CAIN AND ABEL IN THE PALESTINIAN TARGUMS

A Brief Note on an Old Controversy

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The biblical story of Cain and Abel contains, as Sheldon ISENBERG has noted, both a textual problem and a theological enigma). After reporting the words, “Cain said to Abel his brother,” the MT fails to record what Cain said. Furthermore, the text does not specify why Abel’s offering was more acceptable to God than Cain’s. The confluence of these two problems guaranteed to evoke some haggadic expansion in the Aramaic versions2). The Palestinian Targums3) not only record that Cain said to Abel, “Let us go into the field,” but also present a theological debate that occurred between the brothers once they arrived at the field. All of the Targums agree that the dispute ultimately led to the fratricide. The details of this debate, however, offer slight but significant variations in the four recensions4):

Cain answered and said to Abel (his brother),

PTG “I see that the world was created by mercy (rahāmîn) and is governed by mercy.

N “I know that the world was not created by mercy, that it is not governed according to the fruit of good deeds and that there is favor in judgment.


2) There may have originally been only one problem since the presence of Cain’s words, “Let us go into the field,” in the Targums, LXX, Samaritan Pentateuch, Peshitta, and Vulgate suggests a common basis in a pre-Masoretic reading. The remaining theological problem, however, was sufficient to generate midrashic explanations.

3) Although Tg. Onkelos, which contains no haggadic insertions here, is probably related to the Palestinian targumic tradition (see, e.g., Geza VERMES, “The Targumic Versions of Genesis IV 3-16,” ALUOS 3 [1961-62], 81-114), I use this term to designate Tg. Pseudo-Jonathan (1TJ), Codex Neofiti I (N), the Fragmentary Targum (2TJ), and the Cairo Geniza fragments of the Palestinian Targum (PTG).

4) The translation is essentially that of VERMES. Insignificant targumic variants are enclosed in parentheses.
2TJ "There is no judgment, there is no judge. No good reward will be given to the righteous. There will be no punishment for the wicked. The world was not created by mercy and is not governed by mercy.

1TJ "I know that the world was created by mercy, that it is not governed according to the fruit of good deeds and that there is favor in judgment. Therefore your offering was accepted (from you) with delight but my offering was not accepted from me with delight."

Abel answered and said to Cain,

PTG "So (lit., what is it that) the world was created by mercy and is governed by mercy? It is surely governed according to the fruit of good deeds.

N "I see that the world was created by mercy and is governed according to the fruit of good deeds.

2TJ "There is judgment, there is a judge. There is another world, there is a gift of good reward to the just and punishment for the wicked, and the world was created by mercy and is governed by mercy. It is surely governed according to the fruit of good deeds.

1TJ "The world was created by mercy and is governed according to the fruit of good deeds (and there is no partiality in judgment). Because (the fruit of) my deeds were better than yours (and more prompt than yours) my offering was accepted (from me) with delight but your offering was not accepted from you with delight."

The argument is continued another round in Tgs. Pseudo-Jonathan (1TJ), Neofiti (N), and the targumic Tosepta:

Cain answered and said to Abel:

"There is no judgment, there is no judge, there is no other world, there is no gift of good reward for the just and no punishment for the wicked."

Abel answered and said to Cain:

"There is judgment, there is a judge, there is another world. There is the gift of good reward for the just and punishment for the wicked."