies Cain's remarkable impudence to seek mercy from God in Gen. 4:14.

Rabbinic literature also portrays Cain as mocking God's capacity for exhibiting judgment when he denies responsibility for the murder of Abel. Much of this may be seen in the depiction of Cain and God's exchange in Gen. 4:9–10. When explaining this exchange, GenR 22:9 uses two parables to illustrate Cain's response to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The first parable links the situation to an officer and a suspect at the crime scene:

> This [Cain's exchange with God in Gen. 4:9] may be compared to an officer who was walking in the middle of the road, and found a man slain and another standing over him. "Who killed this man?" demanded the officer. "I will ask you that question instead of you asking me," rejoined the other. "You have answered nothing," he retorted.[82]

This parable shows the flawed logic of Cain answering God's inquiry with a question. Although the officer in the parable is not aware of who killed the man in the road, the officer does not accept the other man's response. Thus, God is not satisfied with Cain's answer and continues to question Cain as the suspect.

The second parable, by contrast, describes how God was aware of the murder, making the question rhetorical.

> "Again, it is like the case of a man who entered a garden and gathered mulberries and ate them. The owner of the garden pursued him, demanding, 'What are you hiding?' 'Nothing,' was the reply. 'But surely your hands are stained [with the juice]!' Similarly, [God said to Cain], 'The voice of your brother's bloods cry out to me from the ground."[83]

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[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

Here, GenR shows that God's questioning of Cain was rhetorical, because God was aware of the murder. Ideally, Cain would have answered truthfully but instead sought to protect himself with the hope that God was unaware of his actions.

A third parable also displays God's rhetorical questioning and discovery of the murder:

> Again, it is as if a man entered a pasture ground, seized a goat, and slung it behind him. The owner of the pasture pursued him, demanding, "What have you in your hand?" "Nothing," [replied the man]. "But it is bleating at your back!" exclaimed [the owner]. Similarly, [God rebuked Cain], "The voice of your brother's bloods cries to me from the ground."[84]

By changing the situation to have the thief steal a live animal, the parable seeks to explain how God discovers the murder from Abel's blood crying out. The succession of these three parables concludes with the goat, showing a progression towards a more acceptable explanation. With the goat bleating in the background, the third parable, like the second, describes how God discovers the evidence of Cain's murderous actions. However, the third parable manifests a more acceptable interpretation as it illustrates how the evidence against Cain made itself aware to God.

TanY offers a different exploration of God's question. When Cain flees from his parents, unaware that God witnessed the whole ordeal, TanY cites Jeremiah 23:24, "Can any man hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth?"[85] In this manner, Cain appears ignorant of God's omniscience, and in the same way, Cain is also unaware of God's ability to pass down judgment. Cain's ignorance therefore symbolizes how the paradigmatic sinner is unaware of God's ability to observe human action.

PRE displays a similar approach to Abel's bloods crying from the ground, "Cain did not know that the secrets are revealed before the Holy One, blessed be He. He took the corpse of his

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[84] Ibid.
[85] Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu,* 29.

brother Abel and hid it in the field."[86] Gerald Friedlander notes that the Oxford MS even has Cain burying Abel's body to hide it. While Cain buried the body, the blood remained as evidence of the killing. When God reveals the divine knowledge of the murder through Abel's bloods crying out to Cain, the murderer says that he did not know that he would kill him because he had never seen a dead body before.[87] Cain's logic is flawed because even if he did not know about killing or death, he still sought to hide his actions.

To complete the presentation of Cain as the paradigmatic sinner, rabbinic interpretations of God's warning in Gen. 4:7 discuss how Cain ignores the dangers of sin and also instruct about how to combat sinful impulses. GenR 22:6 explores the dangers of sin through the vehicle of the subject/verb disagreement in 4:7.[88] The midrash states that at first, sin is weak like a woman, but more interaction with sin makes it stronger like a man.[89] While the syntax appears corrupt from the gender disagreement in the words חטאת and רובץ, GenR's discussion displays how the word choice in Gen. 4:7 is meant to show the strengthening of sin.

The rest of GenR 22:6 then provides other illustrations of how the strengthening of the evil inclination works. Here GenR states that sin begins like a spider's web, but increased sinning strengthens it to become like rope. This is followed by a proof text from Isaiah 5:18, "Ah! Those who haul sin with cords of falsehoods and iniquity as with cart ropes." This prooftext from Isaiah that has cords of sin being woven into ropes of iniquity supports the earlier interpretations of sin strengthening within those who continue to act from the evil inclination. These interpretations also support GenR's earlier claim of the word disagreement being purposefully used to illustrate the strengthening of sin.

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[86] Friedlander, *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer* 155.
[87] Ibid.
[88] See page 23.
[89] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis,* 185.

Another parable follows in GenR 22:6 to describe how sin takes advantage of those ignorant to its dangers:

> There are dogs in Rome who know how to deceive men. One goes and sits down before a baker's shop and pretends to be asleep, and when the shopkeeper dozes off he dislodges a loaf near the ground, and while the onlookers are collecting [the scattered loaves] he succeeds in snatching a loaf and making off.[90]

This warning about the dangers of the evil inclination imply that GenR sees it as being an innate part of human nature. Therefore, this parable conveys how God seeks to make Cain aware that he should not "doze off" and let the sinful inclination, which waits like a hungry dog, take control of his actions. Following this parable, GenR states that one who indulges sin in their youth will be mastered by it in their old age.[91] These portions of the midrash illustrate how God sees Cain as vulnerable to further sin after he fails to offer a proper sacrifice. Cain must do better, lest his inclination to sin become stronger.

The halakhic midrash MEK also explores the textually corrupt warning in Gen. 4:7. In Tractate Amalek, MEK speaks of five unclear syntactical constructions in Scripture including the one found in this verse. MEK explains that the beginning of the verse can be read two ways: "'If you do well shall it (your sin) not be lifted up (relieved).' The clause can also be construed to read: 'Shall it (your sin) not be lifted up (made greater), and even if you don't do well.'"[92] These syntactical options listed in MEK change how Cain would experience his sin. The first citation refers to sin being forgiven as a result of the sinner improving their actions. The latter, in contrast, uses a different construction to convey that should the sinner fail to improve, their sin will continue to have a greater negative impact. Although these two semantic options illustrate

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Jacob Z. Lauterbach, trans., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), 258.

different outcomes, both convey how Cain must notice the impact of sin in order to improve his actions. Otherwise, he will continue to be vulnerable to the evil inclination.

Adherence to the Torah as an antidote to the evil inclination is discussed extensively in the GenR material. GenR states, "Rab Hanina said: If your Tempter comes to incite you to levity, cast him down with the words of the Torah as it is written [in Isaiah 26:3], 'The confident mind You guard in safety. In safety because it trusts in You.' And if you do so, I attribute merit to you as though you had created peace."[93] In Hanina's statement, the Tempter refers to anyone who would lure someone towards sinful action. For this reason, the Tempter may also be read as the evil inclination referred to in Gen. 4:7. Hanina's statement then means that the study of Torah provides a defense against the evil inclination. In the context of the Torah's overarching narrative, God has not yet revealed any teachings or commandments by the events of Genesis 4. As Cain grapples with his evil inclination, he is made to be an example of what happens when one ignores Torah. GenR implies that Torah's teachings would give him and, by extension, any potential sinner the ability to take a better course of action.

Another factor to consider is how rabbinic literature emphasizes the effect of Cain's wickedness on humanity as a whole. When exploring the use of the plural for blood in Gen. 4:10, GenR 22:9 notes this usage is purposeful in referring to the future descendants of Abel. This shows that Cain's murderous actions not only had an impact on the present, but also the future. This interpretation is also utilized in BT Sanhedrin 37a–b and Onkelos's translation of Gen. 4:10. In BT Sanhedrin 37a–b, this reading is used in discussing the importance of acquiring truthful testimony in capital cases, as the resulting judgment has a significant impact on the defendant and the defendant's unborn descendants. BT Sanhedrin 37b concludes this portion with a

[93] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis,* 186.

teaching about the importance of a human life, stating that whoever destroys a life destroys the entire world. Accordingly, whoever saves a life saves the entire world.[94] By associating this teaching with the murder of Abel, Cain destroys the potential for Abel to produce righteous descendants.

TanY offers an alternate reading, stating that the plural for blood refers to Cain inflicting numerous injuries on Abel's body with a stone, not knowing where the soul would depart from the body.[95] A similar reading is also found in BT Sanhedrin 37b, where Abel's blood is spilled onto numerous trees and rocks in the field.[96] Here, TanY's and Sanhedrin's interpretations display Cain as the paradigmatic sinner by presenting the murder as exceptionally violent.

3.2 Cain as Paradigmatic Penitent

In contrast to depictions of Cain as the paradigmatic sinner, depicting him as a possible penitent allows for a display of God's capacity for mercy. GenR 22:11 describes how Cain complains to God about the magnitude of his punishment from Gen. 4:11–14 and cites how his parents were driven from the garden and that being driven out from God's presence would leave him more unprotected. The result of this discussion that God gives Cain the sign from Gen. 4:15. GenR 22:12 then fleshes out the meaning of the sign given to Cain. "Rab said: He made him an example to murderers. R. Hanin said: He made him an example to penitents."[97] Both statements may be combined to teach about the importance of repentance. Rab's statement about being an example to the murders displays the power of God's judgment as it corresponds to Cain's

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[94] Adin Steinsaltz, *Tractate Sanhedrin Part 3*, trans. David Strauss, vol. 17, The Talmud - Steinsaltz Edition: (New York: Random House, 1998), 68–69.
[95] Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 30.
[96] Steinsaltz, *Tractate Sanhedrin Part 3,* 69.
[97] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis,* 191.

murderous acts. The addition of Hanin's statement also teaches to teach that repentance for a terrible sin may allow a sinner to experience mercy. With this addition, Rab's statement may be read to mean that even the murder has the ability to engage in repentance and receive benefit. These statements then imply that Cain's complaint, especially his outcry in Gen. 4:13, may be read as some form of repentance.

The next passage in GenR 22:13 states that when Cain is expelled from God's presence, "he went forth like a swine who deceives his creator." Here, Cain is like a non-kosher animal trying to pass as kosher. Even though this passage conveys how Cain's repentance is not wholehearted, GenR shows God accepting it in order to promote the potential for sinners to repent and receive divine mercy. When showing the potential for experiencing divine mercy, PRK 24:11 has God announcing "I accepted Cain's repentance, and shall I not receive your repentance?" to the Kingdom of Judah after they have sinned against God following the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel.[98]

BT Sanhedrin 101a–b provides an alternate exchange between God and Cain regarding Cain's repentance, but arrives at the same message as GenR and PRK. Here, a passage discusses the sins of King Manasseh, who is partially responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem after he brought foreign religious objects into the Temple. After suffering in captivity under Babylon, Manasseh experiences relief through his repentance (2 Chronicles 33:10–13). After citing Gen. 4:13, the passage states that Cain says to God, "'Master of the Universe! Is my sin greater than that of the 600,000 Israelites who will sin before You and worship the golden calf, and yet You will forgive them?' Faced with that argument, God was compelled to set a mark upon Cain to

[98] William G. Braude, trans., *Pesikta De-Rab Kahana: R. Kahana's Compilation of Discourses for Sabbaths and Festival Days* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 498.

protect him."[99] Steinsaltz explains that although Cain committed a great sin, God answered this request because of the need to teach the divine capacity for justice and mercy.[100] The same discussion occurs in PesR 50:5.[101]

GenR, PRK, and TanB display a conversation between Cain and Adam after Cain is expelled from God's presence.[102] GenR 22's depiction of the narrative concludes thus:

> Adam met him and asked him, "How did your case go?" "I repented and am reconciled," replied he. Thereupon Adam began beating his face, crying, "So great is the power of repentance, and I did not know!" Forthwith he arose and exclaimed, "A Psalm, a song for the Sabbath day: It is a good thing to make confession unto Adonai" (Ps. 92:1)."[103]

With Adam shaming himself for not knowing the power of repentance, GenR conveys how mercy is available for all. This conversation between Cain and Adam highlights a similarity between the two as they were both expelled from God's presence. Adam's lament, therefore, expresses how he might have been able to avoid his expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

Revisiting the statement from GenR 22:11 in which Cain is an example to sinners and penitents highlights how rabbinic literature generally uses the story to promote God's chief attributes of mercy and justice. Cain as the paradigmatic sinner experiences judgment, while at the same time, he may receive mercy through repentance. The rabbinic texts therefore use the Cain and Abel narrative to argue for the coexistence of mercy and justice in God. Although many sources in rabbinic literature argue this point, Cain's outcome highlights a tension between divine mercy and justice. Because Cain ultimately receives some form of mercy, does God truly carry out justice in this scene? The relief of Cain's punishment diminishes God's persona as a

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[99] Adin Steinsaltz, *Tractate Sanhedrin Part 7*, trans. David Strauss, vol. 21, The Talmud Steinsaltz - Edition (New York: Random House, 1999), 58–59.
[100] Ibid. 59.
[101] William G. Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 849.
[102] Frreedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis,* 192. Braude, *Pesikta De-Rab Kahana*, 498; John T. Townsend and Solomon Buber, trans., *Midrash Tanhuma: Translated into English with Introduction, Indices, and Brief Notes (S. Buber Recension)*, vol. 1 (Hoboken: Ktav, 1997), 18.
[103]Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis,* 192.

judge. Even though rabbinic literature seeks to promote the coexistence of mercy and justice, the Cain and Abel narrative highlight the difficulty of making such a claim.

3.3 Rabbinic Concerns about Intra-Communal Conflict

Rabbinic exposition of Gen 4:8 includes a variety of additions filling in details about of the brothers' argument. Notably, some rabbinic sources insert discussions between the brothers to express concerns about internal conflict within the Jewish community under Roman rule. For example, GenR and TanY both present Cain and Abel fighting over possession of land and the establishment of the Temple. TanY's version of this conflict includes a more extensive conversation, in which Cain seeks to inherit more as the elder son, but Abel efuses when Cain also seeks the site of Abel's sacrifice. TanY also links Cain's murder of Abel in Gen 4:8, when it says they were in the field, שדה, to the prophecy in Jeremiah. 26:18, "Zion will be plowed like a field (שדה)."[104] TanY argues that these conflicts lead to violence that only serves to create more devastation. The citation of Jeremiah 26:18 also suggests TanY's attitude towards the biblical King Zedekiah, whose failed rebellion against the Babylonians was a catalyst for Judah's fall and the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 586 BCE. Here, GenR and TanY make use of the Temple to comment on the danger of civil war. Cain and Abel's argument is then used to state that this infighting will lead to destruction as experienced in 586 BCE.

As previously mentioned in the discussion on the Palestinian Targums, the conflict between the brothers in Gen. 4:8 highlights a concern regarding the dangers of internal conflict leading to violence. Another interpretation, found in GenR 22:7[105] and PRE 21, records the brothers arguing over their wives, who are also their sisters. GenR explains the existence of the

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[104] Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 28.
[105] Freedman and Simon, *Midrrash Rabbah: Genesiis* 187.

sisters through an expansion of the word את that proceeds the birth of each brother in Gen. 4:1–2.[106] In the versions found in both GenR and PRE, the text conveys that Cain sought the sister meant for Abel and murdered him to take her. This provides another display of Cain's wickedness, with him coveting Abel's wife.

When discussing these interpretations that include arguments regarding internal conflicts and their capacity to lead to violence, it is also important to consider the historical context of these sources. The majority of the sources in this exploration likely originate in the Roman province of Palestine and were redacted between the 3rd and 9th centuries CE. Since the texts stem from these times, the sources witnessed conflicts within the Jewish community firsthand, and even those involving the Romans. Throughout the rabbinic period, the growth of the Roman Empire was constantly entrenched and destabilized by civil war.[107] Rome gained power over the province also as a result of the Hasmonean civil war, in which allegiance to various possible successors to the throne split the people and required Roman intervention. There was so much religious division that scholars such as E. R. Goodenough have argued that, following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Rabbinic Judaism was only one of many religious options for Jews and that even in Palestine, most Jews rejected it.[108]

It is reasonable, then, to consider the ways these rabbinic statements against violence and conflict through the Cain and Abel story might be commenting on power struggles within the Jewish community as the rabbis sought to assert themselves as the primary arbiters of the Jewish

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[106] This interpretation of Cain and Abel having sisters also solves a textual issue regarding human procreation, as the text only mentions Cain and Abel as children from Adam and Eve. BT Sanhedrin 58b and Yevamoth 62a also refer to this interpretation when discussing laws of marriage and procreation.
[107] Seth Schwartz, "The Political Geography of Rabbinic Texts," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 78.
[108] Ibid. 83.

tradition. Under Roman rule, the rabbis were in competition with the patriarchs, who were allowed to collect taxes. These patriarchs also made judicial appointees over the Jewish community, who correspondingly exercised their jurisdiction over religious law.[109] This dispute may be seen in rabbinic literature through the story of Cain arguing with Abel over land for the Temple. In the context of this infighting, the inserted arguments comment on how the Jewish community faced hardship due to instability. By inserting the Temple into the Cain and Abel narrative, the rabbis convey the importance of a united Jewish community under Roman rule.

3.4 Rabbinic Concerns about Conflicts with the Romans

Rabbinic literature also comments on tensions between the Jewish community and the Roman provincial government of Palestine. This literature was redacted following the Great Revolt (66–73 CE), which also saw the destruction of the Second Temple, and the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–136 CE). In the Palestinian Talmud (PT) Ta'anit 24b and Lamentations Rabbah (LamR) 2:5, we find a harsh criticism of Bar Kokhba for being irrational and having too much pride. As much as he is praised for his strength, the rabbis portray Bar Kokhba's downfall as being a result of his improper judgement.[110] In the narratives of the PT and LamR, Bar Kokhba is huddled with his army in the fortress of Betar, under siege from the Romans. The narratives in each of the texts describe two different approaches to the Roman attack. The first approach is represented by Bar Kokhba, who would stand to catch the stones flung by Roman catapults and then throw them back at the Roman forces. In contrast, they describe the approach of Rabbi Elezar of Modi'im, who wore sackcloth while fasting and praying for God to suspend the

[109] Ibid. 79–80.
[110] Richard G. Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba in Traditional Jewish Literature: False Messiah and National Hero* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 35.

judgement of Betar. A Cuthean, an enemy of Israel, discovers R. Elezar praying and tells Bar Kokhba that R. Elezar was plotting to surrender Betar to the Romans. Following the accusation, Bar Kokhba kills R. Elezar cruelly, leading to a *Bat Kol*, a voice from heaven, quoting Zechariah 11:17, "Woe to the worthless shepherd who abandons the flock; the sword shall be upon his arm and upon his right eye; his arm shall be wholly withered and his right eye utterly blinded." Following this verse, the Romans take Betar and kill Bar Kokhba, suppressing the rebellion.

The presentation of a strong, but quick-tempered Bar Kokhba contrasted with the pious R. Elezar highlights the rabbis' aversion to what they deem as unnecessary conflict and destruction. Bar Kokhba's downfall is linked intimately to his murderous act. Bar Kokhba does not judge R. Elezar properly as he is easily influenced by the accusation of the Cuthean; he instead responds with violence and does not hear the message of the righteous sage. Exploring this episode, Richard Marks draws a comparison between R. Elezar and the prophet Jeremiah, both of whom were attempting to quell a violent crowd in order to save the people.[111] This comparison highlights the use of Jeremiah 26:18 in GenR and TanY's interpretation of the Cain and Abel narrative, where violence from the Gen. 4 narrative is linked to Judah's violent rebellion which Jeremiah seeks to avoid. The violence from these rebellions leads to destruction and failure, as does the violence in the Cain and Abel narrative. Cain and Abel therefore serve as symbols for different parts of the community. Through these passages, the Cain and Abel narrative teaches how internal conflict within the community leads to its destruction.

A polemic against the destruction caused by communal violence may also be seen in a parable from GenR 22:9 describing the meaning of Abel's "bloods" crying out in Gen. 4:10:

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[111] Ibid. 36.

> R. Simeion b. Yohai said: It is difficult to say this thing, and the mouth cannot utter it plainly. Think of two athletes wrestling before the king; had the king wished, he could have separated them. But he did not so desire, and one overcame the other and killed him, he [the victim] crying out [before he died], "Let my cause be pleaded before the king!" Even so, "the voice of your brother's blood cries out against *Me*."[112]

This story draws upon imagery from Roman gladiatorial battles, which the rabbis forbade Jews to attend, as recorded in BT Avodah Zarah 18b.[113] According to Beth Berkowitz, the existence of this rule reflects rabbinic concerns about Jewish participation in what is perceived as violent and dangerous Roman acculturation.

3.5 Concerns Regarding Providence

The polemic from GenR 22:9 against organized violence also warrants an additional exploration into how a just and merciful God would allow such conflict to occur. The first sentence of the parable is significant because it admits to the possibility of heresy in challenging God's role here. By saying that this challenge cannot be uttered plainly and by putting it in the form of a parable they understand how delicate this theology is.[114] At the same time, they show their honest concern to direct attention to a serious dilemma: God could be held responsible for violence and, by extension, Abel's death. This analogy escalates TanY's challenge, as the deity is accused along with the Roman official who oversees this type of battle.[115] The parable also brings up a concern for the issue of human free will, as God, acting as the Emperor, is seen as setting up the brothers' violent confrontation.

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[112] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis,* 189.
[113] Beth A. Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 155. However, this passage does follow with a qualifying statement: "One is permitted to go to the fights because he can scream and save a life." With this inclusion, the prohibition against the gladiatorial matches focuses on how the rabbis see the glorification of violence and murder as appalling.
[114] Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, trans. Batya Stein (Stanford (Calif.): Stanford University Press, 2000), 112.
[115] Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention,* 155.

TanY offers a further charge against God when exploring Cain's question from Gen. 4:9, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

> [Cain responds] "You are the guardian of all, yet You seek him from me!" This may be compared to a thief who stalks during the night but is not apprehended while committing the crime. When the watchman seizes him the next morning and asks: "Why did you steal those utensils?" The thief replies: "I am a thief and I did not neglect my profession. Your job is to keep watch at the gate. Why did you neglect your duties? Now you question me?" So Cain retorted: "True I slew him, but You created the evil inclination within me. Since You are the guardian of all, why did you permit me to slay him? You who are called [I am Adonai your God] killed him, for if you had accepted my sacrifice as You accept his, I would not have been envious of him."[116]

Similar to the previous parable in GenR, TanY has Cain responding to God in a defensive manner. After the parable of the thief stealing and getting caught, Cain actually admits to the murder but blames God for the creation of the evil inclination. Here, TanY challenges why God created human beings with the capacity for evil and violence. Joel Duman argues that this questioning is a philosophical statement that goes so far as to also question God's judgment.[117] In this parable, Cain argues that God is responsible for the inclination. However, TanY explains that Cain's defense is faulty because he ignores the meaning of the warning from Gen. 4:7 that free will makes humankind responsible for their actions, not God.[118] Yet this statement would appear to contradict how the parable portrays God as acting as the Emperor placing Cain and Abel in conflict. Perhaps this issue may be reconciled by synthesizing these parables. Together they teach the importance of restraining from violence, even when the situation heightens such a confrontation.

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[116] Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 29.
[117] This type of skepticism is characteristic of later rabbinic literature. See Joel Duman, "The Treatment of the Cain and Abel Story in Midrash Tanhuma," Academia.edu - Share Research, https://www.academia.edu/7243368/The_Treatment_of_the_Cain_and_Abel_story_in_Midrash_Tanhuma.
[118] David Kevin Delaney, "The Sevenfold Vengeance of Cain: Genesis 4 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation," PhD diss., University of Virginia, May 1996, 79. See note 4

Rabbinic literature appears to address these issues of theodicy through the insertion of expanded arguments for Gen. 4:8. Whether the brothers argue about which sister to marry, their possessions, or the attributes of God, these different insertions create additional motives for the murder. In the biblical text, the murder immediately follows the sacrifice episode and God's warning. These inserted episodes split the narrative into two different parts so that the murder is separated from the sacrifices. By creating additional motives through the various interpretations, the rabbinic literature avoids blaming God's rejection of Cain on the murder itself.[119]

Another issue of providence is raised because God allowed Cain to live after murdering Abel. GenR 22:11 alludes to this concern explaining that Cain had a defense because he had no prior knowledge of murder. He could not learn from prior example. Following his actions, the midrash teaches that all future murderers would be executed.[120] Additionally, Cain has no formal instruction in any way and therefore cannot be completely blamed for his lack of knowledge.[121] Here, GenR conveys that the Cain and Abel narrative is meant to teach the existence of divine judgement as a means to teach the consequences of human action.

TanY includes a different explanation where Cain is accidentally killed by Lamech, a descendant from the 7th generation of his family. This exploration of Cain's death fulfills the language from Gen. 4:15 which states that anyone who kills Cain will be punished sevenfold.[122] This passage from TanY states that the language from Gen. 4:15 regarding the sevenfold punishment assures that Cain's punishment was meant to be postponed. Both of these explorations in GenR and TanY solve a concern about Cain's death by assuring the reader that

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[119] Delaney, *The Sevenfold Vengeance of Cain*, 79
[120] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis,* 190
[121] Delaney, *The Sevenfold Vengeance of Cain*, 80
[122] Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 32-33

Cain ultimately experiences the death they believe he deserves. This assurance also serves to display God's capacity for judgment as Cain pays the ultimate price in the end.

Conclusion

Cain is portrayed simultaneously as the paradigmatic sinner and penitent man to teach God's capacity for mercy and judgment. This teaches that God's justice is inescapable. At the same time, God's mercy is open to all through the act of repentance. This concern for understanding God's mercy and judgment continued to influence the interpretation of the Cain and Abel narrative in the medieval era.

Rabbinic literature uses Gen. 4:8 as an opportunity to insert arguments that address the fear of internal communal conflict. The concerns about the potential resulting violence reflect how rabbinic literature responded to the destruction caused by civil war within the Jewish community and the rebellions against Rome. Finally, rabbinic literature addresses issues of providence, when they admit to the existence of instances in which God could be complicit in allowing the violence between the brothers to occur. They resolve these concerns by highlighting how Cain is responsible for his actions. These statements about Cain's choices display how divine providence does not impede human free will, arguing that humans can never blame God for the consequences of their own actions.

Chapter 4
Medieval Commentary and Philosophy

Introduction

One of the primary differences between rabbinic and medieval interpretation is the genre. The medieval age saw the development of contextual biblical interpretation as opposed to the teachings from decontextualized verses found in rabbinic midrash. The development of contextual interpretation coincides with the development of Muslim zāhir/haqīqa and Christian *sensus litteralis*, which also focus on plain meanings of the text.[123]

Here, it is important to highlight certain commentators that pioneered Jewish contextual analysis. Medieval Muslim interpreters maintained that the language of the Qur'an is pure and should be interpreted based off its zāhir (literal sense). Non-literal interpretations, therefore, are only used when a literal interpretation results in an ambiguous meaning.[124] This form of qur'anic interpretation reflects how Islam stresses the purity of Arabic and the perfection of God's teachings in the Qur'an.[125] Karaite Jews picked up on this method and produced commentaries primarily in Arabic.[126] Their commentaries focused on philological characteristics of the text such as grammar and syntax and gave a strict contextual interpretation.[127] Saadia Gaon followed this trend of Muslim and Karaite contextual methodology while he was living in the Abbasid Caliphate. [128] He believed that biblical interpretation ought to be conducted in the same manner

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[123] Adele Berlin and Mordecai Z. Cohen eds., *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 205.
[124] Ibid. 208-209.
[125] Robert Harris, "Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 142.
[126] Jason Kalman, "Rabbinic Exegesis in the Middle Ages," (6500 words) in S. McKenzie, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Volume 2, 178.
[127] Ibid. 178.
[128] David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 79.

unless human reason and tradition resulted in an illogical interpretation, because the Bible in Hebrew was the true language of revelation.[129]

A similar push toward the literal meaning was found in medieval Christian interpretation hundreds of years later with the growing preference of *sensus litteralis*.

> "Drawing upon the twelfth century exegetical work of the Victorines and the new Aristotelian learning that entered the cathedral schools in that same century, Thomas Aquinas equated the literal sense with authorial intention, making it epistemologically decisive. Aquinas insists that 'from the literal sense alone can any argument be made.' And not from the spiritual senses."[130]

Like the Muslims and the Karaites, Aquinas valued a purer reading of the biblical language for the Christian world, and he found it in interpretations of the literal sense of the text. He saw embellished readings, or "spiritual senses," as superfluous and as deviating from the truer teachings.

The development of Saadia's contextual method may also be seen as addressing Karaite and Muslim polemics against rabbinic midrash.[131] Because rabbinic midrash exhibited a more embellished reading of the details to convey morals and laws, a contextual method was developed that focused on philological qualities, in order to stress a clearer meaning of the biblical text, in line with mainstream Muslim and Karaite methods of interpretation.[132]

After Saadia, the contextual method developed in two different Jewish schools: Northern France and Spain.[133] Northern France experienced a revolution of Ashkenazi Talmudic study which began with Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi) and was further developed by his

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[129] Harris, Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis, 142
[130] Elisheva Baumgarten, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Katelyn Mesler, eds., "Nahmanides' Four Senses of Scriptual Signification: Jewish and Christian Contexts.," in *Entangles Histories: Knowledge, Authority and Jewish Culture in the 13th Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 41.
[131] Harris, Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis, 143.
[132] Ibid. 144.
[133] Ibid.

grandchildren and students, for example, Rabbis Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) and Jacob ben Meir (Rabbenu Tam).[134] This method would come to be called *peshat*. It is important to understand that Rashi's method does not reject rabbinic midrash. Rather, he often provides both a midrashic and a contextual reading to offer a more detailed account of the biblical text.[135]

By the 10th century, Spain, under Muslim control, rivaled Babylonia as the dominant theater of Jewish learning.[136] Like Saadia, Spanish Jewish commentators utilized the qur'anic attitude of the purity of the text to compose their contextual interpretations. The development of the Spanish school is largely attributed to Abraham Ibn Ezra. Drawing from Saadia and Spanish-Jewish philologists such as Ibn Hayyuj and Ibn Janah, Ibn Ezra's contextual method focused on grammatical interpretations. Ibn Ezra's rules of interpretation also reflected Saadia's guidelines of context and reason.[137] Unlike Rashi and the Northern French school, Ibn Ezra rejected midrash, save for halakhic exposition.[138] For this reason, he also rejected Rashi's method of *peshat*.

> Despite this difference in attitude towards rabbinic midrash, Robert Harris notes:
>
> While the two approaches might have come into conflict…their shared commonalities, particularly with regard to the exegesis of non-legal narrative and prophetic texts without recourse to the midrash of the sages, enable them to be seen as complementary methodologies, both intent on interpreting Scripture contextually.[139]

An example of this integration of styles is utilized by David Kimhi (Radak). Although Radak was born in Northern France, his family originated from Spain. After his father's death, his brother, Moses, instructed him in Hebrew philological studies.[140] He drew inspiration from Ibn

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[134] Baumgarten, Mazo Karras, and Mesler, Nahmanides' Four Senses of Scriptural Signification, 41.
[135] Harris, Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis, 146.
[136] Ibid. 143.
[137] Ibid. 152.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid. 154.
[140] Kalman, Rabbinic Exegesis in the Middle Ages, 184.

Ezra's method but also incorporated the Northern French school's methods because of his audience. His methodology represents a hybrid of the two schools.[141]

Moses ben Nahman's (Nahmanides) commentary was shaped by his engagement with Jewish mysticism. Harris notes that the mystical elements of Nahmanides' commentary often result in interpretations that go far beyond the meaning of the plain text.[142] Nahmanides commonly refers to these mystical elements as "hidden teachings," which convey instructions given to Moses at Sinai and passed down through teacher-student relationships.[143]

Later Jewish philosophers also adopted the *peshat* method. In his commentary on the Cain and Abel narrative, Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides) stresses the importance of contextual analysis, while rejecting commentators who would allegorize characters unnecessarily. [144] For him, Cain and Abel serve as examples of characters who do not need to be allegorized. Gersonides' contextual method of interpretation for the Cain and Abel text is different than his allegorical interpretations of other parts of the Bible, such as Song of Songs, where he demands such an exploration.[145]

Regarding the Cain and Abel narrative, different interpretations also reveal attitudes that are reminiscent of the rabbinic midrash regardless of whether specific midrashim are cited by the commentators. The following medieval sources are discussed: Saadia Gaon (late 9th–mid 10th century, Abbasid Caliphate), Solomon Isaac (Rashi: early 11th – early 12th century, France), Yehuda Halevi (early 11th – mid 12th century, Spain/Israel), Ibn Ezra (late 11th – late 12th century,

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[141] Ibid.
[142] Harris, Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis, 158.
[143] Michelle J. Levine, *Naḥmanides on Genesis: The Art of Biblical Portraiture* (Providence: Brown University Press, 2009), 120.
[144] Levi Ben Gershom, *The Wars of the Lord*, trans. Seymour Feldman, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), 215.
[145] Seymour Feldman, "Levi Ben Gershom/Gersonides," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 65-66.

Spain), Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides: early 12th – early 13th cemtury, Spain/Morocco/Egypt), David Kimhi (Radak: late 12th – mid 13th century, France), Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides: late 12th – late 13th century, Spain/Israel), the Zohar (appearing ca. 13th century), Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides: late 13th – mid 14th century, France), Isaac Abarbanel (mid 15th – early 16th century, Portugal/Spain), and Ovadiah ben Jacob Sforno (late 15th – Mid 16th century, Italy). This group contains a variety of sources from the Northern French and Spanish schools of *peshat* exegesis. Additionally, I have included interpretations from important philosophical and mystical sources as well.[146] As in the chapter on rabbinic literature, sources are organized chronologically unless similarities between texts required an alternate format.

4.1 Vocational Identities

A preoccupation with Cain's choices in medieval Jewish literature may be seen early in the differences between the brother's vocations. Compared to the rabbinic literature, medieval commentators focus more on the meaning behind Cain and Abel's vocations. The different vocations are used to compare the personalities of Cain and Abel. In Saadia Gaon's exploration of Gen. 4:1, he describes the shepherd as one who primarily sits in tents. Saadia is then able to link the sitting in tents to other biblical characters with that vocation, "In the scripture we only know of people described as 'dwellers in tents' as scholars and teachers as it says of Jacob: 'Jacob was a simple man dwelling in tents,' (Gen. 25:27) and regarding Moses it says: 'Moses would take the tent and pitched it.' (Ex. 33:7)."[147] Through this definition of a shepherd, Saadia

[146] While Rashi's grandson, Rashbam, was a large influence on the further development of peshat exegesis, I have not included his commentary in this exploration as Rashbam's comments on Gen. 4 largely reflect Rashi's.
[147] Saadiah Ben Joseph, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation*, trans. Michael Linetsky (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 2002), 173.

is able to associate Abel with other biblical heroes. Additionally, the heroes associated with this category of people are portrayed as learned individuals.[148] Saadia's description echoes the text of GenR 63:10, which also uses Gen. 25:27 to explain the how Abraham, a tent dweller, is a learned individual.[149]

Rashi's commentary seeks to answer why Abel might have chosen to become a shepherd by explaining how he withdrew from working the ground. Abel withdrew from this vocation because of the curse it attained in Genesis 3:17 as a part of Adam and Eve's punishment for disobeying God in the Garden of Eden.[150] The comments of Rashi convey how Abel's choice of vocation displays a more thoughtful deliberation than that of Cain. This careful deliberation is a result of Abel having learned from the incident in the Garden and having chosen not to be associated with its curse. In contrast, Cain's choice of vocation reflects his impiety. Radak's commentary on Gen. 4:2 reflects a similar understanding, mentioning that the difference in occupation highlights the brothers' choice to live different lifestyles.[151]

Gersonides explains how the Gen. 4 narrative is organized to promote shepherding as a more dignified profession. He bases his argument on the chiastic structure in Gen. 4:1–2.[152]

> [Shepherding] was mentioned first because it is more important than agriculture. And this is for two reasons: the first - the subject it is dealing with is a more important subject that the subject of agriculture, since animals are more important than plants; the second - you will find there is a greater output in determining the food for animals and its end than the output of agriculture and its end. This is because the animal, when it eats food appropriate to it, will grow and bear fruit in the correct way, as long as external factors do not prevent [its growth], such as from the surrounding air and similar external factors.

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[148] For comparison, GenR 22:3 includes a small piece on the negative attributes of farmers. where it cites Cain becoming a murder, Noah a drunkard, and King Uzziah a leper - need reference to page number in Chapter 2
[149] Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, trans., *The Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, vol. 2 (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 566.
[150] Solomon Isaac, *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary: Genesis*, trans. Abraham Ben Isaiah and Benjamin Sharfman, vol. 1, 5 vols. (Brooklyn: S.S.R. Publishing, 1949), 37.
[151] Michael Carasik, ed., *The Commentators Bible: Genesis*, The Rubin JPS Mqra'ot Gedolot (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2018), 48.
[152] See pages 13-14, 16

> Whereas agriculture may be already in its perfect form, but the right product may not come, since the plant is dependent on rain and sometimes the rain does not come to the plant in the correct way.[153]

Gersonides uses the chiasm in Gen. 4:1–2 to emphasize Abel's superior vocation. His explanation of how animals provide a greater yield may allude to how Abel is aware of that difference. Gersonides explanation of why animals are more important than plants also foreshadows how Abel's sacrifice will have greater value to God than Cain's.

Abarbanel's commentary on the brothers' profession reflects the same reasoning as Rashi, "Cain became a tiller of the soil because, not being God-fearing, he felt indifferent to the curse God inflicted upon Adam (Gen. 3:17)."[154] As in Rashi's interpretation, Cain's choice to become a farmer appears to show his neglect for the events that transpired in the Garden of Eden. Abarbanel expands his commentary on the vocations in his interpretation of the sacrifice episode. He explains that the brothers brought their sacrifices as result of an argument regarding who had the better profession.[155] He goes on to say that Abel's sacrifice was superior because it was an animate being as opposed to Cain's fruits, which were inanimate objects.[156] He then cites Ps. 80:2, which describes God as a watchful shepherd, to show that Abel imitates this divine quality. This is furthered when he notes that "All of our saintly ancestors were shepherds, as was King David. Not one of them was ever held up as a tiller of soil."[157] He concludes that because Abel's profession avoided the "coarse and vulgar" that was evident in farming, Abel was able to focus on constantly improving himself.[158] This interpretation of Abel "constantly improving himself" also relates to God's warning to Cain in Gen. 4:7, which is grounded in Cain's ability to improve

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[153] Alexander Green, *The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 30.
[154] Isaac Abarbanel, *Abarbanel on the Torah: Selected Themes*, trans. Avner Tomaschoff (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency for Israel: Department of Jewish Zionist Education, 2007), 238.
[155] Ibid. 239.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid. 240.

himself in order to avoid the inclination towards sin. Abarbanel's comment, therefore, shows that Cain chose an occupation which did not allow for self-improvement, foreshadowing his fall to the evil inclination later in the narrative.

Similar interpretations on the superior value of shepherding are later expressed by Sforno, who notes that shepherding is a more skilled occupation than farming.[159] This implies that Abel was a more skilled worker than Cain. Underlying all of these interpretations of the brothers' vocations is the notion that Cain the farmer is not nearly as good as Abel the shepherd.

4.2 The Sacrifices

The presentation of these vocational qualities lays a foundation for Cain's unsuccessful sacrifice. Prior to commenting on the sacrifices themselves, some of the medieval commentators discuss how the brothers would have known to sacrifice since no prior instruction from God or Adam and Eve is found in Genesis. Interpretations that convey prior knowledge or instructions of sacrifice would change how readers interpret Cain's actions.[160] In Saadia's exploration of Gen. 4:3, he states,

> It is impossible for Cain and Abel to have fulfilled these three commandments (sacrifice, tithes, Levirate marriage) out of their own initiative but only by command of an instructor and law of a legislator for the intellect does not deem this as instinctive. On the contrary, it requires study until acceptance of it manifests.[161]

This interpretation requires that Cain and Abel would not only need instruction but also some degree of experience in order to successfully make the sacrifice. While Saadia's commentary does not mention any hard evidence of instruction or experience, Radak's comments on Gen. 4:3

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[159] Ovadiah Ben Jacob Sforno, *Sforno - Commentary on the Torah: Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ralph Pelcovitz (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1987), 34.
[160] See pages 15-16.
[161] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 176

cites BT Avodah Zarah 8a, mentioning how Cain brings his sacrifice of fruits to the same place that Adam sacrificed both fruits and meat to give thanks to God.[162] Nahmanides' commentary on the verse also uses this tradition from Avodah Zarah. Additionally, he notes that Cain and Abel know the hidden secrets surrounding the act of sacrifice.[163] This interpretation infers that the brothers have knowledge of the method of sacrificing. As previously mentioned, Nahmanides' invocation of "hidden" secrets conveys teachings about sacrifices that must have been passed down from a teacher. With his citation of the midrash from Avodah Zarah, Nahmanides infers that Adam had precisely that type of intimate and mystical knowledge, which he received from God.

These interpretations of Cain and Abel having previous knowledge of sacrifice establish a standard that may be followed when making the sacrifices in Gen. 4:3–4. With this standard, Cain's failure to make a successful sacrifice displays a lack of understanding or an ignorance of the teachings passed down to him. Radak's presentation of Avodah Zarah, where Cain and Abel were present during Adam's sacrifice of both fruits and meat insinuates that Cain ignored the meaning of the demonstration. Abel, by contrast, shows perfect understanding.

Cain's flawed character is also displayed when the medieval compared their sacrifices. The catalyst of these interpretations is the fact that Abel's sacrifice includes a description of the firstborn sheep, while Cain's fruits from the ground receive no qualitative explanation.

Saadia's commentary starts with an explanation of the importance of the firstborn:

> "The firstborns precede all other things because of their greatness and extreme importance for us. [Accordingly] He commanded to obey Him with a sincere heart as it says of the firstborn regarding the first dates to ripen as 'that they are beloved' as it says: 'Shall I give my first-born [for] my negligence,' (Micah 6:7) and also 'And there shall be bitterness in him as one who has bitterness for his firstborn,' (Zech. 12:10)…It says of

[162] Carasik, *The Commentators Bible: Genesis,* 48
[163] Moses Ben Nahman, *Ramban's Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, trans. Charles B. Chavel, vol. 1, 5 vols. (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971), 88.

> the first ripe fruits that they are beloved as it says: 'Like a fruit that ripened before the summer that were one to see it shall not remain in his hand but he shall quickly swallow it.' (Is. 17:7) Because the value of the first of something is great and precious in one's mind and has place in the hearts, God commanded to separate them for himself so that they should serve Him with the greatest thing that is precious for them."[164]

Saadia's exploration of Abel's sacrifice highlights that Abel understands the theology behind the giving of the first fruits or firstborn animals for sacrifice. As previously mentioned, Waltke notes this focus on first fruits (Deut 26:11) and (Ex. 13:2, 12; 34:19) is significant because God slayed the first-born of Egypt.[165] Israel is commanded to give the firstborn to God as a recognition that Israel itself is viewed as God's firstborn. This interpretation then implies that a proper sacrifice from Cain could have included the first fruits of his harvest . However, Saadia cites GenR 22:3, which argues that the lack of qualitative description indicates that Cain's fruits from the ground were lowly and vile.[166]

> Saadia also notes the attitudes of the brothers as they made their sacrifices:
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> Abel was God-fearing and pure in heart, but Cain was the opposite of this. For prayer is accepted from purity [of heart] as it says: "He shall accept all of your offerings and shall command of His sacrifices that He shall burn completely" (Job 11:13) but not from a foul one as it says: "The foul of the heart do put on ire and do not seek help from what has bound that ire upon them?" (Job 36:13).[167]

The sacrifices are thus a demonstration of the brothers' piety and personality. Through his use of verses from Job, Saadia also foreshadows Cain's ultimate reaction to this episode as he kills his brother in defiance of the warning that God gives him in Gen. 4:6–7. Sforno's commentary also focuses on the sacrifices as symbols of the brothers' characters. He describes Abel and his sacrifice as "pleasing and acceptable", while Cain and his sacrifice are unpleasant.[168]

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[164] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 177.
[165] Waltke, *Cain and His Offering,* 368
[166] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 178.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Pelcovitz, *Sforno - Commentary on the Torah: Geenesis and Exodus,* 35.

Other commentators follow suit in their portrayal of the sacrifices. Rashi cites "the Aggadah" for the explanation that Cain's offering was a mixture, which leads to the objection of the halakhah against mixing different types of offerings.[169] While the text of the commentary does not explicitly state which midrash Rashi cited, he is likely drawing from a shared tradition in GenR 22:5, PRE 21, or TanY. Ibn Ezra's comment on the sacrifices focuses on the philological qualities of the verse. He interprets the lack of qualitative description of Cain's sacrifice as conveying its inferiority.[170]

Gersonides notes that Cain's choice to be a farmer ultimately sets him up for failure as his fruits are dependent on nature, thus making farming inferior to shepherding. The result of this choice is that Cain's fruits do not have good quality, as they did not receive enough rainfall.[171] Alexander Green explains that this phenomenon shows Gersonides following the Maimonidean belief that God's will acts through nature.[172] Similar to the Aristotelian view, Gersonides argues that all natural phenomenon are in accordance with a divine will.[173] Charles Manekin expands on Gersonides' view, saying that "Even what we consider to be chance and fortuitous events occur according to the divine plan: a chance event has determinate causes, which include [cosmic] influences that determine the fortunes of humans."[174] This observation creates tension as it appears that Cain is unable to determine the outcome of his labor, since God is responsible for the poor quality of the fruits. However, Gersonides highlights that he made a choice to practice farming. Therefore, Cain alone is responsible for the outcome of his labor. Even with the reality

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[169] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 38.
[170] Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)*, trans. H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, vol. 1, 5 vols. (New York: Menorah Publishing, 1988), 81.
[171] Green, *The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides,* 30.
[172] Ibid. 31.
[173] Charles H. Manekin, "Conservative Tendencies in Gersonides' Religious Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 312.
[174] Ibid.

of God being ultimately responsible for creating weather that does not always support one's crops, Gersonides' interpretation explains how it was Cain's duty to reflect and adjust his actions accordingly. This analysis of Gersonides' comments on Cain's choices highlights Jewish medieval philosophy's concern for free will, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Abarbanel's commentary is similar to Gersonides in the way in which he links the sacrifices specifically to the brothers' choices of professions. Commenting on Abel, he states, "It was not the quality of Abel's produce, but his quest for personal distinction, which found favor in God's eyes." Here, Abarbanel uses Abel's sacrifice as evidence of his thoughtfulness and better nature.

The Zohar conveys this attitude in an entirely different fashion, ultimately showing the negative consequences upon the world itself. The Zohar interprets Cain's offering as coming from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the same fruit that led to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.[175] Daniel Matt explains how Cain's offering split apart the divine structure represented in the Sefirot:

> In Kabbalah, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil symbolizes Shekhinah. Adam's sin was that he worshiped and partook of Shekhinah alone, splitting Her off from the other sefirot and divorcing Her from Her husband, Tiferet, the Tree of Life. Here, Cain too separated Shekhinah, symbolized by the soil, from the other sefirot.[176]

Here Cain's sin is likened to Adam's in the way in which he damages the relationship between different areas of divinity represented by the sefirot of Shekhinah and Tiferet. Additionally, having Cain's sacrifice come from the Tree of Knowledge is another example of Cain's

[175] Daniel C. Matt, trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1, 12 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 304.
[176] Ibid. Note 1477.

ignorance or, perhaps, indifference to the events of Gen. 3. Abel's sacrifice, in contrast, is viewed as righteous and, in fact, reunites the two sefirot, repairing their harmony.[177]

The Zohar also explains how Cain acts in accordance with what is known as the *Sitra Achra*, the other side. In Kabbalah, the sefirot represent different aspects of the divine and its relation to the physical world. However, there is also a mirror image of the Sefirot, known as the *Sitra Achra*, which represents the opposite or evil attributes. Regarding Cain's sacrifice, the Zohar teaches that:

> Rabbi Eleazar said, "From the fruit of the soil (Gen. 4:3)," as is said: "Woe to the wicked! Disaster! What his hands have done shall be done to him. For they shall eat the fruit of their deeds (Is. 3:10–11)." For they shall eat the fruit of their deeds - Angel of Death. They shall eat - for he is drawn to them, clings to them, to kill and defile them. So Cain offered from his side.[178]

The Zohar explains that Cain's sacrifice is a result of his actions being based in the *Sitra Achra*. The quotation from Isaiah 3 foreshadows how Cain will once again act from the *Sitra Achra* when he murders Abel, arousing the Angel of Death to react to Cain's actions.[179]

Like earlier rabbinic literature, the medieval interpretations of the brothers' vocations and sacrifices set up Cain as the paradigmatic sinner, as opposed to Abel, who is praised for his thoughtfulness and dedication. In synthesizing these arguments, the medieval commentators appear to emphasize how Cain made decisions to justify his rejected sacrifice.

4.3 Cain's Reaction and God's Warning

When exploring comments about Cain's reaction to his rejected sacrifice and about God's subsequent warning, the medieval commentators emphasize Cain's ability to create an improved

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[177] Ibid. Note 1479.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid. Note 1478.

life for himself. God's recognition of Cain's emotions gives insight into medieval understandings of God's omniscience.

Saadia's comments on Gen. 4:5–6 highlight how God's use of Cain's dejection is a teachable moment:

> We say that the meaning of this matter is that despite Cain felt the scowling come upon him because of his inadequacy of [his] meal offering [as not being] from the choicest and despite that this to his praise it would be better and more appropriate for him to improve it and bring forth its fat and [then he] would not need to be embarrassed. [For this reason] God said to him: "Why are you angry? Would you improve, you would be accepted."[180]

Here, Saadia praises Cain's embarrassment as evidence that he understood his wrongdoing. This interpretation conveys how these rightful emotions of rejection and embarrassment should inspire Cain to improve. Additionally, Saadia's statement reveals a comforting and inspiring God who, understanding human emotions, seeks to redirect Cain towards the right path. The Zohar makes a similar statement in this regard, noting that Cain's emotions show his potential for acting upon his "demonic" side.[181]

Sforno offers a similar reading but focuses on Cain's dejection as evidence of his jealousy of Abel. He translates God's opening question in Gen. 4:6 as God asking, "Why are you jealous of your brother and concerned that I accepted his offering with good will? This was not an arbitrary decision or an unjust one."[182] Sforno's presentation of Gen. 4:6 defends God's decision. God honestly and carefully deliberates. Cain's insinuation, through his sense of dejection is incorrect.

The same attitudes pervade in interpretations of Gen. 4:7. Commentators focus on the natural presence of evil in human beings. However, they note that human beings are endowed

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[180] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 180.
[181] Matt, *The Zohar,* 305.
[182] Pelcovitz, *Sforno - Commentary on the Torah,* 35.

with the ability to choose a better path. Saadia presents God's reproach of Cain in 4:7 through three teachings. First, sin is presented as "crouching at the door" to refer to the Day of Judgment.[183] This means to say that Cain should be mindful of his actions because he will be judged before God. Next, Saadia cites Deut. 30:15, "See I have placed in front of you today life and the good, death and the bad."[184] This line comes from one of Moses' final speeches to the people as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. This section serves as a review of the commandments, as Moses tells the people to recognize the good and bad paths in front of them so that they may ultimately choose to do good. Saadia's invocation of this verse suggests God implored Cain to choose the path towards improvement and a better life. Finally, Saadia teaches that repentance includes the following steps: "Renunciation, remorse, admission, acceptance not to relapse."[185] This means that Cain must recognize his wrongful actions, understand why he should feel bad about them, and admit them truthfully in order to not repeat the same mistakes. Saadia understands Cain's mistakes from his attempted sacrifice are a natural part of life and argues that the burden they cause will be lifted should he choose a better path.

Rashi's commentary on Gen. 4:7 follows a similar line of reasoning. He cities Targum Onkelos, "If you do better, you will be forgiven."[186] Here, Rashi emphasizes how Cain's mistakes are recompensable. He continues a similar rendering of the rest of the verse so that sin "crouching at the door" refers to some form of judgment at the end of Cain's life.[187] Similarly, Rashi understands the evil inclination as a natural part of life and preaches that it can be overcome by good choices.[188]

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[183] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 182.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 38.
[187] Ibid. 39.
[188] Ibid.

Ibn Ezra focuses his interpretation of Gen. 4:7 on the meaning of Cain's fallen face from Gen. 4:5. When exploring the word שאת (uplift) in Gen. 4:7, he cites 2 Samuel 2:22 where the same word is used to refer to Abner's begging for Asahel to cease his pursuit, so Abner may look at Joab's face. Through this reference, Ibn Ezra describes the uplift in Gen. 4:7 as if Cain would lift his face as in Job 11:15, where a similar phrase is meant to show an improvement of esteem.[189] He then continues this theme by noting Cain's jealousy towards Abel, "Why are you [angry] that I accepted Abel's sacrifice since he is obligated to obey [you], and [you are] to rule over him?"[190] Ibn Ezra portrays God as understanding that Cain seeks to do better than Abel. Therefore, Ibn Ezra has God using 4:7 to show Cain his potential to do just that. At the same time, he also warns Cain of the natural tendency to follow a lesser path and that he must conquer that impulse. Nahmanides offers a similar interpretation of both the word שאת (uplift) and of Cain's desire to be superior to Abel.[191]

Maimonides comments on the nature of the evil inclination as it appears in Gen. 4:7 in his *Guide to the Perplexed* 3:22. Like many of the other commentators, he also emphasizes how the evil inclination is innate to human beings:

> They also say that the evil inclination is produced in the human individual at his birth: Sin crouches at the door (Gen. 4:7); as the Torah states literally: From his youth (Gen. 8:21). On the other hand, the good inclination is only found in man when his intellect is perfected (Midrash Ecc. 9:14).[192]

While Maimonides understands the power of the evil inclination, his suggestion of the good inclination being found in the learned individual alone implies the same resulting actions—that

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[189] Strickman and Silver, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis,* 82.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Chavel, *Ramban's Commentary on the Torah: Genesis,* 88.
[192] Moses Ben Maimon, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 480-490.

one should reflect and take time to deliberate the correct way—promoted by the previous commentators. Additionally, Maimonides' citation of midrashic material on Ecclesiastes is related to GenR's argument about studying Torah as a way of warding off the evil inclination.[193]

Radak similarly remarks that the evil inclination is innate in human beings citing Song of Songs 7:11. This verse also notes how sin continues to "lust" towards those who are likely to fall prey to it. Additionally, Radak cites Deut. 30:15, 19 to emphasize the importance of following the correct path.[194] Sforno cites BT Succah 52a, stating that "The evil inclination within man grows stronger from day to day."[195] This statement from the Talmud creates the same image of the evil inclination as that in Song of Songs 7:11. Sforno continues, "You can overpower [the evil inclination] through the Divine Image [within you] as our sages say, Were it not that the Holy One, Blessed be He, helps him, he would not be able to withstand it, as it says: 'God will not leave him in his hand' (Ps. 37:33)."[196] The message in this citation is parallel to Saadia and Radak who teach that the potential to choose the correct path also exists within each person. Sforno's citation extends the power of this choice to show God's support for those engaged in this struggle.

The Zohar's reading of this verse continues its presentation of Cain acting from the *Sitra Achra*, also described as his "demonic" side.

> Rabbi Yose said, This word has now been said and is fitting, but I have heard as follows: שאת [uplift] - He will remove from you, forgive you [for] this clinging of impure spirit. If not, "sin crouches at the door." What is the meaning of at the opening of the door? Supernal judgment, opening of all, as is said: "Open for me the gates of justice," (Ps. 118:19). Sin crouches—that side to which you clung, extended toward you, lies in wait for you to punish you, as translated.

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[193] See page 41.
[194] Carasik, *The Commentators Bible: Genesis,* 49.
[195] Pelcovitz, *Sforno - Commentary on the Torah,* 36.
[196] Ibid.

Here, the Zohar treats the word שאת (uplift) as referring to God helping Cain overcome the *Sitra Achra*. The Zohar, like Saadia and Rashi, explains sin crouching at the door as referring to some type of eventual judgment. Here, the Zohar emphasizes how the *Sitra Achra* lured Cain in and will come to punish him in the end.

Abarbanel's use of this same verse relies on his comments about the brothers' professions. "If only Cain recanted and, instead of tying himself to the soil, improved his spiritual standard, God would appreciate him more than his brother."[197] Here, Abarbanel views God's warning as a charge for Cain to find a better path. By noting Cain's need to improve his piety, Abarbanel emphasizes Cain's need to follow the path of his brother who exhibits the proper intellectual and spiritual qualities as mentioned in his comments on Gen. 4:3–4. Although the medieval commentators took different routes to explain the importance of free will, they all ultimately came to emphasize the importance of Cain's potential ability to overcome his dejection and to choose a better path.

4.4 The Murder

Despite God's warning, Cain killed Abel. While rabbinic literature offers multiple alternative catalysts for the violent confrontation, the medieval commentators emphasize the connection between Cain's rejected sacrifice, God's warning, and the murder. This reflects their desire to only use the text of the passage to make their respective claims.

Saadia's commentary focuses on how the murder occurs "in the field." He notes that this statement shows Cain's intention to hide the murder from Adam, his father.[198] Saadia mentions

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[197] Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah,* 241.
[198] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 184

Deut. 19:11 to describe how Cain "lies and waits to ambush." The use of this verse imagines Cain like a hunting animal. Radak, Nahmanides, and Sforno offer the same interpretation.[199] Saadia further notes that Abel asked for mercy before Cain killed him, intensifying Cain's wickedness.[200]

Saadia is also bothered by Abel's death, since Abel is the righteous brother. He explains this horrible event by recalling future reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. Judgment and the world to come solve this issue, and Abel will be resurrected at the end of days.[201]

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides note that Cain entered into an argument that ends in violence. Rashi mentions that one could look to the rabbinic literature to see what the argument was about but does not focus on any specific interpretation.[202] Ibn Ezra states that this argument started when "Cain related to Abel the full account of the rebuke with which God had reproached him."[203] Radak offers the same interpretation, adding that Cain ignored God and blamed Abel for the warning he received in Gen. 4:6–7. Here, the medieval commentators, like the rabbinic interpreters, emphasize how Cain instigated the conflict that led to the murder. Emphasizing Cain's instigation is necessary to understand how they convey his complete rejection of God's warning. This emphasis also highlights a concern for human free will that will be discussed later.

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[199] Carasik, *The Commentators Bible: Genesis* 50; Chavel, *Ramban's Commentary on the Torah: Genesis,* 89; Pelcovitz, *Sforno - Commentary on the Torah,* 36. Nahmanides presents his interpretation in direct disagreement with Rashi and Ibn Ezra.
[200] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 182.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 39.
[203] Strickman and Silver, *bn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis,* 83.

4.5 God Questions Cain

When God questions Cain concerning the whereabouts of his brother, the medieval commentators emphasize how Cain could have made the correct choice and answered honestly. Saadia understands that God sought to "awaken Cain to admission."[204] His thought is that Cain might confess to God in order to receive some form of mercy. Cain, however, declines and responds with the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" Saadia understands this statement to mean that Cain sought to deceive God by saying something else must have happened to him.[205] This interpretation is also found in Rashi, Radak, and Abarbanel.[206] Sforno supplements it, adding that God asked Cain where he buried Abel. Cain's deflection is then read to reflect how he is unaware of God's omniscience.[207] These interpretations echo rabbinic literature's portrayal of Cain mocking God's judgment.

When detailing God's knowledge of the murder, Saadia uses Job 31:38 to describe how Abel's blood cries out because of the overt wrongdoings of Cain.[208] Saadia highlights that the אלי (to me) in Gen. 4:10 refers to all hidden things revealed to God and that it is impossible for Cain to conceal such an act. This reading of God's omniscience is also implicit in Rashi, Radak, Abarbanel, and Sforno.[209] In interpreting the plural for bloods (דמי), Saadia cites Targum Onkelos' reference to Abel's future descendants, magnifying the wickedness of Cain's actions. Interpretations mentioning future descendants are also found in Rashi, Radak, and Abarbanel.[210]

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[204] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 185.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 39; Carasik, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 50; Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah,* 243.
[207] Pelcovitz, *Sforno - Commentary on the Torah,* 36.
[208] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 186.
[209] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis* 39-40; Carasik, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 50-51; Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah* 243; Pelcovitz, *Sforno - Commentary on the Torah* 36.
[210] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 39-40; Carasik, *The Commentators Bible: Genesis,* 51; Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah,* 243.

Abarbanel echoes Sanhedrin 37b on the sanctity of human life. He notes that Cain's actions are tantamount to wiping out half of the human race since only the two brothers were alive to reproduce.[211]

4.6 Concern of Free Will

Having gone through all the points in the narrative where Cain makes crucial decisions, there is sufficient evidence to argue the medieval commentators used this narrative to emphasize that human free will coexists with God's omniscience. A major concern of medieval Jewish philosophy, especially in the 13th and 14th centuries, was whether God's knowledge of events impedes human free will.[212] Most of the medieval Jewish philosophers argue that God's knowledge does not impede human free will.[213] Jonathan Jacobs argues that, "Whatever moral-psychological impediments there might be to agents doing what they ought to do, the view of Jewish philosophers was that punishment for sinning is justified in part by the fact that agents can do what they ought to do."[214] This is how Gersonides' comments on Cain's sacrifices were reconciled as mentioned above. Although Gersonides maintained the Maimonidean concept of God working through nature, Cain made a choice to engage in farming and was thus responsible for the results of his labor. Gersonides' interpretation matches Jacobs' claim about the importance of the biblical characters having agency and accountability for the consequences of their actions. The medieval commentators see this argument playing out in the Cain and Abel narrative most notably in Gen. 4:6–7, where God lays out standards for Cain. With the existence

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[211] Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah,* 243.
[212] T.M. Rudavsky, "The Impact of Scholasticism upon Jewish Philosophy in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 350. Rudavsky notes that this issue is introduced by Aristotle in *De interpretatione* and then perpetuated by the Stoics.
[213] Ibid. 351.
[214] Ibid.

of free will, the medieval commentators emphasize the importance of careful deliberation in making choices.

Additionally, much of this argument plays out in the way in which the medieval commentators address the murder in Gen. 4:8. Regarding midrash, Delaney argued that the various inserted arguments created a buffer that separated the narrative into two distinct components: the sacrifice episode and the murder. Rashi mentions the midrash in his comments on 4:8 but does not describe them. For the medieval commentators, the buffer does not exist. The absence of a separation from the inserted arguments directs the medieval commentaries' presentation of the narrative to focus on Cain's choices. Through their respective presentations of Cain's murderous actions, Cain's punishment is shown to be well deserved.

4.7 Cain's Punishment

Saadia's discussion of Cain's punishment emphasizes how it stems from his inability to recognize God's omniscience. Saadia links Cain's punishment from the ground with Adam's curse from the Garden of Eden in Gen. 3:17, because he also hid from God.

> "Do you not see that God judged as he judges those who were negligent in watching people that caused the spilling of innocent blood for it says: 'He shall not work nor sow…,' (Deut. 21:4) and were that the river deprived [of fruits] by nature and if not the Law having prevented him by warning."[215]

Saadia's interpretation shows that Cain insulted both God and the earth itself by seeking to hide his actions. Like Adam, his punishment is then directly linked to the ground. This extension of the curse from the Garden of Eden is also referred to by Rashi, Radak, and Abarbanel.[216]

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[215] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 187.
[216] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, Rashi's Commentary: Genesis, 40; Carasik, *The Commentators Bible: Genesis* 51; Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah,* 244.

Nahmanides disagrees with this connection to Adam's sin, saying that Cain's curse is unique, based on his reading of Num. 35:33, where "blood pollutes the land."[217] Nahmanides separates this curse because Cain committed a different crime than Adam.

Additionally, Saadia, Rashi, Nahmanides, and Abarbanel all relate the curse to Cain's profession as a farmer.[218] Despite the minor differences in the interpretations of the Gen. 4:11, the curse from the ground is ultimately inspired by Abel's blood being spilled on the surface of the earth, for which God takes offense.

The curse coming from the ground in Gen. 4:12 is also linked by some commentators to Cain's punishment of eternal wandering. Rashi explains that this is the reason behind Cain's being unable to settle in one place.[219] Nahmanides presents an alternative interpretation by noting that exile is the Torah's proper punishment for a murderer.[220] Abarbanel, however, disagrees with Nahmanides, stating that this can only be true of the accidental murderer. Rather, he makes an argument similar to Rashi's, explaining that he must remain a wanderer and continually "migrate in search of fertile land."[221] Here, the dispute is really about whether Cain intended to murder Abel. Despite these questions, Cain's actions ultimately reflect a rejection of God as none of this would have transpired had Cain made the choice for self-improvement.

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[217] Chavel, *Ramban's Commentary on the Torah: Genesis* 90.
[218] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 187; Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 40; Chavel, *Ramban's Commentary on the Torah: Genesis* 90; Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah* 244.
[219] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, Rashi's Commentary: Genesis, 40.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah,* 244.

4.8 Cain's Repentance?

Perhaps the greatest point of dispute for the medieval commentators is whether Cain's outcry in Gen. 4:13 and God's merciful response in 4:14–15 is the result of Cain engaging in true repentance. Saadia sees Cain's outcry as evidence of him being a model penitent. His argument relies on Gen. 4:6.[222] Saadia argues that by noting the magnitude of his sin, Cain promises not to do something like it again, asks for forgiveness, and shows remorse through his understanding of his punishment.[223]

Rashi follows a similar line of interpretation, citing GenR, "You [God] bear the worlds above and below, and my iniquity you cannot bear?"[224] Rashi's interpretation describes Cain begging for relief, taking advantage of God's need to show mercy to teach penitence. However, Rashi still finds fault with Cain, citing the aggadah—likely GenR 22:13, PRK 24, or PRE 21—which state that Cain left God's presence deceivingly.[225] The Zohar and Nahmanides also view Cain's outcry as a confession.[226] Nahmanides follows Rashi and Saadia, with Cain arguing that God must show him mercy and protect him.[227] Nahmanides explains this is true repentance because "Cain confessed that man is impotent to save himself by his own strength but only by the watchfulness of the Supreme One upon him."[228]

Abarbanel follows the same line of thought but intensifies Cain's confession, stating that he might be deserving of death.[229] He argues that Cain's banishment "was so horrendous that he only wished that, 'anyone who finds me will kill me.' It is as if Cain pleaded, 'Let such violent

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[222] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 188.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 40.
[225] Ibid. 42
[226] Matt, *The Zohar,* 306; Chavel, *Ramban's Commentary on the Torah: Genesis,* 91.
[227] Chavel, *Ramban's Commentary on the Torah: Genesis,* 91.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah,* 245.

death be my comfort and atonement, since no other penalty could wipe out my crime.'"[230] Cain was allowed to live because God wanted him to live out his sentence.

Other commentators take a harsher view of Cain. Ibn Ezra states that Cain neither confesses nor repents at all and instead insists that he is only focused on complaining about the magnitude of his punishment.[231] Here, Ibn Ezra argues that Cain is primarily concerned with being banished from God's protection.[232] Radak also emphasizes Cain's concern for a lighter sentence and the desire for protection.[233] All of these commentaries on Cain's outcry and God's subsequent response, appear to stem from some form of recognition of God's power as stated by Nahmanides. This underlying theme allows the medieval commentators to promote God's mercy, by preaching that engaging in repentance is a worthwhile endeavor. Even though Ibn Ezra and Radak do not accept Cain's repentance, God's actions are viewed as modeling the importance of this process. This echoes rabbinic literature's portrayal of the narrative, by displaying God as both just and compassionate.

4.9 Cain's Expulsion

Although Cain is expelled from God's presence, the medieval commentators view the sign from God in Gen. 4:15 as some form of protection. The dispute over Cain's punishment focuses on the meaning of the "sevenfold punishment" in 4:15. Saadia argues that this statement pairs with the mark as another form of protection.[234] Abarbanel makes a similar claim, stating that Cain's killer would be punished because Cain was meant to be killed even later. Rashi offers

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[230] Ibid.
[231] Strickman and Silver, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis,* 84.
[232] Ibid. 85
[233] Carasik, *The Commentators Bible: Genesis* 52.
[234] Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation,* 190.

a different perspective, noting that the specific number refers to Lamech, seven generations into the future, who will be Cain's downfall.[235] Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Sforno all concur that "sevenfold" means that Cain's true punishment will be carried out in the future.[236] Like early rabbinic literature, the medieval commentators use discussions on Cain's descendants to show their concerns about Cain having been allowed to live and protected after murdering Abel. Additionally, their discussions on Cain's descendants reflect rabbinic literature's portrayal of the increasing wickedness of the descendants.

The medieval commentators also note the importance of Cain being expelled from his home. Rashi describes how murderers are always sent eastward, as with Adam and Eve in Gen. 3:24 and as described in Deut. 4:41.[237] In the Kuzari 2:14, Yehuda Halevi mentions how the brothers' fight took place particularly in the Land of Israel, where "God's eyes are constantly upon it (Deut. 11:12)."[238] The conflict between the brothers is viewed as a contest to find out which one of them would inherit the Promised Land. Cain's actions disqualify him and he is chased out.[239] Abarbanel echoes this interpretation of Cain being expelled from the Promised Land.[240] The Zohar even writes that Cain is banished to another realm below the earth.[241] These interpretations of Cain's expulsion echo the Torah's theology that inheritance of the Promised Land is dependent on a righteous life which may be attained by adhering to God's will and the commandments.

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[235] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 41.
[236] Strickman and Silver, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis* 85; Carasik, *The Commentators Bible: Genesis* 52-53; Pelcovitz, *Sforno - Commentary on the Torah,* 37.
[237] Ben Isaiah and Sharfman, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis,* 42.
[238] Yehuda Halevi, *Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith*, trans. Daniel Korobkin (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1998), 64.
[239] Ibid. 65.
[240] Tomaschoff, *Abarbanel on the Torah,* 246.
[241] Matt, *The Zohar,* 306.

Conclusion

The medieval commentators' exploration of the Cain and Abel narrative creates some of the same portrayals as are found in the rabbinic literature. Cain's actions in the sacrifice episode, his reaction to God's warning, his murder of Abel, and his refusal to take responsibility when questioned by God combine to create the paradigmatic sinner. There are disputes over whether Cain cmayan be viewed as a model penitent, however, because the discussions about his outcry in Gen. 4:13–14 allow the commentators to use him as a means to teach of the importance of repentance while earning God's mercy. Like the rabbinic portrayal, that of the medieval commentators promotes God's capacity as both judging and as compassionate.

The medieval literature, however, stands apart in its presentation of the importance of free will in order to combat speculation that God may have been the cause for Cain's jealousy and the eventual violence. The extensive material on Gen. 4:6–7 highlights where Cain has the ability to properly reflect and avoid becoming the first murderer.

Chapter 5
Conclusion

Having surveyed sources from biblical scholarship, rabbinic literature, and medieval commentaries, we may identify certain trends in order to explore how the narrative was used in Jewish tradition. Reflecting on the material, I argue that the narrative's structure focuses on the proper use of free will in forming a proper relation to God. The narrative begins with Cain's failed sacrifice, which many interpreters render as a dismal performance. Seeing Cain's dejected emotions, God, in Gen. 4:7, coaches Cain with a warning about the evil inclination and how he must control it. The subsequent murder of Abel and Cain's inability to be honest with God results in punishment. This implies that Cain failed to heed God's teachings in Gen. 4:7 and missed the opportunity to exert control over his inclinations.

5.1 Differences in Vocation

Comments on the brothers' vocations match my claim, which was inspired by Jonathan Klawans' observation that farmers and shepherds worked together to contribute to the economy. The distinction between the two vocations serves to present them as symbols for opposing character traits.[242] GenR 22:3 links Cain, the farmer, to Noah and King Uzziah. This midrash then goes on to say that these farmers all had poor outcomes in life.[243] Saadia, commenting on 4:1, notes that Abel's identity as a shepherd means that he dwelt in tents.[244] From this statement, Abel is associated with Jacob and Moses. Saadia notes that characters identified in this manner

[242] See page 14.
[243] See page 32.
[244] See page 58–59.

had superior intelligence. Here, Cain's vocation serves as evidence of his character flaws; Abel's vocation, on the other hand, displays piety and thoughtfulness.

5.2 The Sacrifices

The interpretations of the brothers' sacrifices mirror Ellen van Wolde's comments on how the differences in qualitative descriptions convey the poor quality of Cain's sacrifice.[245] Although Cain's sacrifice is not negatively described in the biblical text, interpreters expand on this distinction to illustrate a greater contrast between the brothers. GenR 22:5 notes that Cain's poor sacrifice was disrespectful to God. He is compared to a man who harvested good fruit for himself, but then gave bad fruit to the king. Abel's sacrifice from the firstborn and better sheep exhibits his piety.[246] PRE offers a similar interpretation and explains how Abel's sacrifice reflected the theology behind the importance of the firstborn in sacrifices.[247] This is similar to Bruce Waltke notiing that the sacrifices to God come from the firsts of the fruits or the animals because God slayed the first-born of Egypt.[248] BTalmud Avodah Zarah 8a mentions that the brothers learned the standards for sacrificing from Adam.[249] Saadia's commentary focuses on the intentions of the brothers. He uses the difference in qualitative descriptions to show how Cain had a poor heart while Abel's was pure.[250] The Zohar increases the magnitude of the error of Cain's sacrifice, saying it was reminiscent of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden.[251] Both of these actions created disharmony in the *sefirot*, requiring repair through Abel's offering. These

[245] See page 15–16.
[246] See page 32–33.
[247] See page 33.
[248] See page 18.
[249] See page 61.
[250] See page 62.
[251] See page 64.

additions about the poor quality of Cain's sacrifice provide a fuller illustration of his negative character traits.

5.3 God's Warning

Although the grammar of the warning in Gen. 4:7 makes it exceedingly difficult to interpret, comments on the verse appear to reach a general consensus that it is meant inspire Cain to improve himself. GenR 22:6 reconciles the issue of the feminine word for sin (הטאת) being matched with the masculine form for crouching (רובץ) by noting that the word choice purposefully demonstrates the strengthening of a sin which is within someone who continues to ignore its influence.[252] This midrash discusses how the study of Torah provides the tools necessary to combat the evil inclination.

Saadia's commentary on the warning cites Deut. 30:15, "See I have placed in front of you today life and the good, death and the bad." This line from one of Moses' final speeches in Deuteronomy invokes the importance of making an effort to choose the righteous path. Synthesizing the verse with Gen. 4:7, Saadia notes that God's warning to Cain provides a teaching about how repentance for the past helps make improvements for the future.[253] Ibn Ezra focuses his comments on Cain's dejected emotions, stating that God is asking Cain to recognize his poor state of mind and to not let his anger and depression lead him towards the evil inclination.[254] What unites these views is how the interpreters recognize that Cain is responsible for his actions; the sins he committed and the repentance he later offers.

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[252] See page 39.
[253] See page 66–67.
[254] See page 68.

5.4 The Murder

Detailed accounts of the murder in the various interpretations seek to reveal more evidence of Cain's wickedness. GenR 22:8 notes that the verb used for rising (קם), shows how Cain takes advantage of Abel's mercy in order to kill him.[255] GenR 22:9 also makes use of the plural form of Abel's bloods to show how Cain damaged humanity by cutting off a line of righteous descendants.[256] The Palestinian Targums make use of the arguments in 4:8 to present Cain as opposing rabbinic teachings.[257] Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides all infer that the argument which led to the violence in Gen. 4:8 was a result of Cain initiating the interaction.[258] Although interpreters note that Abel was involved in the conflict, he receives no blame.

5.5 God's Questioning of Cain

God's questioning of Cain raises a theological question as interpreters must determine whether God truly had knowledge of Cain's actions. The answer to this question affects how the Bible presents God's ability to monitor human actions. Many interpretations argue that this questioning was rhetorical. GenR 22:9 presents three parables that show Cain's flawed logic in trying to hide his actions from God.[259] TanY cites Jeremiah 23:24, "Can any man hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth?" This citation implies God's knowledge of human action and promotes the divine ability to exercise judgement.[260] Saadia's commentary on the exchange notes that its rhetorical nature was meant to be an opportunity for honesty and repentance.[261] The consensus on the rhetorical nature of this exchange illustrates

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[255] See page 36.
[256] See page 41.
[257] See page 33–36.
[258] See page 71.
[259] See page 37–38.
[260] See page 38.
[261] See page 72.

how Cain makes choices that display his ignorance of God. This ignorance, in addition with his wickedness in other portions of the narrative, contribute to Cain's portrayal as the paradigmatic sinner.

5.6 Cain's Punishment and Possible Repentance

In addition to the portrayal of Cain as the paradigmatic sinner, interpreters argue whether Cain's cry for mercy in Gen. 4:13–14 may be viewed as repentance. GenR 22:13, PRK 24, and PRE 21 all state that Cain's cry for mercy was like a pig trying to pass for a kosher animal.[262] Saadia and Nahmanides argue that Cain's outcry is true repentance because he recognized the magnitude of his crimes.[263]

Despite the differences in opinion regarding Cain's repentance, many sources appear to reach a consensus on why God shows Cain mercy. PRK 24 has God asking Israel, "I accepted Cain's repentance, and shall I not receive your repentance?"[264] Similarly, Nahmanides argues that God's mercy towards Cain reflects God's desire to offer protection to all who repent and recognize divine watchfulness.[265]

5.7 Implications for Jewish Readers

These interpretations allow Jews to explore different avenues to consider the character of the brothers and the interactions between Cain and God. Rabbinic and medieval sources about the narrative present the brothers as contrasting symbols: Cain is the sinner and Abel is the righteous man. In the introduction, I mentioned that the Bible's purpose is to command how we

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[262] See page 43.
[263] See page 76.
[264] See page 43.
[265] See page 76.

conduct ourselves. Although God gives no explicit commandments in this narrative, understanding the actions of Cain and Abel as symbols for sin and righteousness force us to consider what the text seeks to teach us.

This survey leads me to argue that God's warning to Cain in Gen. 4:7 conveys how free will is a central theme of the narrative. Many of the interpretations explored in this thesis highlight various points in the narrative where Cain makes crucial decisions. Following the rejected sacrifice, interpretations of 4:7 show God imploring Cain to recognize the dangers of the evil inclination. Comments on Gen. 4:7 teach that Torah supplies one with the tools to combat the evil inclination. This is key: Torah offers guidance for a righteous life. Interpretations of Cain's continued wickedness exhibited in the murder and his flippancy towards God's interrogation are then meant to show the consequences of ignoring such a warning. When questioned by God, Cain has the option to give an honest answer, but he does not. Although doing so would not have cleared Cain of the murder, the interpreters agree it would have set him on a path to repentance and divine mercy.

In the context of that observation, the focus on free will in the Cain and Abel narrative shows how proper contemplation when making choices allows for better service to God. When Cain failed to provide a proper sacrifice or to speak honestly, God still provided him the opportunity for improvement. Despite being the archetypal sinner, God shows Cain mercy to teach the power of repentance. The narrative, through the lens of the history of interpretation, shows how practicing repentance is essential to the proper exercise of free will. Repentance is included in this narrative to teach us the benefit of reflecting on our actions so we can improve ourselves. The Cain and Abel narrative can be used by Jews to learn the benefit of following God's desire for personal repentance.

It is not necessary that Jews believe in the existence of God to adhere to the teachings in Gen. 4. Nor is it important for modern Jews to view the Bible the way ancient and medieval commentators did. Even for those Jews who disagree with the premise that the Bible is an instrument of obedience to God, God's words to Cain can still inspire action. The words of Gen. 4 should provoke us to be self-reflective and to identify where we can make improvements to our own lives.

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