In the case of Cain his wickedness did not begin when he killed his brother. For even before that God, who knows the heart, had no regard for Cain and his sacrifice. But his baseness was made evident when he killed Abel. (Origen—On Prayer 29.18)

The central scene in this tale of firsts is the murder. The main actors are Cain and Abel, but the story is now quickly beginning to center only on Cain. Abel, whose role has been minimal at best, is about to exit the stage as the victim of the first violent crime. Two things that attracted the attention of interpreters in antiquity was the lack of detail surrounding the murder and God’s interrogation of Cain. Why did Cain decide to kill Abel and why does God ask Cain where Abel is? From these and a few textual anomalies translators developed interpretive traditions that portrayed the brothers not only as the models of proper and improper sacrificial practice, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, but also as representatives of two opposing theological viewpoints.

**What did Cain say to Abel?**

Gen 4:8 introduces another abrupt shift in the narrative’s action. Earlier we saw how the narrative quickly shifted from a birth narrative to a description of the brothers’ sacrificing to God. Now, having completed his conversation with God in 4:7, Cain is next made to speak to his brother Abel, which appears to be nothing more than a ruse to abet Cain’s murderous intentions.¹ The difficulty with Gen 4:8, however, is that we are never told what Cain said to his brother. The Hebrew

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¹ In reality Gen 4:7 is not a conversation since the only speaker is God and Cain is not afforded the opportunity to answer.
simply does not tell us anymore than “Cain said to his brother Abel” (אמר קן אליעתל), which is immediately followed by the locative picture of the brothers together in a field. The problem turns on the meaning of אמר (“said”) which, in contrast to דבר (“spoke”), is typically used when a speech is about to be quoted. This lacuna in the text leaves the reader of the Hebrew version wondering: what did Cain say to Abel? What was the content of their conversation? Modern commentators suggest that if there ever was a conversation between the two brothers recorded, it was either inadvertently dropped through a scribal error or was deliberately suppressed in order to focus attention on the action. In spite of this gap, the point of the story is quite clear. Cain was unwilling or unable to master sin and, having succumbed to the very thing God warned him against, committed the first act of violence.

Taking into account the flow of the action, it is easy to posit that the content of Cain’s words to Abel was an invitation to join him in the field as part of a plan to murder him. This was the assumption commonly adopted by translators in antiquity. The LXX, Samaritan Pentateuch, Peshitta and the Vulgate all fill the lacuna in the text with some variation of an invitation for Abel to accompany Cain into the field. This addition has also been accepted by modern translations as witnessed by the NRSV which reads: “Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out to the field.’” But other interpreters in antiquity were not satisfied with simply inserting a phrase that continued the action. Some concluded that the presence of אמר in 4:8 meant that there had been a conversation between the brothers prior to Abel’s murder. This,

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3 Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1–15 (WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 106. In a brief article, Pamela Tamarkin Reis suggests that אמר קן אליעתל is better translated as “Cain spoke against Abel” rather than “Cain spoke to Abel.” Her suggestion, if correct, would remove the supposed defect in the text and provide a simpler approach to the problem (“What Cain Said: A Note on Genesis 4:8,” JSOT 27 [2002]: 107–13). Another suggestion, offered by Howard Jacobson, is that the phrase be translated as “Cain plotted against his brother Abel” (“Genesis IV 8,” VT 75 [2005]: 564–65). For a brief overview of how this verse has been interpreted from antiquity through the modern era see Mark McEntire, “Being Seen and Not Heard: The Interpretation of Genesis 4:8,” in Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture Vol. 1 (ed. Craig A. Evans; SSEJC 9; New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 4–13.
4 Craig, 119.