CHAPTER TWO

REJECTED OFFERING—DEJECTED PERSON

GENESIS 4:3–7

Thy burnt-flesh offering prospers better;
See how heaven licks up the flames, when thick with blood!

(Lord Byron, *Cain* 3.1)

As a story of firsts, Cain and Abel represents the first account of an offering made to God. The questions that quickly rise to the surface when reading Gen 4:3–7 are these: What was wrong with Cain’s offering? Why did God reject it? While it may be possible to draw some preliminary conclusions, the task is hindered by the fact that the Bible does not provide enough detail. At no point are we told why God accepted Abel’s offering over that of Cain’s;¹ Cain’s anger suggests that the rejection by God caught him by surprise.² This lack of detail creates two problems, one on the narrative level and the other theological. First, the absence of an explanation for the rejection leaves a gap in the narrative that makes it impossible for the reader to learn from Cain’s actions. How can one offer God a better sacrifice if the text is not clear about the nature of the problem? Second, the absence of an explanation makes God seem unpredictable.³ Indeed, the Emperor Julian declared that God appeared to act somewhat capriciously in the way Abel’s offering was accepted over that of Cain’s (*Contra Galilaeos* 346E–347C).⁴ God’s seemingly capriciousness in rejecting one

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¹ The paucity of details led Hermann Gunkel to conclude that “something seems to be missing here” (*Genesis* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997], 43). N. M. Sarna has commented that the narrative is “extraordinarily terse and sketchy” (*JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* [New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 31).
³ Huffmon, 112.
sacrifice over the other creates a theological problem. The problem is compounded by Abel’s murder. Since Cain’s act of fratricide is precipitated by God’s unexplained rejection of the sacrifice which resulted in Cain’s anger, God becomes complicit in the act. These problems opened the door for ancient interpreters to expand and rework the story in a way that relieved God of appearing capricious and, by extension, complicit in Abel’s murder. What follows below traces the interpretive approaches used by Jewish and Christian exegetes to respond to a theological problem created by gaps in the narrative.

*Was something wrong with the offering?*

The Hebrew tradition of Gen 4:3–5 does not contain any of the linguistic and grammatical ambiguities found in 4:1–2. In fact, the narrative is fairly straightforward. Beginning with Cain, the eldest, the brothers are said to have brought a “gift/offering” (מנחה) to God which was representative of their respective occupations. Cain brought an offering “from the fruit of the earth” and Abel an offering from “the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions.” Though it is not spelled out, the more detailed description of Abel’s offering is usually taken by modern commentators to provide the reason God was pleased with his sacrifice. The care used by the author to describe Abel’s offering as being from among the choice of his flock echoes biblical mandates for such (Exod 22:28–29; 34:19–20; Lev 3:16; Deut 32:38; Ps 147:14). The obvious conclusion, based on the descriptions offered, is that Cain’s sacrifice was defective since, unlike Abel’s, it was not taken from the choicest part of the harvest. Thus, even though a strict chronological reading would recognize that the regulations concerning sacrifice had

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6 For a review of how Abel’s offering was interpreted in antiquity see Jack P. Lewis, “The Offering of Abel (Gen 4:4): A History of Interpretation,” JETS 37 (1994): 481–96; for a list of the different types of explanations that have been offered by modern commentators see: Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1–15 (WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 104.

7 Wenham, 103. This is also the explanation offered by Philo (Sacrifices 88–89).