In two of his novels, the Portuguese writer José Saramago (1922–2010) criticized Jewish and Christian religious ideas. He did so—often quite brilliantly—by retelling and reimagining old stories from the Bible. He first used this device in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* from 1991, in which he presented Jesus as the victim of God's ruthless plan to dominate the world and to plunge the whole of humankind into perdition (Weren 1999: 234–241). In his final novel *Cain*, Saramago focused on Old Testament stories, taking the story of Cain and Abel as a point of departure (Gen 4:1–16). A peculiarity of Saramago's style is that he does not capitalize names (e.g., cain, abel, god, etc.).

The dynamic relationship between the modern novel of *Cain* and the biblical material used in it is central in this contribution. I will try to answer the following questions:

(1) What image does Saramago paint of Cain and of his relationship with his brother Abel and with God?

(2) What differences do the portraits painted by Saramago show in comparison to the way in which God and Cain are characterized in Genesis 4 (Hebrew Bible and Septuagint)?

In answering these questions, I will try to link up with recently developed narrative theories and methods, which are frequently applied to narrative texts from the Bible (Powell 1993). In doing so, I will focus on two important concepts: characterization and intertextuality (cf. Boelaars 2012).

The first concept can be explained as follows. The human characters in a story are not real human beings but “people of paper” (Bal 1979). They are language constructs, to which readers and interpreters can attribute meaning by relating them to other textual data. The same goes for non-human personages, for example, God or the devil. Character portraits are not stored in the text, ready-made: they are gradually constructed during the reading or interpretation process. The textual data that are relevant to this process are aptly described by Alter (1981: 116–117):

Character can be revealed through the report of actions; through appearance, gestures, posture, costume; through one character’s comments on another;
through direct speech by the character; through inward speech, either summarized or quoted as interior monologue; or through statements by the narrator about the attitudes and intentions of the personages, which may come either as flat assertions or motivated explanations.

Personages are often colored by means of material from other books. This phenomenon is referred to as intertextuality (Allen 2000). This term is applied to the fundamental interwovenness of texts from different books. There are various relations between the novel of *Cain* and stories from the Bible, consciously intended by Saramago and easily discovered by well-informed readers. In comparing them, it are the differences rather than the similarities that are interesting. Saramago regards the Bible as a classic, the content of which deserves contradiction and fundamental discussion. He provides this by giving new content to God's and Cain's roles.

My contribution is structured as follows. I will start with an analysis of the roles attributed to Cain and God in Saramago's novel. Subsequently I will contrast his book with Genesis 4, taking into account not only the version from the Hebrew Bible but also that in the Septuagint and will explore how the Septuagint's view of Cain and Abel is developed in the New Testament. Finally I will describe how Saramago's image of Cain and God relates to this colorful interpretation history.

1. Saramago's Images of Cain and God

In the third chapter of his novel, Saramago provides a retelling of Genesis 4:1–16. Some data are the same. Adam and Eve's two eldest children are called Cain and Abel. Cain is a tiller of the soil and Abel is a keeper of sheep. Both sacrifice the first fruits of their work to God, but the brothers become estranged because the Lord rejects Cain's sacrifice and accepts Abel's. Immediately after Abel is murdered by Cain, a lengthy debate develops between Cain and God about the question of guilt and the punishment for the crime committed. Cain will have to roam the earth, but to protect him from vendetta, God places a mark on Cain's forehead. These are (some of) the similarities; the differences, however, abound. From an early age, Cain and Abel are each other's best friends. However, this harmonious relationship is disturbed when the brothers offer a sacrifice whereby the smoke of Abel's sacrifice rises whereas the smoke of Cain's first fruits swirls downward. There is nothing about smoke staying near the ground or ascending toward heaven in either the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint. This image originated in painting (e.g., Gustave Doré). In Saramago's story, Abel mocks his