

Patterns of Penance and the Sin of Cain: Approaching a Sacramental Biblical Theology

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My essay focuses particularly on the sacrament of reconciliation. I am currently composing a monograph on this sacrament for a series in biblical theology, surveying the Scriptures to see how, within them, the Church's sacraments are prefigured, revealed, and commanded, and to illustrate Scripture's witness in a way that will "strengthen" and "rejuvenate" our theology and practice, following *Dei Verbum (DV)* §24. My contribution here focuses especially on how to approach writing a biblical theology of penance. Biblical treatments and defenses of the sacrament are often brief, contenting themselves with proving a few conceptual points or doubling down on Jesus's giving his apostles the power and duty of absolution in John 20:19–23. Robert Fastiggi's discussion of the biblical "foundations" of reconciliation, for instance, spans less than thirty pages for both testaments combined, and concludes with a kind of anti-climactic apology: "While it's clear that the Sacrament of Penance has been instituted by Christ, the actual form of the administration of the sacrament will need to develop within the Church's tradition."¹ This is a roundabout way of saying that although Scripture clearly attests to the sacrament's theological foundations, it leaves us *only* with foundations. If this is true, how far can a biblical theology of the sacrament go, and how should one go about it?

Approaching a biblical theology of penance, I think, requires us to pause and consider two aspects of the task. First, we should give an account

¹ Robert L. Fastiggi, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Anthropological and Scriptural Understanding* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2017), 36.

of “biblical theology” and our aims in writing one. Secondly, we should consider how to write a theology of *this* sacrament in particular. What should we be looking for? Such questions will help us gain a clearer vision of what illumination we should expect from Scripture about penance and how we will go about finding it. With our approach and aims discussed, this essay can then conclude with an attempt to follow them in practice by offering a theological, penance-focused exegesis of the sin of Cain (Gen 4:1–16).

A Biblical Theology of the Sacrament

Writing a biblical theology of the sacrament of reconciliation requires us to attend to the notion of “biblical theology.” Unfortunately, there continues to be little agreement on exactly what biblical theology is. The phrase is “a wax nose” molded always to the interpreter practicing it.² Thankfully, however, this lack of consensus allows us to offer our own proposal and tailor it to the task at hand. Rather than offering a requisite *Forschungsbericht* or haggling with other proposals in detail as though my goal were to dismantle or replace them globally, I can in this brief essay tell you how I think one should go about this task and why.

Our task is writing a biblical theology of penance, and we may begin by noting already two small words in that phrase that tell us much. The first is the indefinite article, “a.” We are writing *a* biblical theology. That designates our goal already as an academic product that fits a particular genre, not simply a lens with which I read. Depending on which term one emphasizes—*biblical* or *theology*—and depending on what one means the phrase to rule out, the phrase “biblical theology” can be used to indicate exegesis that is “theologically interested”³ (as opposed to exegesis that spurns dogmatic theology) or to indicate theology that is “biblically faithful”⁴ (i.e., explicitly biblically sourced as opposed to theologies that operate from first principles other than revelation). Both of these uses of the term, I think, have valid interests but cede too much definitional ground: exegesis that is opposed to or not aimed at the theological truth is incomplete, from a Catholic perspective, and theology that is not constantly informed and reformed by God’s

² Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: Zondervan, 2012), 13.

³ Robert D. Miller II, OFS, *Many Roads Lead Eastward: Overtures to Catholic Biblical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 10 (summarizing Roland Murphy).

⁴ D. A. Carson, “A Biblical Theology of Education,” *Themelios* 46 (2021): 257–68, at 258.

word can only be ancillary to theology.⁵ To do exegesis that is theological or theology that is exegetical is simply to do exegesis or to do theology; we do not need an added composite term. Writing *a* biblical theology indicates not merely an attitude or interest, but a formal property: we are going about a biblical analysis that will participate in a particular mode of inquiry and form of presentation.

Second, we note the preposition “of” in “a biblical theology *of* the sacrament of reconciliation. That is, our biblical theology is focused on a particular *practice*, and one that is already known from our present context. The work of biblical theology, according to many, “aims at presenting, in a unified and systematic way, the origin and development of revealed doctrine in its successive stages.”⁶ This view, expressed here by the Catholic Augustin Cardinal Bea, echoes almost exactly the influential and constructive work of the Princeton theologian Geerhardus Vos: “Biblical theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than the exhibition of the organic process of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity.”⁷ This captures the formal character of what we hope our ultimate product to be: a descriptive and synthetic presentation of divine revelation across the biblical canon. But this is done best when, as in our current pursuit, it is focused on a particular mystery or topic. To trace out and synthesize *all* of the theological content in the Bible is a gargantuan task that leaves even its largest literary specimen lacking.⁸ However, many such biblical theologies are carried out

⁵ See, for instance: Aquinas’s insistence on theology as a science whose principles are those revealed and apprehended by divine faith in *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 1, aa. 1–2; Augustine’s discussion of the *praecambula fidei* he finds in Platonism and the saving God he can know only through Scripture and the Church in *Confessiones* 7.9.21; and Pope Benedict XVI’s formula for Catholic biblical exegesis in *Verbum Domini* (2010) §34: “Only where both methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book.”

⁶ Augustin Cardinal Bea, “Progress in the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” *Theology Digest* 1 (1953): 67–71, at 71.

⁷ Quoted in Richard C. Barcellos, “An Analysis of Geerhardus Vos’ Nature and Method of Biblical Theology,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 31 (2020): 151–71, at 163. See, more fully, Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948).

⁸ As a case in point, see the large and impressive work of Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), which totals over a thousand pages, but whose syntheses of topics like God’s Spirit or ethics or God’s Son who is Wisdom—syntheses describing the biblical witness to these topics across both testaments—occupy, on average, only around forty pages. A Catholic biblical theology that follows Vos’s interest (see above) in form, content, and

with a distrust of dogmatic theology or a desire to replace it, and such an expansive burden need not concern a Catholic who trusts the complementarity of Scripture and Tradition. Nor are we primarily engaged in *sola scriptura* apologetics—in which one prescind from dogmatic theology so that Scripture may prove dogma independently. We can assume our practice of the sacrament and the dogmas that undergird it, allowing them to serve as “lights on the path” and illumine our reading.⁹ Rather than coming to the Bible to construct a theology from scratch, we stand on something already known within the “living tradition” and look *back* to see it anew in Scripture (*DV* §12). Beginning from our chosen topic, we can look to see how it is unveiled throughout Scripture and plot out key points, developments, and trajectories across the canon in order to represent them and reflect on them for Catholic theology and the life of the faithful today.¹⁰

This leads us to a third observation regarding the motivation and benefits of such a “biblical theology.” If we already know the truth through our dogmatic formulations and are not engaged in apologetics or answering open questions, why turn back to unearth or rearticulate the Bible’s witness distinctly—especially when its witness only grounds or anticipates later developments that gave shape to the sacrament as it is given to us? One answer, of course, is that, in the minds of the faithful or in the mouths of preachers, God’s own inspired words take precedent over other kinds of discourse, as they possess uniquely the “fire” and “mighty power” of divine speech.¹¹ Another answer is that reexamination of Scripture’s canonical witness guides the magisterium in reform and the “maturation” of the Church’s judgments (*DV* §12). Further, reading Scripture in the light of the Church’s Tradition contributes to our constant groundedness in revelation

salvation-historical progression is Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. William Heidt (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1950).

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §89. That dogma can help, rather than merely hinder, exegesis is emphasized by Gary A. Anderson, *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), xi; Karl Rahner, “Exegesis and Dogmatic Theology,” in *Dogmatic versus Biblical Theology*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Baltimore: Helicon, 1964), 39.

¹⁰ This approach is sketched out by Brevard S. Childs, despite his criticisms of the “biblical theology” movement in the era of Vos (or Bea): *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 131–32. Childs’s “canonical” emphasis for biblical-theological method (e.g., 99), though it requires some qualifications for which we do not here have space, is in part an attempt to affirm an exegesis that assumes rather than brackets out Christian theological presuppositions at least regarding the one God to whom the Bible as a whole bears witness.

¹¹ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), §7.

and breathes vigor and new life into the way in which the faithful understand, live, teach, and preach the truth. We may hear from *Dei Verbum* once more:

Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. (§24)

A biblical theology that rearticulates a mystery of the faith or an aspect of revealed truth and shows its unfolding within revelation *strengthens* the discipline and lived practice of Christian theology by exposing the epistemic foundations on which it rests. Moreover, just as its results are able to contribute to the Church's maturity, it also lends youth and vigor to the faithful by a kind of *rejuvenation*.

I suggest that biblical theology, as distinct from dogmatic theology, can contribute uniquely to this rejuvenation specifically in that it redescribes and synthesizes the biblical witness *in the Bible's own mode*.¹² If dogmatic theology formulates and distills what God reveals, God chose to reveal the content through the literary vehicles of story, song, and instruction. Biblical theology aims "to describe OT or NT faith and practice from within its original presuppositions, and with due attention to its own organizing principles,"¹³ rearticulating and representing how the stories, songs, and forms of instruction in Scripture disclose divine truth. This is not only a good thing in that these divinely inspired modes of communication, providentially given within the conceptualities of particular cultures and languages, "possess a privileged congruence with the divine actions and mystery-bearing realities in salvation history."¹⁴ It is a good thing because—as embodied creatures who receive and express truth in metaphor and live within linear time—the narrational,

¹² According to Angelo Tosato, receiving the gift of revelation *ad modum recepti* is the touchstone of all Catholic biblical interpretation (*The Catholic Statute of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Monica Lugato [Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2021], 14).

¹³ Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, 4 vols. (1962): 1:418–32, at 425.

¹⁴ William M. Wright IV and Francis Martin, *Encountering the Living God in Scripture: Theological and Philosophical Principles for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 206. Compare also René Latourelle, SJ, *Théologie de la révélation*, *Studia 15* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963), 380–82; Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, rev. and ed. E. M. Stewart, trans. P. Joseph Cahill, SJ (New York: Seabury, 1973), xxi–ii.

metaphorical, and otherwise embodied modes of Scripture's communication not only inform our formulation of truth but also form and enliven our religious imagination, and thus our self-understanding and practice.¹⁵ If simpler language calls me to "live virtuously," the Bible calls me to imagine myself "walking the path" of righteousness, a path on which I can "stumble" or put a "stumbling block" in front of others, one from which I might go or be led "astray," and from which I must therefore not even "turn aside to the right or to the left," lest I fail to reach my destination.¹⁶ This may all refer to the same thing as "living virtuously," but it shapes my imaginative framework for my life in the world and the telos of my calling in God toward beatitude more than the accurate but more abstract formulation. Thinking of sin as a "debt," even though it is so only analogously, shapes my imagination about invisible realities when I transgress, and it is a core metaphor from which we derive also our conceptions of this debt being remitted, forgiven, blotted out, or repaid, whether in one's personal life or in the Church's development of doctrine (e.g., indulgences).¹⁷ This goes also for stories—historical or parabolic—that serve as larger vehicles for communication and invite us to see ourselves and realities about humanity, God, sin, and justice within the interactions between characters. Thinking of human rejection and divine providence through the Joseph story (Gen 37–50) adds pathos and imaginative fodder to our prayer in times of abandonment and our contemplation of God's mysterious ways. We are called to embrace Christian suffering, but the image of "bearing one's cross" after Christ (Mark 8:34) calls us specifically to imagine ourselves in our sufferings as ascending Golgotha with Christ, falling, groaning, yet bearing up under pain for love of God.

Biblical metaphors are important not merely for the ultimate *res* to which they point but also for how they *construe* it, and biblical stories and songs are important not merely for the truth or virtue they ultimately manifest, but the

¹⁵ On the goodness and connaturality of biblical metaphor for the human recipients of revelation, see Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 1, a. 9. On embodiment in human language and cognition, see here George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Peter Richardson, Charles M. Mueller, and Stephen Pihlaja, *Cognitive Linguistics and Religious Language: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁶ E.g., Gen 6:9; Exod 32:8; Deut 5:32; 2 Kgs 21:9; Job 31:7; Ps 1:1; 17:5; 119:133; Luke 21:8; Rom 11:11; 14:13; 2 Pet 2:15.

¹⁷ See Gary A. Anderson's volume on the growth of the "sin is debt" conception and its utilization in imagining atonement and satisfaction: *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). See also Joseph Lam, *Patterns of Sin in the Hebrew Bible: Metaphor, Culture, and the Making of a Religious Concept* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

way in which they manifest it, the priorities the story's characters assume or embody, their postures and relations and reactions, or the symbols within the story. The biblical-theological task of drawing these metaphors and stories out for our reflection about ourselves or a particular mystery is beneficial, even when it has no effect on dogmatic formulation, because it gives human creatures richer and thicker frameworks by which to understand and live the truth. This is part of the rejuvenating task and benefit of biblical theology, lending the inner dynamism of God's revelation by presenting the Bible *for* the Church's theology and life *in* the Bible's own mode.

Looking for Penance in Biblical Patterns

Our biblical theology of penance, then, can assume the sacrament's practice and dogmatic presuppositions without having to prove or reconstruct them. We can begin from the sacrament and then look backward to *see* the sacrament and its foundations enfolded in individual narratives and stories, moving from Genesis to Revelation to sketch its unfolding and ultimately its institution as a sacrament by Christ for the Church.

A practical question, of course, is where to look. How will we see the sacrament in Scripture? Naturally one would look for the elements that constitute the sacrament, but this can be complicated. The sacrament's practice as it has been developed in the Church is not directly visible in the Bible—indeed, in either testament. Jesus's own opposition to sin and occasional pronouncements of forgiveness in his own person as the divine Son (e.g., Mark 2:5) are fundamental and showcase the Christological act mediated sacramentally in the Church.¹⁸ The dominical institution is given in John 20:19–23, to be sure. But unlike baptism, we do not have clear New Testament examples of it being carried out *as* a sacrament. James 5:16 and the command to “confess your sins to one another,” coming after the promise that sick believers who ask anointing from local presbyters will be healed and “forgiven,” is significant. Yet it is at best an example of the authority conferred in the sacrament and the persons involved. This command assumes much and explains little other than promising forgiveness with the healing. We do not see the absolution which is the “form” of the sacrament, conferred by Christ through the priest's words. Paul's apostolic authority is clearly

¹⁸ Jean-Philippe Revel, *La reconciliation*, vol. 5 of *Traité des Sacrements* (Paris: Cerf, 2015), 201–10. Fastiggi shows four principles grounded in the Old Testament: (1) that sin causes alienation from God; (2) that its resolution requires conversion and repentance; (3) that conversion requires internal and external penitence; (4) that forgiveness does not necessarily remit the temporal consequences of sin.

involved in reinstating the shunned sinner in 2 Cor 2, though he does not emphasize his authority and “spirit” as heavily here as when insisting on the excommunication in 1 Cor 5:3–5. This means that, for the New Testament as well as the Old, we will have to look for types that *prefigure and anticipate* the sacrament and the grace delivered through Christ’s *ego te absolvo* in the priest.

If we cannot simply look for the form of the sacrament, we might then focus on its matter. However, as Fastiggi states: “For the Sacrament of Reconciliation, identifying the matter is a bit more complex because there is not a single sensible sign or action but several.”¹⁹ The “quasi-matter” of the sacrament, as defined at the Council of Trent (1551), is the penitent’s contrition, confession, and satisfaction.²⁰ As Aquinas expresses it, human beings take the place of what in other sacraments would be the material element, particularly as the penitent human’s words and actions seek and are met by the words and actions of the priest.²¹ Looking for episodes and institutions and other material in Scripture that prefigure the sacrament, then, requires us to look for *patterns* in postures and behaviors in the context of sin and its removal, in which a sinner cries out in penitence and hope or in which God responds to this penitence with absolution or holds back sin’s fullest penalty. Typological exegesis is often carried out by seeking meaning in signs, the things signified, and then in considering what the natures of those things might signify further.²² But we cannot follow such a model here, since those “things” which will prefigure the sacrament and illumine it spiritually are not things with natures, but events, acts, postures, and responses whose semantic and theological value is found in the relations between characters

¹⁹ Fastiggi, *Reconciliation*, 93.

²⁰ Council of Trent, sess. 14, can. 3. The Council of Florence, sess. 8 (1439), anticipated Trent in its Bull of Union with the Armenians (see Fastiggi, *Reconciliation*, 55, 93–94). Absolution formulas phrased as intercessions, where they are (or, in past times, were) the approved formula for use in the sacrament, constitute valid form as well. That the sacrament’s form is the absolution, and not the penitent’s contrition or act of satisfaction, comes as at least partial closure to debates regarding the efficient cause of absolution and reconciliation and the distinction between the virtue of penance and the sacrament. See Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, trans. and rev. Francis Courtney, SJ, Herder History of Dogma (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 155–90.

²¹ See the phrasing in *ST* III, q. 84, a. 1, resp.: “For the penitent sinner, by what he does and says [per ea quae agit et dicit], indicates that his heart has ceased from sin; similarly too the priest, by what he does and says [per ea quae agit et dicit] regarding the penitent, indicates the work of God who remits sin.”

²² Even Jeremy Holmes’s recent monograph, which is nuanced in its discussion of biblical narrative, focuses spiritual-sense exegesis on a thing’s *nature* (*Cur Deus Verba: Why the WORD Became Words* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021], 124).

and their context in the narrative of salvation. Rather, we will need to follow something like Paul's approach to typology in patterns. Paul recounts Israel's golden calf apostasy as a warning to the Corinthians, and claims: "These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us" (1 Cor 10:11). Paul derives the "spiritual sense" here from a pattern of events between God and Israel that corresponds to a pattern of events that is repeatable in the Church: liberation (from Egypt/sin), baptism (into Moses/Christ), and sustenance from spiritual food (manna/Eucharist), followed then by pride, apostasy, and destruction (1 Cor 10:1–12).

Paul calls these "types" or "patterns" (Gk. *typoi*) and says that they happened "as types" (*typikōs*) so as to become a textual warning for the Church (1 Cor 10:6, 11). Our search for penance in Scripture must likewise look for such patterns. With baptism, we can see the sacrament figured or partially figured by looking for its material element of water, and we can consider the nature of water as a drowning or cleansing agent or as a source of life from the womb until the tomb. With penance, we will best illumine the sacrament by considering biblical situations and patterns in which we see penitence and reconciliation in the context of sin and its consequences. And, since we are dealing with this sacrament in particular, its most fitting biblical figurations will occur in the context of a preexisting redemption or relationship with God analogous to baptism or the friendship with God enjoyed by the baptized. Some figurations will occur in narrative, and we will be able to see the main elements of confession, pardon, and penance explicit or implicit in a sequence of events. We can "see" in a narrative framework, and against the backdrop of very grave failure, the mediation of forgiveness through God's representatives in Nathan's rebuke and pronouncement of forgiveness to David (2 Sam 12:13–14). At other points we will see the elements expressed in a non-narrative context. In the Psalter, for instance, we are often left not knowing the result of a prayer for forgiveness or the specific sin in view, but we can "see" the figure of the penitent in the psalmist's posture, note the deliverance he expected and asked of his merciful God, and note also what his inspired words assume regarding sin's penalties and atonement. The institutions of Israel's purificatory and reparation offerings, likewise, can illumine vividly the logic of sin, atonement, and communal reconciliation that are fulfilled in Christ and offered to the faithful in the sacrament.²³ And didactic biblical material, of course, can speak directly or theoretically about sin and its removal. By examining patterns of sin, penance, and restoration in

²³ Aquinas points to the reparation offering in Lev 5:15–16 (5:17–18 in the King James Version and many English versions) in particular: *ST* III, q. 84, a. 7, ad 2.

the stories, songs, and instruction of the Bible, we can reflect through them on God's great mercy and be shaped in our self-understanding as penitents or as priests in the confessional.

Seeing Penance in the Sin of Cain

After discussing our aims and approach, it is fitting to offer a sample exegesis, and I will do so with a text from the Old Testament: the sin of Cain and its aftermath in Gen 4:1–16. This text is rarely referenced in discussions of penance.²⁴ Yet it prefigures or parallels many elements of the sacrament, though it does not prefigure the sacrament as fully as others (e.g., David's sin, which includes rebuke, confession, absolution through a mediator, and temporal penalty). The story of Cain, on many readings, narrates the beginnings of civilization as "ruled and governed by sin," beginning with the fratricide of Cain and followed by the "anti-genealogy" of Cain's successful but violent heirs.²⁵ The protology in Gen 1–11 certainly does show us the beginnings that set in motion the story of human history. However, it does not do *only* this. The narrative does not merely sweep from creation to the state of the world in Abraham's day: it stops at points to dwell on individuals in their relations to one another and to God. Here, the narrative slows not only to show us the increase of sin with Cain's fratricide but also to showcase Cain's interaction with God regarding the sin and God's assignment of punishment, as well as God's continued care and protection for Cain.²⁶ This invites us to slow down as readers and take note not merely of the historical

²⁴ Most modern books on penance omit this passage entirely. In the Septuagint, when Cain's offering is rejected, God intervenes by indicating Cain's error and says, "Be silent!" In *De paenitentia* 2.104, Ambrose uses this as support for prohibiting those in grave sin from using the sacraments before completing their penance, as does John Chrysostom in Homily 3, no.2.

²⁵ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 70–71; see also Robert B. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986): 595–608. Leon R. Kass points to the natural rivalry between siblings "further accentuated" in the narrative by the differences in their occupations and the types of civilization they represent (*The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006], 129 [127–32 more broadly]). One tradition even reads Cain and his line as demonic, conceived by Satan and not Adam, though this tradition appears to be very late (Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001], 89–92).

²⁶ See Hieronymus Horn, *Anfänge, die Geschichte Schrieben: Das Buch Genesis (1–11) neu Kommentiert* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2013), 87.

effects of Cain's sin but also of his interactions with his brother and with God and what wisdom we gain from it regarding human sin and God's merciful justice. Reading the episode in light of the sacrament of reconciliation, we will be able then to consider ourselves and our own sin through the figure of Cain and in light of God's treatment of him.

Cain's sin is narrated at verse 8: "Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out in the field.' When they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him."²⁷ This is a great violation of the natural law, aggravated indeed by the murderer's and victim's close consanguinity. But to consider this sin and its aftermath in terms of this sacrament, we should step back to consider the conditions in which it was committed. This is not merely a great crime. It is a great crime against God's created order despite Cain's preexisting relationship of fealty and benefaction with God. Cain and Abel's parents, Adam and Eve, retain faith in the Lord, as implied by Eve's naming of Cain (v. 1). And Adam and Eve have, with some apparent success, passed their faith and relationship with God to their children. According to the text, Cain first, then Abel following, makes an offering or "gift" of homage (Heb. *minḥāb*) to the Lord (v. 3). Cain is aware of a duty to make offerings in thanksgiving and praise to God.

Further, Cain's relationship with God includes an awareness of sin and of the duty to avoid it. There is nothing explicit in the language to indicate that sin is the *cause* for him to make this offering; it appears simply to be a thank-offering. But when Cain is dejected because he knows God has accepted Abel's offering but not his own (v. 5), God intervenes to correct Cain for his misdirected anger ("Why are you angry?"; v. 6) and redirects his attention to the amendment of his future behavior. "If you act rightly, you will be accepted; but if not, sin lies in wait at the door: its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it" (v. 7). This is a difficult verse to make sense of in the extant Hebrew, and there are a number of interpretive possibilities due to its dense phrasing.²⁸ Most translations, however, understand the context to

²⁷ Quoted translations are all from the New American Bible Revised Edition unless otherwise noted.

²⁸ The second half of the verse, which sounds almost like a maxim, can be taken to speak of a desire or urge *for* "it" or "him" (the masculine pronoun does not match the feminine noun for "sin") or the desire that "it" or "he" has *for* Cain, and the line about Cain ruling over "it" (or "him") might in context be interpreted as a command or as an indicative statement assuring Cain of his abilities. In the first half of the verse, is sin personified as waiting at the "opening" like a robber (with the feminine noun *ḥattā't* personified as a masculine participle *rōbēš*) or is some robber crouching at the "opening of sin"? And what is promised if Cain does well? Is it that he will receive something, that he himself will be received, that he can "lift" his head in pride or that something or

indicate that this statement rebukes and instructs Cain, similar to the New American Bible Revised Edition quoted just above.²⁹

Vulgate: If you do well, won't you receive? And if you do wrongly, will not sin will be right there at the door? But its desire will be under you, and you will rule over it. (trans. mine).

New Revised Standard Version: If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.³⁰

New English Translation: Is it not true that if you do what is right, you will be fine? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. It desires to dominate you, but you must subdue it.

New Jerusalem Bible: If you are doing right, surely you ought to hold your head high! But if you are not doing right, Sin is crouching at the door hungry to get you. You can still master him.

Jewish Publication Society Tanakh: Surely, if you do right, / There is uplift. / But if you do not do right / Sin crouches at the door; / Its urge is toward you, / Yet you can be its master.

On any of these translations, we see in Cain's relationship with God before Abel's murder an assumed moral code that affects one's standing in God's favor and the acceptability of one's offerings.³¹ God is admonishing Cain on the basis of a moral law which he should know he has somehow transgressed.

In just a few verses of background we learn that Cain wants to be pious,

someone else (his guilt?) can be "lifted" or "borne" away? Kass even suggests that the "lifting" may rather be the *subject* of "doing well," in this case referring to Cain's concern with sacrifices: "Whether the lifting [up of offerings] does well or does not well, sin coucheth at the door" (*Beginning of Wisdom*, 139n21).

²⁹ The Septuagint (and its exact quotation in, e.g., 1 Clem 4:4) interprets the verse as God's explanation of how Cain erred, indicating that Cain "sinned" (*hēmartēs*) because he offered the sacrifice rightly (*orthōs prosenenkēs*) but failed to divide it rightly (*orthōs de mē dielēs*).

³⁰ The English Standard Version and Revised Standard Version are substantially identical to the NRSV—the KJV as well, excepting "his" and "him" (rather than "it") pronouns.

³¹ I do not therefore find a "seeming capriciousness" on God's part in rejecting Cain's offering. The narrative gives little to identify as the specific reason Cain's offering was rejected, yet the scene assumes that Cain should know or be able to recognize

even if his love of God is imperfect or even servile. He at least wants to be accepted, whether he wants to do what is required to be accepted or not. In this, as we consider our own post-baptismal sin through Cain's story, we can see a great similarity between us and this child of God. We have a natural—and by our baptismal grace, also a supernatural—longing to be accepted before God. As with Cain, too, God intervenes to call us to live justly through the Scriptures and the Church, warning us that sin is like a robber whom we must resist and whose near occasion we must avoid. Indeed, beyond Cain, we have the promise that we will dominate over sin, since it is under the Church's foot that God will, on the last day, finally "crush Satan" (Rom 16:20).

Before God's final victory, however, we have the potential to be like Cain in mortal sin. The horror we feel when we read Cain's slaughter of Abel, and this right after God has intervened to recall Cain to act with justice, should be felt also when we consider any mortal sin. Cain *knows* right and wrong, and he is reminded of it again by God in response to his feeling dejected. But Cain's response to God's call to be free from sin is to throw himself more firmly into its power. Cain is not a tragic figure with a fatal flaw or blind spot. He is knowledgeable and culpable, and his act is premeditated and willful. The fratricide is narrated very briefly, yet in a succession of three verbs: (1) Cain *spoke* to Abel to invite him into the open field, away from parents or other eyes; (2) Cain *attacked* (literally "rose up against") Abel while they were there; (3) and he *killed* him (v. 8). The succession underscores Cain's continued willfulness in the deed, as the repeated description of Abel as "his brother" lends pathos to our reading.³² Cain had the ability, as God insisted, to shun sin and not let it hold sway over him. But instead he let his anger against Abel take shape in a deliberate plan, chose to invite Abel to the field, chose—here not in the heat of passion but with calculation—to attack him and ultimately killed him.

If we step back to consider this within biblical theology more broadly, we

a deficiency in his offering or in himself that could cause such an outcome (despite Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation [Atlanta: John Knox, 1982], 57.)

³² Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 106: "The awfulness [*sic*] of the deed is accentuated by the stark brevity of the description and the twice-repeated 'his brother.'" Compare also Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 95: "It is as though the author is saying that what he tells is too frightful for words, that brother should slay brother, and that so soon after both had made their offerings to the same God." One notes a comparable heightening of pathos in the binding of Isaac, where God, the narrator, and the characters name Abraham as "father" and Isaac as "son" in nearly every verse before God intervenes to stop the killing (Gen 22:2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10).

can see narrativized here a depiction of sin paralleled in other, more theoretical passages. For one, we can consider the workings of sin within Cain and within the human person. Cain's grave sin stems from within, beginning with his dejection at not being accepted and, in response to God's good rebuke, proceeds by a sequence of choices to lure away and kill his brother. In James's terms, anger and jealousy within Cain seduce his will, "conceive" sin, and then bring forth death—both a spiritual death for Cain in this sin and the biological death of his brother (Jas 1:14–15).³³ One sees the fittingness of Jesus's teaching of the fifth commandment that focuses interiorly on anger, as the fruit of murder is borne by roots sown from the seeds of anger and bitterness (Matt 5:21–22; cf. 15:19; Rom 3:13–15; Eph 4:31). Moreover, we can see here Paul's depiction of sin's abuse of God's law to spur on more sinning. As he curves in on himself, sin and covetousness that are already "within" Cain turn God's good rebuke into a goad propelling Cain toward greater iniquity (Rom 7:5, 7–12; cf. 1 Cor 15:56). Cain's mokey jealousy and broodiness show that anger is already in his heart. And Cain does not hear God's rebuke as a positive call to do right and seek God's face; instead, he hears God's correction of himself only in comparison with God's approval of his brother. It is God's good rebuke that occasions Cain's greater turn to evil.

Further, if we follow the reference to Cain in 1 John, we find Cain to be an archetype of one who sins against the second table of the law. In Christ, we are assured that we have passed from death to life "because we love our brothers," but "everyone who hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:14–15). "We should love one another, unlike Cain who belonged to the evil one and slaughtered his brother" (1 John 3:11–12). But for John, such hatred is manifested not only in equally heinous acts of murder, but in the willful refusal of compassion for those with material needs (1 John 3:17). The opposite of brotherly love is brotherly murder. For 1 John, all acts of uncharity toward one's brethren are compared to the sin of Cain, because they are sins against the life and dignity of those whom baptism has made our brothers and sisters. And how many of them are committed out of jealousy and strife, considering our sin or disfavor in relation to our neighbors,

³³ The feminine image of desire seducing the will and then giving birth in James calls to mind an intriguing parallel between sin in 4:7 and Eve in 3:16. The word for "urge" or "desire" in 4:7 is *tašūqāh*, a rare term in the Hebrew Bible, its only other occurrences being Song 7:11 and the curse that Eve's "desire" will be for her husband in Gen 3:16, which parallels 4:7 in structure and vocabulary. The curse of Eve states, woodenly: "toward [el] your husband is [or will be] your desire [*tašūqāh*], and he [pronoun] will rule [*yimšāl*] over [*bə*, "in"] you." God's words to Cain are, woodenly: "toward [el] you is [or will be] its desire [*tašūqāh*], and you [pronoun] will rule [*timšāl*] over [*bə*, "in"] it."

whom we then try to best or defeat, rather than in relation to God whom we should please by repenting?³⁴

If Cain can serve here as a figure of post-baptismal sinning, and his fratricide a figure of sins against our brothers and sisters, we should consider the words and deeds of the other main character in this story: God. The first thing we see in the text—and perhaps the most fundamental as we reflect on the Sacrament of Penance—is God’s initiative to address and interact with the sinner. God *comes to speak* to Cain immediately. The Hebrew text places these two words in immediate sequence: *wayyahargēhū wayyō’mēr*—“And he killed him. And he [the Lord] said . . .” If Cain’s response to God’s correction was to lure Abel away, God’s response to the murder is to seek and address Cain. If sin causes separation or alienation, God’s response is to close the distance and invite sinners to re-engage their relationship with God. At this point in Scripture’s narrative, this has been God’s response to every human sin. When Adam hid, God’s response was to ask: “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9). Now that Cain has killed Abel, God asks Cain: “Where is your brother Abel?” (4:9). Assuming that God knows the answer to both questions, we should see God’s intention in posing them to be an invitation to confess. God’s questions point to the sin and the person affected, Adam himself (“Where are *you*?”) after he has brought death on himself and, here, Abel (“Where is your *brother*”), whose life has been unjustly taken. God puts Cain in a position with few options: to confess his sin, lie, or attempt to evade. Cain, like Adam, evades. As with Adam (“Have you eaten from the tree?”; 3:12), God will not leave the sin unaddressed, but accuses Cain directly: “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground!” (4:10).

Cain refused to accuse himself before God, so God now accuses Cain. Like the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, this sin cries out to God and demands to be condemned and requited (Gen 18:20–21). And it is: the earth which Cain has defiled with Abel’s blood will work against him in his farming, and Cain will now be a “wanderer” with no home in the land (4:11–12). Yet the rationale for which God accuses Cain is not, it appears, mere just deserts or even exacting vengeance for the slain. Cain’s penalty for fratricide here does not follow the *talio* explicitly demanded for the shedding of human blood: “The land can have no expiation for the blood shed on it except through the

³⁴ I have drawn on 1 John here, but others have made the same point based on the structure of the Genesis narrative as it stands. Cf. David W. Cotter, OSB, *Genesis*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2003), 42: “The text . . . implies that all sin is somehow fratricide.” Similarly Vawter, *On Genesis*, 95: “Cain’s sin . . . is intended to represent a paradigm of the human condition as it was in the Yahwist’s time and unfortunately as it has remained thereafter.”

blood of the one who shed it" (Num 35:33; cf. Gen 9:6; Exod 21:23–25). In fact, God makes it clear that he wants Cain *not* to die. Cain moans that his punishment is great and that, in his wandering, "anyone may kill me" (4:14). Cain knows the danger that the loss of a settled home poses and expects that God's punishment is subtly aimed at exposing Cain to mortal danger. But God insists that this is not the case. God again intervenes to correct and assure Cain that God will avenge Cain's death sevenfold on anyone who should slay him in the open country. Furthermore, God also takes action to prevent his slaughter: "The LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one would kill him at sight" (v. 15). Precisely what this "mark" or "sign" (Heb. *'ôl*) was is unclear.³⁵ The mark's function and what that implies about God and Cain's penalty are the salient points here: its purpose is to protect Cain's life.³⁶

God wants Cain to bear this penalty, but not to die from it. He is cast out, punished, and yet amid the rest of humanity he retains a protection that is meant to help him live and thus to continue bearing this penalty. Considering this historically and literarily as an independent episode, Gerhard von Rad calls this perhaps "the most enigmatic part of the narrative."³⁷ Some suggest that this is a feature of the story's origin as an etiology for the Kenites, nomadic wanderers not among Israel who were yet worshipers of the Lord.³⁸ Others explain Cain's retaining his life by suggesting that Cain's guilt is mitigated by the fact that, as none have yet died in the Genesis narrative, Cain could not have truly desired to kill Abel or known that his blow would have this effect.³⁹ Considering this in the light of the truth we already know to be revealed to the Church about sin and penance, we can see rather a God who punishes sin with fitting consequences and yet "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezek 33:11). God's imposed consequences are *fitting*. Cain will wander in the open country, just as he lured Abel into the open country;

³⁵ The opinions preserved in the midrash *Genesis Rabbah* 22.12 already include the views that God caused the sun to shine for Cain (as a "sign" giving assurance of God's promise), gave Cain leprosy, gave Cain a dog, or made a conspicuous horn grow out of his body.

³⁶ See also Kass, *Beginning of Wisdom*, 144; Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 35; Vawter, *On Genesis*, 97. Other interpretations read the mark as a kind of shameful brand given as a punishment.

³⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. and ed. W. L. Jenkins, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 109.

³⁸ See von Rad, *Genesis*, 107–8; Vawter, *On Genesis*, 93–94.

³⁹ E.g., Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, Heritage of Biblical Israel 1 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), 31.

Cain has sinned against his family and will now be bereft of that family's home; and the ground which he defiled with Abel's blood will now work against him when he comes to till it. Yet the punishment is not *final*. Cain's murder is not matched with his own death. His banishment will bereave him of family and home, but he settles "east of Eden" and begins a new family (Gen 4:17–24). And although he departs from "the LORD's presence" (v. 16), God's protective mark goes with him, as does the blessing of fertility.

As with Adam and Eve, there are consequences for sin. And those consequences not only are set in motion in the individual who sinned but also take hold in the still young human race. Adam's sin brings mortality into the world for all Adam's heirs (Rom 5:12–14). Cain's sin launches his family line on a trajectory of success marred by wrath and violence (Gen 4:17–24). Yet despite these sins' historic ramifications, in both stories we see a God who intervenes to preserve the one who sinned, presumably in hopes that they will learn repentance through God's punishment and discipline. God promises Adam's line a redeemer (3:15), provides for them in their shame as they depart from the garden (3:21), and continues to fulfill in them his own pronounced "blessing" of offspring rather than annihilating them (1:28). Cain, too, is preserved in bearing his banishment and granted the blessing of offspring. Likewise, in both stories, we see God intervene directly following the sin to encounter the sinner and invite them to confess, renew their relationship with God, and receive the live-giving "medicine" of penance.⁴⁰ One recalls Paul's statement about divine discipline: God may leave outsiders to the full penalty of their sins at the judgment, but for the people who in Christ are his own he disciplines them and calls them to penance so that they "will not be condemned along with the world" (1 Cor 11:32). Unlike Sodom and Gomorrah, whose sin also cried out to God, Cain will receive a fitting penance rather than full punishment, and thus a further opportunity to repent and be reconciled to God.

All of this can inform our imagination as we consider our own sins. How much more serious might our nightly examen be if we consider all sins against our brethren as, at heart, fratricide? And how much more should Cain's mitigated penalty, despite his great sin, show us God's mercy and desire for the life and repentance of the lost (Luke 5:32)? Reflecting on Cain's penalty, too, can encourage us in fulfilling our penances and confessing our sins in hope, knowing that the God who imposes consequences for sin does so not merely to punish or exact justice but to instruct and reform us. God's rebukes are discipline (Ps 39:11/12; Heb 12:7–11).

⁴⁰ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 15.7.

In so many of these ways we are like Cain and can meditate on this episode to inform us about the nature and danger of our sin, God's fitting penalties for sin, and his desire that we bear those penalties for our own good as penances rather than be destroyed for our transgressions. However, we must consider an important point at which this story must instruct us only by counter-example. God promises protection for Cain as he imposes consequences for his sin, but he pronounces no *absolution*. Correspondingly, God's invitation to confession does not appear to be met with sincere confession or *contrition* on Cain's part. There is a possibility that Cain's lament in Gen 4:13 should be translated, "My guilt is too great to be forgiven." The Vulgate and Septuagint both render the Hebrew this way.⁴¹ Indeed, interpretations of Cain as the Bible's first penitent, though not a majority interpretation, go back at least to the time of the Rabbis (*Genesis Rabbah* 22.13). Yet, if Cain is contrite, his contrition is far from perfect, as he laments the enormity of his guilt but proceeds to complain about the pains of his imposed penalty (Gen 4:13–14). Moreover, this lamentation comes only after God tells Cain that his sin is known and will be punished (vv. 10–12).

Cain fails to accuse himself before God. We in penance are called to anticipate God's judgment and accusation against us—to quote Paul's words about self-examination and penance again: "If we judged ourselves, we would not be judged" (1 Cor 11:31; NRSV). God has to go after Cain and invite him to confess, and even then Cain is evasive. For all who have run from confession, this image powerfully reminds us of the shepherd who will seek out and call the stray: to him no soul is expendable; each is worth pursuing and saving (Luke 15:1–7). But if God's response even to Cain's failure shows us his mercy and goodness, Cain's example is a bad one for us. When God invites Cain to confess and turn again toward the Lord, Cain turns away. He does not fling himself guilty and self-exposed upon God's mercy in hope and contrition. He accepts his punishment, his penance, reluctantly. And his acceptance is not truly contrite, and God pronounces no forgiveness here.

The story of Cain shows us a grave sin committed by one who already had a relationship with God, sin's temporal consequences, and God's invitation to confess one's sin and be reconciled. All of this gives us fodder for prayer and meditation and self-examination in the context of our post-baptismal

⁴¹ Sarna, for one, reads Cain's words in vv. 13–14 in a contrite and plaintive light and suggests also the possibility of rendering v. 13 as a pleading question: "Is my sin too great to be forgiven?" (*JPS Torah Commentary*, 34). John H. Sailhamer argues that God's merciful response itself implies that Cain is repentant in v. 13 (*The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 114).

sinning and our encounter with God in penance. We should also note that the sweet moment in which God's absolution meets our contrition in confession is missing. What might have happened had Cain confessed with sincere contrition? Would God have forgiven his sin and have imposed these same penalties to amend for its temporal consequences, as when God forgave Israel or David and yet still required a fitting but mitigated penalty for their sins?⁴² The text leaves the fate of Cain's soul unknown, and thus it leaves our biblical-theological investigation with an implicit command: "run to confession." For all that Cain is like us and can be a figure for us in our meditation, we should not be like Cain. We should anticipate God's judgment and accusation of our sin by accusing ourselves before the Lord, knowing his mercy and love—offered more wonderfully in the Church through the merits of Christ. The grace of the Spirit within and the preached word name and rebuke our sins. And we should consider the open confession times and the priest's email or office number as invitations to come and receive what Cain avoided. To enter the confessional of our own free will, to approach God in self-accusation, is to re-engage the relationship that our sin ruptured. Our penances, whether in the form of prayers or devotions or acts of charity for our neighbors, fittingly match our Cain-like sins of insufficient worship and malice toward our brethren. Penance allows us to turn toward the God who turns toward us and to receive his graces in absolution for our past and in preservation for our future, that as we judge ourselves and receive God's discipline we might not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor 11:31–32). And as we approach in the humility and contrition that Cain lacked, we receive what Cain did not receive: God's sweet word of absolution, the gift of forgiveness. N·V

⁴² See Num 14:20–23 and 2 Sam 12:13–14.