

THE SYRIAC MILIEU OF THE QURAN:
THE RECASTING OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

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5. Jewish Cain, Muslim Abel¹

5.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined a Quranic retelling of a Hebrew Bible narrative which Geiger considered to be an exception to the rule in that it exhibited Christian influence. Having established that the Quranic episode of Adam's fall is in fact closer to the (Syriac) Christian tradition than Geiger believed, I now turn to study stories that to Geiger were evidently of a Jewish origin. In this chapter as well as the following ones I will argue that the Syriac Christian tradition helps illuminate these retellings too. To do so I will look at three examples, the first of which is the Cain and Abel story.

Within the Syriac tradition I shall focus primarily on dramatic poems which expand on Biblical themes and range from formal dialogues in alternating stanzas to dramatized narratives which include dialogue and homiletic material.² That the Quran should be aware of them is not entirely surprising bearing in mind their use in liturgy and wide audience.³ Indeed the Qur'ānic retellings and the Syriac poems display similarities with regard to motifs, literary form, lexical use, and typological function.

5.2. The texts

In Genesis 4 we read as follows:

(1) Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying: "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord". (2) Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. (3) In the course of time Cain

¹ An early version of this chapter was presented at the X Symposium Syriacum, Granada, September 2008.

² S. Brock, "Dramatic Dialogue Poems", in H. J. W. Drijvers *et al.* (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984* (Rome, 1987), 135-47; *id.*, "Syriac Dialogue Poems: Marginalia to a Recent Edition", *Le Muséon* 97 (1984): 29-58.

³ For the wide diffusion of these homilies, see L. Van Rompay, "The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation", in M. Sæbø (ed.) *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (Göttingen, 1996), 641; K. Upson-Saia, "Caught in a Compromising Position: The Biblical Exegesis and Characterization of Biblical Protagonists in the Syriac Dialogue Hymns", *Hugoye* 9.2 (2006).

brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, (4) and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, (5) but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. (6) The Lord said to Cain: “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? (7) 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”. (8) Cain said to his brother Abel, and when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. (9) Then the Lord said to Cain: “Where is your brother Abel?” He said: “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (10) And the Lord said: “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! (11) And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. (12) When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth”. (13) Cain said to the Lord: “My punishment is greater than I can bear! (14) Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me”. (15) Then the Lord said to him: “Therefore whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance”. And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. (16) Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.⁴

In the Quran we read:

(27) Recite to them the story of the two sons of Adam truthfully when they offered an offering (*qarrabā qurbānan*) and it was accepted (*fa-tuqubbila*) from one of them and was not accepted (*wa-lam yutaqabbal*) from the other. [The one whose offering was not accepted] said: “I will surely kill you (*la-aqtulannaka*)”. [His brother] said: “Allah accepts [offerings] only from the God-fearing. (28) If you extend your hand against me to kill me (*la-in basatta ilayya yadaka li-taqtulanī*), I will not extend my hand against you to kill you. Indeed I fear God, the Lord of all. (29) Indeed I desire (*innī urīdu*)⁵ that you bear my sin and your sin (*an tabū’a bi-ithmī wa-ithmika*)⁶ so that you become one of the

⁴ NRSV slightly adapted to fit the Hebrew text.

⁵ The exegetes were troubled by Abel’s wish that Cain sin (See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 11:207). An interesting yet artificial solution was to read *annā urīdu* (“How could I wish...”) instead of *innī urīdu* (“I wish...”) which leaves the *rasm* intact, changing only the vocalization; al-Khaṭīb, *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt*, 2:258.

⁶ Abel’s utterance is problematic. What is his own sin and why should Cain bear it? In al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 8:330-33, the following explanations are cited: that Cain bear the sin of killing Abel in addition to

inhabitants of the Fire; that is the reward of the evildoers (*al-zālimīna*)” (30) But his soul incited him to kill his brother so he killed him and thus became one of the lost. (31) Then Allah sent a raven digging up the earth (*yabḥathu fī l-arḍi*) in order to show him how to conceal his brother’s corpse (*li-yuriyahu kayfa yuwārī saw’ata akhīhi*).⁷ He said: “Woe is me. Am I unable to be like this raven and conceal my brother’s corpse?” He then became one of those who pity themselves (*fa-aṣbaḥa mina l-nādimīna*).⁸ (32) On account of this

his other sins, taking *ithmī* as *ithm qatlī*, that Cain bear Abel’s sin in addition to his own sin in murdering his brother. The latter approach is fine-tuned in al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:658-59, where the idea is that Cain should bear his own sin in killing Abel and the equivalent of Abel’s sin were he to kill Cain, the rationale for this being that the instigator is responsible for the defensive actions of the attacked party. Another interpretation cited in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 11:207, is based on a tradition that on the day of resurrection wrongdoers who will not be able to appease those whom they wronged otherwise will take some of their sins off their hands. See also al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi’*, 7:414-15. The Quranic view of personal responsibility is not entirely clear. Whereas several verses repeat that “no bearer of burdens shall bear another’s burden” (Q 6:164, Q 17:15, Q 35:18, Q 39:7, Q 53:38), other verses present a murkier state of affairs. In Q 16:25, the unbelievers are said to carry their own burdens fully on the day of resurrection as well as “some of the burdens of those that they lead astray without any knowledge”. In Q 29:12-13, the unbelievers attempt to seduce the believers to join them with a promise to bear their sins. The Quran denies that they shall bear any of the believers’ sins and then adds: “They shall certainly carry their loads and other loads along with their loads...”. What these other loads are remains unspecified. It seems that Q 5:29 is another example of a more complicated concept of responsibility.

⁷ The meaning of *saw’a* is debated. It might be best to understand it as “any disgracing action or thing”; see Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1:1458. Following the context some exegetes understand it as “corpse” (*jīfa*). Others render it as “genitals” (*’awra*); see, e.g., Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 11:209. Though the exegetes do not spell it out, the source for the genitals interpretation is in a striking parallel passage in Q 7:20-27. There Satan leads Adam and Eve astray in order to “to reveal (*li-yubdiya*) to them that which was hidden (*wūriya*) from them of their shameful parts (*saw’ātihimā*)” (Q 7:20). Addressing its audience, the Quran reminds the children of Adam that God sent down to them “a garment to hide your shameful parts (*libāsan yuwārī saw’ātikum*) and feathers” (Q 7:26). The Quran draws the lesson to be learned from this story: “Children of Adam! Let not Satan tempt you as he brought your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their garments to show them their shameful parts (*li-yuriyahumā saw’ātihimā*)” (Q 7:27). The only other passage in which *saw’a* occurs is Q 20:121, again with reference to Adam and Eve’s nakedness. Likewise, *w-r-y* in the third form is used only in these two stories. The use of similar language in both narratives suggests that the language and themes of the one may have influenced the other. Already in the Biblical text the two stories which appear in consecutive chapters parallel each other in several ways. Compare, for example, God’s curse of Eve, “[...] yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16), with His consolation to Cain, “[...] its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Genesis 4:7); God’s questions to Adam and Eve, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9) and “What is this that you have done?” (Genesis 3:13), with His questions to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” and “What have you done?” (Genesis 4:9-10); and the curse concerning the ground in Genesis 3:17 with that in Genesis 4:11. It is not therefore surprising that in post-Biblical times the similarities between the two episodes continued to grow. Q 5:31 might reflect another instance of this process. In a mirror image of the Adam and Eve story in which a snake brought about their nakedness which required that God help them cover it, in the retelling of the Cain and Abel story a raven sent by God teaches Cain how to cover his brother’s nakedness/corpse. Whether the influence was restricted to phraseology or perhaps accounts for the origin of the burial motif in the Cain story remains to be seen (see also Genesis 3:19: “[...] until you return to the ground... you are dust and to dust you shall return”). An interesting precedent for the Quranic linking of Genesis 3 and 4 is found in the *Syriac Life of Abel* where in his plea to Cain, Abel says: “by Him who stripped Adam of the glory he was clothed in, do not take off from my limbs my clothes and reveal to the sun in the sky the nakedness (*pursāyā*) of my youth”; S. Brock, “A Syriac Life of Abel”, *Le Muséon* 87 (1974): 476. Though *pursāyā* is not found in the Peshitta to Genesis 3, it is used to describe Adam and Eve’s nakedness in later Syriac texts (see, e.g. Ephrem’s *Commentary on Genesis* 2.21-22 and 27). Interestingly, one of the Arabic words used to gloss *pursāyā* is *saw’a*; Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 2:3277.

⁸ For this translation of *nādimīna*, see the discussion below.

(*min ajli dhālika*) We decreed to the Children of Israel (*katabnā 'alā banī isrā'īla*) that whoever kills a soul – not [in retaliation for another] soul nor for corruption in the land⁹ – shall be as if he killed all mankind; and whoever gives life to a soul shall be as if he gave life to all mankind. Our messengers have already come to them with clear signs, but many of them indeed commit afterwards excesses in the land (Q 5:27-32).¹⁰

The Quran departs from the Biblical version in several ways. Many details are omitted: the protagonists are simply “the two sons of Adam” (*ibnay ādama*) and no further names are given;¹¹ their occupations and specific offerings are not mentioned; the dialogue between God and Cain is lacking and so on. But omissions of this kind are characteristic of Quranic retellings, which after all were trying to drive home a point rather than repeat stories in their entirety.

More interesting are those elements of the plot which are not found in the Bible. Striking are the dialogue between the brothers in which Abel presents an extremely passive approach,¹² the burial scene and the decree which follows the story. Can these departures from the Biblical story tell us whence the Quran took its version?

⁹ The translation follows the predominant reading *aw fasādin*. According to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's reading *aw fasādan*, the verse should be rendered “[...] that whoever kills a soul – not [in retaliation for another] soul – or [commits] corruption in the land shall be as if he killed all mankind”; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, 7:429, and al-Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 2:264.

¹⁰ Studies devoted to this episode in the Quran, primarily in light of later Islamic tradition, include W. Bork-Qaysieh, *Die Geschichte von Kain und Abel (Hābīl wa-Qābīl) in der sunnitisch-islamischen Überlieferung* (Berlin, 1993), and I. Zilio-Grandi, “La figure de Caïn dans le Coran”, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 216 (1990): 31-85.

¹¹ Whereas the vast majority of exegetes recognized the story of Cain and Abel in this passage, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728) and al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 723f) both argue that the two protagonists were not Adam's immediate sons, but rather were two Israelites, who were like all of humanity children of Adam. The motivation for this interpretation is found in v. 32, where God decrees to the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul shall be as if he killed all mankind. If the consequences of the sin affect the Children of Israel, it must have been committed by Israelites. Moreover, the story is related with the intent of highlighting Israelite jealousy; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 8:324-25; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 11:204. As we shall see later, in the Christian tradition Cain is said to be the father of the Jews.

¹² My characterization of the Quranic Abel as passive refers only to the fact that he abstained from physically defending himself. Spiritually, his behavior was brave and full of strength. I use passivity in a similar manner to describe Abel's conduct according to the Syriac sources.

5.3. Jewish origin?

To Geiger it is evident that the Quranic retelling “is depicted for us quite in its Jewish colours”, by which he means that the story follows rabbinic traditions.¹³ His conclusion is based on three parallels, though closer scrutiny suggests that the matter is more complicated than he assumes. Let us first examine the parallels he adduces.

5.3.1. The dialogue

The first concerns the dialogue held between the brothers before the murder. Non-existent in Genesis, such a dialogue is found in the Quran (vv. 27-29) and the Palestinian Targums. But as Geiger himself concedes “the matter of the conversation is given so differently in each case that we do not consider it worthwhile to compare the two passages more closely”.¹⁴ We shall return to examine the dialogues shortly.

5.3.2. The raven

The second parallel is shows greater similarity of detail and concerns the Quranic embellishment that Cain learned how to bury Abel by observing the practice of a raven (v. 31). A similar motif is recorded in a few rabbinic texts.¹⁵ Geiger cites *PRE* 21:

Adam and his helpmate were sitting and weeping and mourning for him, and they did not know what to do with Abel, for they were unaccustomed to burial. A raven, one of whose fellow birds had died, came, took its fellow, dug in the earth and buried it before their eyes. Adam said: “Like this raven I will act”. He took the corpse of Abel and dug in the earth and buried it. The Holy One, blessed be He, gave a good reward to the ravens in this

¹³ Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 80. His arguments are reproduced in Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur’ān*, 62-66. For an apologetic yet at times useful response, see M. S. M. Saifullah *et al.*, “On the Sources of the Story of Cain & Abel in the Qur’an”, available online at <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Sources/BBCandA.html>

¹⁴ Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 80.

¹⁵ The most comprehensive studies of this motif are H. P. Rüger, “Das Begräbnis Abels: Zur Vorlage von Sure 5,31”, *Biblische Notizen* 14 (1981): 37-45, and Ch. Böttrich, “*Die Vögel des Himmels haben ihn begraben*”: Überlieferungen zu Abels Bestattung und zur Ätiologie des Grabes (Göttingen, 1995).

world. What reward did He give them? When they bear their young and see that they are white they flee from them, thinking that they are the offspring of a serpent, and the Holy One, blessed be He, gives them their sustenance without lack. Moreover, they call out that rain should be given upon the earth, and the Holy One, blessed be He, answers them, as it is said: “He gives to the beast its food, and to the young ravens which cry”.¹⁶

When Geiger wrote his study, it was still possible to believe *PRE* to be pre-Islamic. However, since then it has been demonstrated that *PRE* is clearly a post-Quranic midrash which at times reflects Islamic traditions so that we can no longer be sure which tradition influenced the other in this case.¹⁷

Other scholars traced the Quranic motif to the *Tanḥuma*.¹⁸ In *Tanḥuma* Bereshit 10 we read:

After Cain slew Abel, he [=Abel] was cast to the ground and Cain did not know what to do. Thereupon, the Holy One, blessed be He, summoned for him two clean birds and one of them killed the other, dug with its talons and buried it. Cain learned from it what to do. He dug [a grave] and buried Abel. It is because of this that birds are privileged to have their blood covered.¹⁹

As in the Quran, in this version it is Cain who buries Abel not Adam. Unlike the Quran which mentions a raven, in the *Tanḥuma* we find “two pure birds”. Their purity is noted presumably in preparation for their reward, the covering of their blood with soil,

¹⁶ Geiger, *Judaism*, 80. ET adapted from G. Friedlander, *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York, 1981), 156-67. It should be noted that earlier in the same chapter we are told that Cain dug and buried Abel’s body in the ground so as to conceal his sin, though in the Yalqut’s quotation from *PRE* he hides it in the field without digging.

¹⁷ For the provenance of *PRE* in eighth or ninth-century Palestine and its awareness of Islamic legends, see chapter 2.1. That this is the case in the ravens tradition is assumed in V. Aptowitz, *Kain und Abel in der Agada, den Apokryphen, der hellenistischen, christlichen und muhamedanischen Literature* (Vienna, 1922), 54. Cf. Böttrich, “*Die Vögel des Himmels haben ihn begraben*”, 53-56, where it is argued that other reasons besides Islamic influence may have caused the raven to enter the Cain legend.

¹⁸ See Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes*, 18. His reasoning in preferring the *Tanḥuma* over *PRE* was based on content rather than on issues of dating. See also Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen*, 86, and D. Masson, *Monothéisme coranique et monothéisme biblique* (Paris, 1976), 336.

¹⁹ A freer and more elegant translation is found in S. A. Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (Hoboken, 1996), 31-32.

applicable only to pure birds (Leviticus 17:13).²⁰ Mirroring Cain, the bird first murders its friend and then buries it.²¹ For Stillman “the qur’anic version is merely an epitome” of the *Tanḥuma*.²² But this is not necessarily the case, seeing that the *Tanḥuma* most probably finished evolving long after the Quran appears.²³ That this passage might belong to later strata of the *Tanḥuma* is suggested by its not occurring in the parallel text known as the Buber *Tanḥuma*.²⁴ The emphasis on the birds’ purity might also be a reaction to the Quranic story, stressing that the birds were not impure ravens. Most importantly, as we shall argue later, the Quran preserves a more basic form of the legend in that all the raven does there is dig with no mention of killing or burying another bird.

The theme is also found in a *Targumic tosefta* to Genesis 4:8 (Oxford Bodleian Ms. Heb. c 74r):

And he (i.e. Cain) did not know where to strike him. He looked about here and there, until he saw two birds fighting; and one rose up against the other, and struck it on its mouth, and its blood spurted out until it died.²⁵ Cain took a lesson from it, and did the same to Abel [his] brother. Then seeing that he was dead, he feared that his father would demand

²⁰ “And anyone of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth”.

²¹ Note the correspondence between the figure that buries Abel and the question of how the dead bird died. In *PRE* Adam learns from a raven which buries an independently dead raven, whereas in the *Tanḥuma* Cain follows the example of a bird which kills its fellow and then buries it.

²² Stillman, “The Story of Cain and Abel”, 236.

²³ For the dating of the *Tanḥuma* see chapter 2.1. Regarding our passage scholars are divided. Whereas in Böttrich, “*Die Vögel des Himmels haben ihn begraben*”, 34-40, it is treated as the earliest Jewish attestation of the bird tradition, in Rüger, “Das Begräbnis Abels”, 44, it is thought to be based on a combination of *PRE* and the passage which appears in the printed editions of *Genesis Rabba*, but is not found in any of the manuscripts (treated below).

²⁴ For a similar principle, see M. Bregman, *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, 2003), 184-86 (in Hebrew). Bregman’s examples concern parallel passages in the two versions of the *Tanḥuma* where the regular *Tanḥuma* has an additional sentence which is unattested in the Buber *Tanḥuma*. This is not the case in our example since the entire passage about the two birds has no parallel in the Buber *Tanḥuma*.

²⁵ I follow Klein here, though the mouth as the most vulnerable organ is odd. It might be preferable to interpret the text otherwise. The sentence *ימהיניה ידע ב[מה] ולא הוה ידע ב[מה]* could also be rendered “And he did not know with what to strike him”. In the same manner, *ומהייה בפומיה* might mean “and struck it with its mouth (i.e. beak)”. This interpretation is supported by the killer bird later digging a hole with its beak (*והוה נקיש* (בפומיה והפר). If correct, this would mean that Cain killed Abel with his teeth, an extremely savage portrayal. Such a tradition is indeed known from several sources; see Aptowitz, *Kain und Abel*, 51 and 154, note 219b (where the Targumic passage is cited and translated as I have suggested).

[Abel] from him; and he did not know what to do. Looking up, he saw the bird that had killed its fellow putting its mouth to the ground; and it dug [a hole], and buried the other dead one, and covered it with earth. At that moment, Cain did the same to Abel, so that [his father] might not find him.²⁶

It is hard to firmly date this passage.²⁷ Here the birds serve as role models not only for the burial but for the murder as well.²⁸ Note also that Cain's motive for the burial is to avoid getting caught by Adam. In all the other sources the burial is presented as a positive act inspired by God (Quran, *Tanḥuma*) and worthy of reward (*Tanḥuma, PRE*).

Another variant on this theme is found in the printed editions of *Genesis Rabba* 22.8. It is hard to know where this particular passage originated from. It clearly does not belong to the original text as it is unattested in all the manuscripts.²⁹ It is attributed to *Genesis Rabba* also in the printed editions of *Yalqut Shim'oni*, a twelfth or thirteenth-

²⁶ M. L. Klein, *Genizah Manuscripts of Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (Cincinnati, 1986), 1:12 (ET) and 13 (text). The text was first published in an appendix in M. Ginsburger, *Das Fragmententargum* (Berlin, 1899), 71-72. The language of the passage was partly inspired by Exodus 2:11-12 ("One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand"; see M. L. Klein, "Targumic Studies and the Cairo Genizah", in S. C. Reif (ed.), *The Cambridge Genizah Collections: Their Contents and Significance* (Cambridge, 2002), 58. Another possible inspiration for this passage may have been Adam's hiding from God in Genesis 3.

²⁷ The manuscript dates from the mid-11th to the late 14th century; Klein, *Genizah Manuscripts*, XXXVII. This, however, tells us little about the date of the work itself. Klein does not date the *Targumic toseftot* and makes do with the observation that vestiges of an original Palestinian dialect survive in them; *ibid.*, XXVII. Böttrich's argument for an early date of the *Tosefta* on Cain and Abel is founded on an unfortunate oversight. He notes the correspondence of our *Tosefta* with the quotation found in Aptowitzer, *Kain und Abel*, 154 note 219b, which he believes to stem from the *Fragment Targum*. Since he dates the *Fragment Targum* to the first or second century this proves that the tradition is ancient; Böttrich, "Die Vögel des Himmels haben ihn begraben", 46. The citation in Aptowitzer stems, however, from the first publication of the very same manuscript published by Klein. Böttrich's dating is based then on comparing the manuscript to itself! This error is crucial for his early dating of the tradition.

²⁸ Jacob ben Asher (d. 1343) in his commentary on the Torah also knows of a tradition that Cain learned how to kill from observing one raven kill another; see Böttrich, "Die Vögel des Himmels haben ihn begraben", 46-47. The late date notwithstanding, Rüger argues that the midrash preserved by Jacob ben Asher was the *Vorlage* of Q 5:31; Rüger, "Das Begräbnis Abels", 44-45. See the responses in A. Ulrich, "Zum 'Begräbnis' Abels", *Biblische Notizen* 15 (1981): 48-54, and Böttrich, *ibid.*

²⁹ See Theodor and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, 1:215. Neither Rüger nor Böttrich notes that the passage is unattested in the manuscripts; Rüger "Das Begräbnis Abels", 38, and Böttrich, "Die Vögel des Himmels haben ihn begraben", 40-41. It is also noteworthy that *Genesis Rabba* 22.10 assumes that Abel had not yet been buried ("It [the soul] could not ascend above, because no soul had yet ascended thither; nor could it go below, because Adam had not yet been buried there; hence the blood lay spattered on the trees and the stones"; ET adapted from Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 1:189).

century midrashic thesaurus on the Bible, but again not in the Oxford manuscript (Bodleian 2637) of the *Yalqut*.³⁰

And who buried him? Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat said: “The birds of the air and the pure animals buried him and God gave them their reward, the two blessings uttered over them, one on the slaughter and one on the covering of the blood”.

Here rather than serve as a role model, the wildlife itself buries Abel. In having both birds and animals participate in the burial, this passage answers a difficulty created by the tradition as presented in the *Tanḥuma*. If the covering of the blood of birds was a reward for their part in the burial of Abel, how is the covering of the blood of animals to be explained, seeing that Leviticus 17:13 prescribes the covering of both? Solution: both birds and animals buried Abel.

Since the bird tradition is found in several rabbinic sources and versions it is hard to deny the possibility that ultimately its origin is indeed Jewish. Nonetheless, four points are noteworthy. First, the tradition is found in Christian sources as well, though again it is most difficult to date these traditions.³¹ Second, none of these Jewish or Christian texts

³⁰ On the *Yalqut Shim'oni*, see Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 351-52. Our passage is in the *Yalqut Shim'oni* Genesis remez 38. For the Oxford manuscript reading, see D. Hyman *et al.* (eds.), *Yalqut Shim'oni 'al ha-Torah le Rabbenu Shim'on ha-Darshan*, (Jerusalem, 1973), 1:127.

³¹ In *2 Enoch* 71:36 we read: “And in connection with that archpriest it is written how he will also be buried there, where the center of the earth is, just as Adam also buried his own son there – Abel, whom his brother Cain murdered; for he lay for 3 years unburied, until he saw a bird called Jackdaw, how it buried its own young”; F. I. Andersen, “2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) ENOCH”, in *OTP*, 1:208. This verse is attested only in the longer recension of *2 Enoch* and is usually assumed to be an interpolation, the dating of which is no easy task. Whereas Vaillant postulates that the passage was added by a redactor working sometime in the 13th-16th centuries, Böttrich dates it to the fourth to seventh centuries; Böttrich, “*Die Vögel des Himmels haben ihn begraben*”, 111-14. Böttrich’s dating is based on his assumption concerning the date of the rabbinic parallels. For Georgian, Turkish, Slavic, Finnish and Estonian traditions, all attested in late works, see *ibid.*, 78-109. To this list should be added three Armenian works in which Cain learns his murder method from a demonic raven. The works are *Abel* 3.4 (“And whence did he know? Two demons in the form of ravens quarreled, and one, taking the flint, slaughtered his fellow. From this [Cain] learned, and having found [a stone], he slaughtered him bloodily. And he was buried by his parents”), *History of the Forefathers* 25 (“But half say that Satan disguised himself in the likeness of two ravens, and the one cast the other to the ground and slaughtered [it] with a flinty stone. Thus Cain did to Abel and killed him”), and *Abel and Cain* 27-28 (“Then Satan took on the form of two ravens, and the one took a sharp stone, and he struck the other with it in the throat and killed him, and the stone was sharp as a razor. And Cain learned

are definitely pre-Quranic.³² Third, the identification of the bird as a raven as opposed to a general reference to birds or pure birds seems more original, in that ravens were well known for their habit of digging caches to store food.³³ Eventually the raven's part was perceived as meritorious (*PRE*). This contradicts the usual image of ravens and therefore they were replaced with pure birds (*Tanḥuma*).³⁴ Finally, a textual comparison of the Quranic version to the rabbinic and Christian parallels seems to support the primacy of the tradition as preserved in the Quran. Whereas in the parallel versions one bird buries another, this is nowhere stated in the Quran, which has only one raven digging in the ground and nothing else. As we shall see shortly, while most exegetes read a second raven into the story, some retained the simple and original meaning of the verse. Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī is cited as saying the following: "The custom of ravens is to bury things. A raven came and buried something and he [=Cain] learned this from it".³⁵ A similar anonymous position is cited by al-Qurṭubī: "The raven dug in the ground in order to hide its food for a time of need for such is the practice of ravens. Cain learned from this to conceal his brother".³⁶

from Satan, and he took the stone and leaped upon his brother"); for the first two sources, see M. E. Stone, *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Adam and Eve* (Leiden, 1996), 148 and 193 and the parallels cited in his notes; for the third, see W. L. Lipscomb, *The Armenian Apocryphal Adam Literature* (Atlanta, 1990), 164 (Recension I) and 273 (Recension II). Lipscomb dates the *Adam Cycle* of which *Abel and Cain* is part to "the period between the eighth and fourteenth centuries"; *ibid.*, 33.

³² This argument is made in Saifullah *et al.*, "On the Sources", with regard to *PRE* and the *Tanḥuma*.

³³ See the comment of Abū Muslim below. In his commentary on *PRE* Rabbi David Luria (d. 1855) expresses his wonder as to why the impure raven should be ascribed a lofty role in the story. He offers the following explanations: 1) In 1 Kings 17:2-6 God sends ravens to feed Elijah. 2) The numerical value of קבור ("bury", Deuteronomy 21:23) is equivalent to ל[מדן] עורב ("a raven taught"). 3) The raven's blackness is related to mourning. None of these explanations is as compelling as the fact that ravens are well known for their digging.

³⁴ Ravens were often perceived as symbols of evil. The raven's role in the deluge story (Genesis 8:6) lent itself to such interpretations; see D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, 2003), 51 and 287 note 43.

³⁵ See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Taḥfīr al-kabīr*, 11:209. Admittedly, the motivation for Abū Muslim's interpretation was not purely philological since he tends to avoid positing unnecessary miracles (see, for example, his comments on Q 2:260, Q 3:41, and Q 3:44 as preserved by al-Rāzī). Nonetheless, in this instance his reading is more convincing.

³⁶ See al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, 7:421. The same approach is found also in M. Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-manār* (Cairo, 1947-54), 6:346, where the raven is understood to have dug in the ground searching for something until it made a hole and thus inspired Cain to bury Abel. Riḍā rejects the traditions concerning two ravens as originating in the infamous *Isrā'īliyyāt*, adding that the Torah itself makes no mention of any of this.

As we noted most exegetes did not interpret Q 5:31 in such a manner, but this results from a rather fanciful and over-literal reading of the verse. All the verse really says is that God sent a raven digging the earth in order in order to show Cain how he might conceal his brother's corpse (*li-yuriyahu kayfa yuwārī saw'ata akhīhi*). The notion that the raven buried another raven rose from an artificial understanding of two features of the verse. The subject of the verb *yuwārī* was taken as the raven, whereas in truth it is Cain referred to immediately beforehand in the suffixed pronoun *li-yuriyahu*. As a result the pronominal suffix in *akhīhi* was understood as referring to the raven.³⁷ This reading was also motivated by a tendency to take the comparison between Cain and the raven to an extreme. When Cain said: “Am I unable to be like this raven and conceal my brother's corpse?” he meant: “Can I not dig like a raven?” He did not mean “Can I not bury my brother like the raven did”.³⁸ Most readers, however, sought for a stronger comparison between Cain and the raven. Therefore, according to Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm (d. 815f), Cain takes his cue from the raven that throws dust (*yaḥthū l-turāba*) on Abel and thus initiates his burial (compare the tradition of the interpolated passage in *Genesis Rabba*).³⁹ In this version there is only one bird, as in Abū Muslim's reading, but unlike the latter, al-Aṣamm has the bird act in an extraordinary manner. In the most developed and most prevalent form of the story Cain sees one raven bury another one. This account is found in two versions. In the first there is no explanation as to how the dead raven died (compare *PRE*). In the second the parallel with Cain is emphasized by having one raven

³⁷ See Ibn 'Aṭīyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz*, 2:181.

³⁸ Related is an issue of reading. Whereas our text has *fa-uwāriya*, some reciters read *fa-uwārī* which if not merely a phonetic variant suggests that Cain's utterance should be rendered: “Am I unable to be like this raven? I shall therefore conceal my brother's corpse”; see al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:660, and al-Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 2:262. This reading makes it even clearer that the raven concealed no corpse.

³⁹ See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 11:209. The same opinion is cited anonymously in al-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-qur'ān wa-i'rābuhu*, ed. 'A.-al-J. 'Abduh Shalabī (Beirut, 1988), 2:167. Cf. al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, 7:422.

kill the other (compare the *Tanḥuma* and the *Targumic tosefta*).⁴⁰ Is it possible that the midrashic sources reflect *tafsīr* traditions in this instance? Perhaps.

5.3.3. The moral

Geiger's third parallel is much more convincing. In the Quran it is not entirely clear how v. 32 proceeds from what came before, but the idea that killing one man is tantamount to killing all of humanity is related to the Cain and Abel story already in the Mishna (redacted ca. 220 CE). In *Sanhedrin* 4:5, the Mishna comments on a peculiarity of the Hebrew for "your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" (Genesis 4:10); surprisingly the word for "blood" occurs in the plural rather than the expected singular. This is taken as an allusion to Abel's blood and to the blood of his (potential) descendants. The Mishna then concludes: "Therefore [לפיכך] but a single man was created in the world, to teach that whosoever destroys a single soul is regarded as though he destroyed a complete world, and whosoever saves a single soul is regarded as though he saved a complete world".⁴¹ According to Geiger, in the Quran one perceives no

⁴⁰ For both versions, see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 8:340-44. Somewhat puzzling is the tradition attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, according to which Cain saw the two ravens digging; *ibid.*, 341. One also finds a tradition attributed to Ibn Jurayj (Meccan, d. 150AH) in which Cain learned his murder technique from Iblīs who took the shape of a bird and killed another bird (compare the *Targumic tosefta* and especially the Armenian traditions); *ibid.*, 338. This tradition does not seem to reflect a reaction to the phrasing of the Quranic verse since the bird here is Satan and not a raven sent by God.

⁴¹ The full text of the Mishna runs as follows (ET adapted from Danby): "How did they admonish the witnesses in capital cases? They brought them in and admonished them, [saying:] 'Perchance you will say what is but supposition or hearsay or at secondhand, or [you may say in yourselves], We heard it from a man that was trustworthy. Or perchance you do not know that we shall prove you by examination and inquiry? Know, moreover, that capital cases are not as non-capital cases: in non-capital cases a man may pay money and so make atonement, but in capital cases the witness is answerable for the blood of him [that is wrongfully condemned] and the blood of his posterity [that should have been born to him] to the end of the world. For so we have found concerning Cain that slew his brother, for it is written: *The bloods of your brother cry*. It says not 'The blood of your brother', but *The bloods of your brother* - his blood and the blood of his posterity. Another explanation: *Bloods of your brother* - because his blood was cast over the trees and stones. Therefore [לפיכך] but a single man was created in the world, to teach that whosoever destroys a single soul is regarded as though he destroyed a complete world, and whosoever saves a single soul is regarded as though he saved a complete world; and for the sake of peace among mankind, that none should say to his fellow: 'My father was greater than yours', and that heretics should not say: 'There are many ruling powers in heaven'; also to proclaim the greatness of the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, for man stamps a hundred coins with one seal, and they are all alike, but the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, has stamped every man with the seal of the first man, yet not one of

connection whatsoever between v. 32 and the preceding verses. This digression, as he would have it, reflects Muhammad's faulty presentation of the materials received from his Jewish informants who related to him the Cain and Abel story together with the Mishnaic saying.⁴² But Geiger's interpretation is too simplistic a reading of the Quran.

That the Quran is citing a Jewish source here should really come as no surprise since the verse itself suggests this in the way it introduces the tradition: *min ajli dhālika katabnā 'alā banī isrā'īla annahu....* Above I translated the verb as "We decreed", but the basic meaning is "We wrote". The same verb introduces the quotation of the *lex talionis* in Q 5:45: *wa-katabnā 'alayhim fihā anna....*,⁴³ as well as the citation from Psalms 37:29 in Q 21:105: *wa-la-qad katabnā fī l-zabūr min ba'di l-dhikri anna....*⁴⁴ Interestingly, in our verse the quotation derives from a rabbinic text, the Mishna, rather than Scripture.

As convincing as the parallel is, it should not obscure a major difference between the text of the Mishna and the way in which it is used in the Quran.⁴⁵ Whereas in the Mishna this rhetorical saying urges great caution in matters of life and death, in the Quran

them is like his fellow. Therefore every one must say: 'For my sake was the world created'. And if perchance you should say: 'Why should we be at these pains?' – was it not written: *He being a witness, whether he has seen or known, [if he shall not utter it, than shall he bear his iniquity]*? And if perchance you would say: 'Why should we be guilty of the blood of this man?' – was it not written: *When the wicked perish there is rejoicing*?' The composition of this Mishna is complex in that it is not entirely clear which passages belong to the warning proclaimed to the witnesses and which passages are tangents.

⁴² Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 81.

⁴³ Note that this verse too occurs in an anti-Jewish polemical context and that it too concerns murder.

⁴⁴ Apart from these verses *katabnā* occurs only three more times. In Q 4:66 it introduces a hypothetical decree; in Q 7:145 and Q 57:27 the general content of the decree is summed up in a word but no text is given. Cf. M. Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an* (Miami, 2009), 201-2.

⁴⁵ In Saifullah *et al.*, "On the Sources", the link between *Sanhedrin* 4:5 and Q 5:32 is rejected on the basis of two arguments, both of which are unconvincing. First, it is argued that in its correct version the Mishna refers only to the destruction and preservation of a single soul from Israel, a message quite different from the universal wording of the Quranic verse. Second, it is noted that the condition, " - not [in retaliation for another] soul nor for corruption in the land – (*bi-ghayri nafsin aw fasādin fī l-arḍi*)", has no parallel in the Mishna. The first point is simply wrong. The variant "from Israel" is only a secondary reading, for which see E. E. Urbach, " 'KOL HA-MEQAYYEM NEFESH AḤAT': Development of the Version, Vicissitudes of Censorship, and Business Manipulations of Printers", *Tarbiz* 40 (1971): 268-84 (Hebrew), and M. Kellner, "A New and Unexpected Textual Witness to the Reading 'He Who Kills a Single Person – It is as if He Destroyed an Entire World'", *Tarbiz* 75 (2007): 565-66 (Hebrew). As for the second objection, what is to prevent the Quran from adding an explanatory remark when citing a Jewish source? This is, in fact, what it seems to do in Q 5:45 where *Lex talionis* is quoted from the Pentateuch with the additional statement that "But whoso forgoes it (in the way of charity) it shall be expiation for him".

it fills an anti-Jewish polemical function.⁴⁶ First, the saying is presented as a result of the murder (*min ajli dhālika*), whereas in the Mishna it explains why Adam was first created alone in the world and is not linked formally to the murder of Cain.⁴⁷ Second, it is presented as being decreed specifically for the Children of Israel, implying that they were in need of such a warning.⁴⁸ Third, in the Quran the saying is followed by a sentence which suggests that the Jews failed to observe its teaching: “Our messengers have already come to them with clear signs, but many of them indeed commit afterwards excesses in the land”. Thus it seems that rather than faulty transmission, v. 32 reflects a reshaping of the Jewish tradition to serve an anti-Jewish polemical agenda.

To sum up: of the three Jewish parallels noted by Geiger only the third may be seen as compelling. But it also suggests that the Quranic account is more than mere repetition of Jewish legends. We now turn to examine elements of the story which might suggest an awareness of the Christian tradition. Most important is Abel’s passivity in the dialogue in verses 27-29 (“If you extend your hand against me to kill me, I will not extend my hand against you to kill you”), which most probably reflects the Christian tradition in which Abel is perceived as a pre-figuration of Christ. This was noted by

⁴⁶ The rhetorical nature of the saying was lost on some of the exegetes of the Quran who were troubled by the comparison. How can the murder of one man be equivalent to the murder of all humanity? How can saving one man be tantamount to saving all men? Among the answers given were that the man murdered or saved is a prophet or a just Imam; that the saying depicts the viewpoint of the man murdered or saved; that the murderer of one and of all both burn in hell and that one who avoids killing one soul kills no one and thus saves all; that God can do as he pleases; and that this was an imposition upon the Jews; see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 8:348-58, and al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’*, 7:429-30.

⁴⁷ The passage in the Mishna too starts with “Therefore [לפיכך]”, but there the word looks forward to “to teach” and does not refer to the Cain incident. One wonders whether the Arabic reflects a misreading of the Hebrew here. According to the exegetes the link between the moral and the murder is even stronger since they argue that *ajl*, which occurs only once in the Quran, literally means “committing a crime”. The phrase then would mean “on account of the crime committed by that one [i.e. Cain]”; see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 8:347-48, al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’*, 7:427, and Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1:25. In al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’*, 7:428, a reading of *min ajli dhālika* backward as completing *fa-aṣbaḥa mina l-nādimīna* is noted. According to this reading, the verses should be rendered: “He then became one of those who pity themselves on account of this. We decreed to the Children of Israel...” This, however, seems artificial on account of the verse division and the fact that there is no *waw* before the verb for “decreed”, *katabnā*.

⁴⁸ See the comment in al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’*, 7:428: “The Children of Israel were mentioned specifically, even though murder was forbidden for nations which preceded them, since they were the first nation to receive the threat concerning murder in written form. Beforehand it was merely oral. Then the matter was emphasized for the Children of Israel by means of the Book in accordance with their iniquity and bloodshed”. One wonders whether *katabnā ‘alā banī isrā’īla* carries here the meaning of “against”.

several scholars who did not, however, point to any Christian literary text containing a similar conversation between the brothers. The next section will be devoted to this task.

5.4. The Syriac background

I wish to suggest that vv. 27-30 reflect a source similar to a group of closely related Syriac texts including a dialogue poem on Abel and Cain,⁴⁹ the unpublished *Homily on Cain and Abel* by Isaac of Antioch,⁵⁰ and the *Syriac Life of Abel* by Symmachus.⁵¹ These texts together with Ephraem Graecus' *Homily on Cain and the Murder of Abel* (itself indebted to the Syriac tradition)⁵² all share an interest in exchanges between the two at different points of the narrative,⁵³ as opposed to the Greek tradition which does not supply such dialogues.⁵⁴ All these texts have been dated by the scholars studying them to the fifth or sixth centuries.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ S. Brock, "Two Syriac Dialogue Poems on Abel and Cain", *Le Muséon* 113 (2000): 333-75. I refer here only to the first poem, since the second one is most probably medieval. The first poem is transmitted in three forms, two of which represent the West Syriac tradition and one the East Syriac tradition; *ibid.*, 336-37.

⁵⁰ Ms. Vat. Syr. 120, ff. 172b-185b; see overview in J. B. Glenthøj, *Cain and Abel in Syriac and Greek Writers (4th-6th Centuries)* (Louvain, 1997), 44-46.

⁵¹ Brock, "A Syriac Life of Abel", 467-92.

⁵² For an overview of the content of Ephraem Graecus' homily and a discussion of its relation to the Syriac texts, see Glenthøj, *Cain*, 38-41.

⁵³ For a survey of the dialogues attributed to the brothers, see Glenthøj, *Cain*, 261-64.

⁵⁴ See Glenthøj, *Cain*, 254 and 274-76. Interestingly Glenthøj also notes that the use of dialogue is more characteristic of Syriac homilies on Gen. 22 than of Greek ones.

⁵⁵ Although anonymous and first attested in ninth-century manuscripts, the first Syriac dialogue poem published by Brock can safely be considered pre-Islamic; it was known to Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) and is transmitted in both the Eastern and Western Syriac tradition. According to its editor, it cannot be later than the fifth century; Brock, "Two Syriac Dialogue Poems", 333-35. As for Isaac's homily, at least three different Isaacs of Antioch are known in the Syriac tradition. According to Brock, our homily belongs to the earliest of them, Isaac of Amid (first half of the fifth century), said to have been a disciple of Ephrem; S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature* (Kottayam, 1997), 41 and 197. Nothing is known of Symmachus, but based on style and general approach Brock suggests a late fifth or early sixth-century date; Brock, "A Syriac Life of Abel", 468. According to Glenthøj, Jacob of Serugh probably used Symmachus or a similar source; Glenthøj, *Cain*, 50-51. Moving to Ephraem Graecus' *Homily*, although written in Greek, it is thoroughly dependant on the Syriac tradition (especially Isaac of Antioch or a similar text), and probably dates from the middle of the fifth century; see *ibid.*, 38-40.

The similarities between the Quranic story and this group of sources fall into four categories: shared motifs, use of dialogue,⁵⁶ similar diction, and typological function. Whereas scholarship usually treats loanwords and to a lesser degree shared motifs, the literary form and function of the Quranic narratives are less commonly addressed, either independently or in conjunction with diction and motifs. Since the literary form and motifs are intertwined in this case I shall examine them together.

5.4.1. Literary form and motifs

Let us first examine the dialogue between the two brothers. In the Bible there is none. We do, however, find a puzzling verse which might have led later readers to create such a dialogue.

Genesis 4:8 in the Hebrew text runs:

Cain said to his brother Abel. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

The beginning of the verse seems corrupt since the content of Cain's utterance is missing in this version.⁵⁷ The Septuagint, Samaritan text, Palestinian Targums, Peshitta and the Vulgate all read additional words here equivalent to "Let us go to the field" (or "valley" in the Peshitta).⁵⁸ Some post-Biblical sources further develop this point by referring to an argument between the brothers in the field. This could be an alternative filling of the gap in the Hebrew text,⁵⁹ an attempt to explain why Cain murdered Abel, a

⁵⁶ Dialogue is an important stylistic feature of the Quran. Pre-Islamic poetry, on the other hand, makes little use of this literary device. See our discussion in chapter 7.3.

⁵⁷ This reading is shared by a fragment from Qumran and by Targum Onqelos.

⁵⁸ See R. S. Hendel, *The Text of Genesis 1-11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition* (New York, 1998), 46-47.

⁵⁹ See *Genesis Rabba* 22:7.

result of a Midrashic reading of the verse,⁶⁰ a vehicle for depicting opposing worldviews, or a combination of these factors.

Already Philo reads the invitation to the plain as a challenge to a disputation in which Cain sought to gain mastery by the use of “sophistries that have the appearance of truth”, for “the plain, the rendezvous to which he summons him, is a figure of contest and desperate battle”.⁶¹ Philo interprets the story as an allegory for the conflict between two character traits found in every human soul. In this debate, “Abel, referring all things to God, is a god loving creed; but Cain, referring all to himself – his name means ‘acquisition’ – a self loving creed”.⁶² Philo elaborates on this point at length, but does not provide a dialogue comparable to the Quranic one.

The same is true of *Genesis Rabba* 22.7, according to which the brothers quarrel about either the division of the world, the location of the future temple, or a woman.⁶³ Not only does the Midrash supply new reasons for the murder which have nothing to do with the rejected sacrifice, but it also seems to mitigate at least part of Cain’s blame. The murder is no longer a one-sided act, but rather is the result of mutual strife in which a heated argument gets out of hand.

Closer to the Quranic dialogue is the exchange found in the Palestinian Targums. Let us look at Targum Neofiti for example:

And Cain said to Abel his brother: “Come! Let the two of us go out to the open field”; and when the two of them had gone out to the open field, Cain spoke and said to Abel: “I perceive that the world was not created by mercy and that it is not

⁶⁰ The words translated as “And when they were in the field (וַיְהִי בְהִיטְתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה)” might have been understood as “And when they were arguing in the field”, based on the use of *הוּוּ ב-* in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic to denote argumentation; see the comment of Z. W. Einhorn on *Genesis Rabba* 22:7. See also Philo’s comment on the plain below.

⁶¹ *That the Worse is Wont to Attack the Better* I; F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, *Philo: With an English Translation* (London, 1929), 2:203.

⁶² *ibid.*, 223.

⁶³ See ET in Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 1:187.

being conducted according to the fruits of good deeds, and that there is favoritism in judgment. Why was your offering accepted favorably and my offering was not accepted favorably from me?” Abel answered and said to Cain: “I perceive that the world was created by mercy and that it is being conducted according to the fruits of good deeds. Because my deeds were better than yours, my offering was accepted from me favorably and yours was not accepted favorably from you”. Cain answered and said to Abel: “There is no judgment and there is no judge and there is no other world. There is no granting of good reward to the just nor is there punishment for the wicked”. Abel answered and said to Cain: “There is judgment and there is a judge and there is another world and there is granting of good reward to the just and there is punishment for the wicked in the world to come”. Concerning this matter the two of them were disputing in the open field. And Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.⁶⁴

The Palestinian Targums display some affinity to the Quranic version, especially in Abel’s response “Because my deeds were better than yours, my offering was accepted from me favorably and yours was not accepted favorably from you” which parallels Q 5:27 where he says: “Allah accepts [offerings] only from the God-fearing”, but also in the use of *qrbn*’ instead of the Biblical *minḥa* as well as the use of *etqabbal* paralleling the Quranic *tuqubbila*. Indeed several scholars suggested that the Targumic tradition was the source of the Quran on this point.⁶⁵ A. S. Yahuda even adduces this as evidence that the Jews in Arabia “were more acquainted with the Jerusalem tradition than with the Babylonian”.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ B. Grossfeld, *Targum Neofiti I: An Exegetical Commentary to Genesis* (New York, 2000), 5. Similar dialogues are found in the Fragment Targum, Pseudo-Jonathan, in a Geniza manuscript of the Palestinian Targum, and in a few Toseftot Targum; see Klein, *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch*, 1:47 (Aramaic) and 2:8-9 (English); Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, 32-33; and McNamara, *Targum Neofiti I: Genesis*, 65-67 (where several versions are listed).

⁶⁵ See Geiger’s comment above; Aptowitz, *Kain und Abel*, 12; and Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes*, 18.

⁶⁶ A. S. Yahuda, “A Contribution to Qur’ān and Ḥadīth Interpretation”, in S. Löwinger and J. Somogyi (eds.) *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume*, (Budapest, 1948), 1:293.

Nonetheless, in other ways the Targumic dialogue is very different from the Quranic one. Cain does not announce that he will kill his brother, but rather engages with him in a theological dispute at the end of which he murders him.⁶⁷ Most importantly Abel's response lacks the turn-the-other-cheek attitude which is strongly emphasized in the Quran, engendering exegetical puzzlement.⁶⁸ The passive nature of Abel's response in the Quran led Stillman to the conclusion that this element of the story was of Christian origin. This was upheld later by Busse, though neither of them pointed to an actual Christian literary source which contained a similar dialogue between the brothers.⁶⁹ It is here that the Syriac texts become relevant.⁷⁰

Let us first examine the dialogue poem. After an introduction which gives the setting, the dialogue in alternating stanzas commences in stanza 13 thus:

(Cain) Says Cain: Since the Lord has taken delight
in your sacrifice, but rejected mine,
I will kill you (*qāṭelnā lāk*): because He has preferred you.
I will take vengeance on His friend.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Several studies have been devoted to the identification of the adversaries who held the positions attributed here to Cain; see, e.g., S. Isenberg, "An Anti-Sadducee Polemic in the Palestinian Targum Tradition", *Harvard Theological Review* 63 (1970): 433-44; and J. M. Bassler, "Cain and Abel in the Palestinian Targums: A Brief Note on an Old Controversy", *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 17 (1986): 56-64.

⁶⁸ Abel's reluctance to defend himself was puzzling for the exegetes as is evidenced by the various interpretations cited in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Taḥf al-kabīr*, 11:206, and al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, 7:412-13. Al-Rāzī, for example, cites the following four: Abel said before the actual attack that he would not do what Cain planned, i.e., intentional murder; he meant that in defending himself he would not seek to kill Cain only to protect himself; it is permissible for an intended murder victim to abandon self-defense as 'Uthmān is said to have done; self-defense was forbidden at the time (Mujāhid). For Mujāhid's opinion, see also al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 8:329-330. In Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī taḥsīn al-Qur'ān* (Qum, 1992-2010), 5:293, this position is attributed to al-Ḥasan, Mujāhid, and al-Jubbā'ī.

⁶⁹ H. Busse, "Cain and Abel", *EQ*, 1:271, and Stillman, "The Story of Cain and Abel", 235-36. Cf. Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen*, 86. Recently Bat-Sheva Garsiel has noted Abel's passivity as "a rare example of the influence of the Christian approach"; Garsiel, *Bible, Midrash and Quran*, 55.

⁷⁰ The authors of the Syriac texts may have been aware of the existence of Jewish literary embellishments of Genesis 4:8; see Brock, "Two Syriac Dialogue Poems", 334 (concerning the first dialogue poem).

⁷¹ Brock, "Two Syriac Dialogue Poems", 342 (Syriac) and 351 (ET slightly adapted here).

A similar expression of intention (“I will kill you”) is repeated in Stanza 23.⁷² Thus at the very outset of the dispute Cain announces that he is about to kill Abel. This is quite different than the Jewish sources, in which a heated argument leads to murder. Here it is pre-meditated and is a result of the rejection of the offering, not of a dispute that gets out of hand. Likewise, in Ephraem Graecus we find Cain declaring to Abel after they arrive at the scene of the murder that he will kill him, the reason being the rejection of his sacrifice and his fear that Abel will inherit the earth.⁷³ Similarly, in Isaac of Antioch’s homily, Cain plans the murder even before they leave for the field. After he realizes that other methods of assailing God are futile (173b-174a), he concludes that the only way to cause grief to God is to kill Abel:

After Abel there is no Abel / in which He could take comfort over Abel. / If I shall kill him (*qāṭelnā lēh*) there will be no other / to bow down before His glory. / That I ascend to heaven is hard, / and I do not reach its height. / I will kill (*qāṭelnā*) His friend, Abel, / and will grieve Him on high (174b).

However, this speech in which Cain plans his revenge on God is not addressed to Abel.⁷⁴

These sources, and especially the dialogue poem, parallel the beginning of the Quranic dialogue, where the murderer announces his evil intentions: “He said: ‘I will surely kill you’ (*la-aqtulannaka*)”. In the Quran too, it is not a question of a heated argument that eventually leads to murder. Note also the use of the cognate verbs.

⁷² “(Cain) If God has sent to accept your offering, / honouring you greatly with the flames, / then I will kill you (*qāṭelnā lāk*) because He has favoured you, / accepting your sacrifice and rejecting mine”; Brock, “Two Syriac Dialogue Poems”, 343 (Syriac) and 352 (ET).

⁷³ See discussion in Glenthøj, *Cain*, 142 and 164.

⁷⁴ According to the *Syriac Life of Abel* as well the murder was pre-meditated. After Cain's offering was rejected and God admonished him, “he was overcome by envy and openly defeated by enmity. Great hate conquered him: he denied love and rejected brotherhood. He was decided in his mind to kill his mother’s son”. Only afterwards does he suggest to Abel that they go to the valley; Brock, “A Syriac Life of Abel”, 472-73. For many other references in Christian texts to Cain's planning of the murder, see Glenthøj, *Cain*, 128.

Returning to the dialogue poem, Abel's response in stanza 14 also parallels the brother's answer in the Quran:

(Abel) Abel replies: What wrong have I done
if the lord has been pleased with me?
He searches out hearts and so has the right
to choose or reject as He likes.

This theme is further developed in stanza 16:

(Abel) in all offerings that are made
it is love that He wants to see,
and if good intention is not mingled in,
then the sacrifice is ugly and rejected.⁷⁵

Abel's response here (similar to the Targum tradition) is most probably inspired by God's speech in Gen. 4:7 ("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"). In stanza 40 in fact Abel uses God's exact words: "sin is crouching at the door".⁷⁶ Similar transfers are seen in Isaac and Ephraem Graecus,⁷⁷ and are generally a regular feature of dramatic

⁷⁵ Brock, "Two Syriac Dialogue Poems", 342 (Syriac) and 351 (ET slightly adapted here). See also stanza 36: "(Abel) He would have chosen you, had you acted well, / and He would have been pleased with your offering: / you would have been accepted if only you had mixed / sincere love along with your sacrifice"; *ibid.*, 345 (Syriac) and 354 (ET).

⁷⁶ Brock, "Two Syriac Dialogue Poems", 346 (Syriac) and 355 (ET).

⁷⁷ See Glenthøj, *Cain*, 112. According to Isaac, after Cain's ruse of inviting Abel to accompany him and bring an offering on his behalf (175a), Abel responds, emphasizing the inappropriateness of using an advocate rather than praying directly to God (175a-176b). In doing so he uses language inspired by Genesis 4:7, repeatedly calling Cain to stand at God's door (*tar'ēh d-alāhā*) and beg till the end of his life that God accept his petition and absolve him of his sins (176a-176b).

homilies.⁷⁸ In any case, Abel's emphasis on intent is reminiscent of Q 5:27 (“[His brother] said: ‘Allah accepts [offerings] only from the God-fearing [*al-muttaqīna*]’”).⁷⁹

The rest of Abel's response in Q 5:28-29 does not have an exact parallel in the Syriac poem, but the passive approach it shows is similar to that of the Syriac poem, in which Abel begs for his life, relinquishing his share of the world (see, e.g., stanzas 18 and 20), mentions the effect of the murder on their parents (stanza 22 and 38), and attempts to appease Cain in various manners, never once trying to defend himself physically. Similar pleas for mercy are made in Ephraem Graecus, Isaac (177a-b) and the *Syriac Life of Abel*,⁸⁰ though in the latter two they are independent, not a response to an utterance of Cain.⁸¹ Especially interesting is the plea which Isaac imagines Abel to have pronounced trembling when Cain rose to kill him. He asks that Cain restrain his sword out of consideration for Eve and Adam, suggests that he replace his anger with love, and appeals to Cain's sense of justice, exhibiting a markedly passive attitude:

Let the dreadful judgment frighten you / from approaching innocent blood. Show me my transgression against you (*saklut[y] da-lwātāk*) / and behold my neck is beneath your sword. Inform me what my crime (*surhān[y]*) is / and do to me as you plan (lit.: “that which is in your heart”). You Cain be the Judge / and judge justice between me and you. Do not unjustly stretch out (*tawšet*) / your hand (*idāk*) against the blood of the upright one. Judge yourself like a stranger / and do not be favorable to yourself. Rebuke the iniquity (*'awlā*) which is in your heart / so that perhaps you might be acquitted, O feeble one. If you win unjustly, / you shall be found guilty according to justice. If you lose innocently, you shall find favor mercifully (177b).

⁷⁸ For a discussion of the phenomenon, see Glenthøj, *Cain*, 228 and 257-58.

⁷⁹ The move from good intent to fear of God can be seen as indicative of the importance of *taqwā* in the Quran. Compare with Q 22:37, where it said regarding beasts of sacrifice: “Their flesh shall not reach God, neither their blood, but your fear of God (*taqwā*) shall reach Him”. The parallel between the two verses is noted in al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 11:205.

⁸⁰ Brock, “A Syriac Life of Abel”, 474-76. Here too the passivity is evident: “If, then, you want to put me to death by murdering (me), (at least) grant me the greeting of a kiss [before] I die” (475).

⁸¹ See the discussion in Glenthøj, *Cain*, 135-45.

This passage is close to the Q 5:28-29 in several ways. Abel displays passivity in offering himself to Cain's sword; he describes the attack with vocabulary reminiscent of that used in the Quran (*lā tawšeṭ idāk - la-in basaṭta ilayya yadaka*); he refers to his own sin as he does in the Quran (*ḥawwān[y] saklut[y] da-lwātāk* and *awda' li mānaw surḥān[y] - an tabū'a bi-ithmī wa-ithmika*), though the context appears to be different; and warns Cain of the dire consequences of his intended deed.

This last theme is found in other Syriac sources as well. Thus we read in stanza 30 of the Syriac dialogue poem:

(Abel) He has clearly selected me, just as you say,
receiving my offering and showing me love.
See that you do not stain your hands with my blood
lest He utter some sentence against you.

To Cain's assertion that the pile of stones heaped over Abel's body will hide the crime Abel responds in stanza 32:

(Abel) That pile of stones which you heap up over me
will cry out for me, accusing you:
their clamour shall the Just One hear,
and He will judge the wrong done to me in accordance with His wisdom.⁸²

Similar warnings are found in Ephraem Graecus,⁸³ and the *Syriac Life of Abel*.⁸⁴ In the Quran too Abel attempts to dissuade Cain by mentioning punishment in hell (Q 5:29).

⁸² Brock, "Two Syriac Dialogue Poems", 344-45 (Syriac) and 353-54 (ET). Note that whereas in the Quran Cain buries Abel, in the dialogue poem he merely heaps stones over the body in order to conceal it.

⁸³ See Glenthøj, *Cain*, 137.

So far we have seen that the Syriac tradition and the Quran exhibit a similar dialogue in which Cain announces that he will kill his brother, while Abel attempts to dissuade him but does not put up a fight. Are there additional affinities between these texts, beyond the form of dialogue and its content?

To the shared motifs mentioned, it might be possible to add another more subtle and speculative one. After Abel's speech ends, v. 30 states:

(30) But his soul incited him to kill his brother (*fa-ṭawwa'at lahu nafsuhi qatla akhīhi*) so he killed him and thus became one of the lost.

The verb *ṭawwa'a* occurs only once in the Quran and its exact meaning remains somewhat vague.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, it seems to parallel another verb, *sawwala*, both in meaning and in syntax. Compare our verse with the description of Joseph's brothers' attempt to fool their father:

They brought his tunic with false blood on it. He [=Jacob] said: "No! Your souls have persuaded you to do something (*sawwalat lakum anfusukum amran*)..." (Q 12:18).

The verb *sawwala* occurs only three more times in the Quran; twice with the soul as subject⁸⁶ and once with Satan.⁸⁷ In fact the same evil act that Jacob attributes to his

⁸⁴ Brock, "A Syriac Life of Abel", 475.

⁸⁵ According to Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2:1891, the primary meaning of *ṭawwī'* is *making obedient* or *causing to obey*. This does not, however, fit our verse, which has been rendered as: "And his soul facilitated to him the slaying of his brother", "And his soul aided him to kill his brother", or "encouraged him to kill his brother"; *ibid.* and al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, 8:336-37. For a rather fanciful attempt to make such a meaning comply with the primary meaning of *causing to obey*, see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 11:208. For a variant reading, *ṭāwa'at*, which might suggest a rendition such as: "But his soul agreed to the killing of his brother", see al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:659, and al-Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 2:259.

⁸⁶ Q 12:83 and Q 20:96.

children's souls is attributed in another verse to Satan.⁸⁸ A further parallel between Satan and the soul is found in the use of the verb *waswasa* ("to whisper"). It occurs 4 times in the Quran; three times describing Satan⁸⁹, and once describing the soul.⁹⁰ Thus it might plausibly be argued that in v. 30 the soul is envisioned as an entity which intervenes and prevents Cain from heeding Abel's reproach.⁹¹ Left to his own devices Cain might have seen the light, but with his soul playing a satanic role he proceeded to commit the heinous crime.⁹²

This is of interest since according to many Christian sources, Syriac and others, Satan instigates the murder much as Cain's soul does in the Quran.⁹³ Several such references are found in the dialogue poem. Thus, for example we read in stanza 12:⁹⁴

The envious man saw, and was clothed with anger;
down to the valley he dragged his brother.
The cunning Evil One incited him (*w-biṣā ṣni'ā hu ṣaggšēh*)
and indicated to him that he should shed blood.

⁸⁷ Q 47:25 ("Indeed those who turn back after guidance has become clear to them, Satan has seduced them [*al-shayṭān sawwala lahum*]...").

⁸⁸ Q 12:5 and Q 12:100.

⁸⁹ Q 7:20, Q 20:120, and Q 114:5. The first two occurrences refer to Satan's role in the Paradise story which, as we have seen with reference to *saw'a*, is parallel to the Cain and Abel episode and may have influenced it.

⁹⁰ Q 50:16.

⁹¹ Note Q 12:53 where the soul is said to be an inciter to evil (*inna l-naḥsa la-ammāratun bi-l-sū'i*). For the *naḥs* as a satanic impulse, compare Plato's appetitive soul and the rabbinic statement that identifies Satan with the evil inclination and the Angel of Death (BT *Baba Batra* 16a). For the evil inclination in rabbinic literature, see Urbach, *The Sages*, 1:471-83, and I. Rosen-Zvi, "Two Rabbinic Inclinations? Rethinking a Scholarly Dogma", *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 39 (2008): 1-27.

⁹² Ibn Jurayj and Mujāhid indeed ascribe to Iblīs a role exactly at this point of the story, when he teaches Cain how to kill by crushing the skull of a bird between two stones; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 8:338.

⁹³ See already Theophilus of Antioch (d. 183-85), *Ad Autolyicum* 2.29 (ET in the edition of Robert M. Grant, [Oxford, 1970], 73): "When Satan saw that Adam and his wife not only were alive but had produced offspring, he was overcome by envy because he was not strong enough to put them to death; and because he saw Abel pleasing God, he worked upon his brother called Cain and made him kill his brother Abel". For further references, see Glenthøj, *Cain*, 25, 147, 213 and 279-81 (overview).

⁹⁴ See already stanza 10 where the Evil one cleaves to Cain as they leave to offer their sacrifices. In stanza 28 Abel refers to Cain as the abode of Satan.

But perhaps the closest parallel to the Quran on this point is supplied by Isaac, since here Satan's incitement to Cain to go ahead and murder his brother immediately follows Abel's passive response as it does in the Quran. Satan's agitation is much too long to be cited here in full, but perhaps a few lines will give its tenor:

But Cain did not consent / to withdrawing his hand from the pure one. For the Evil One had encouraged (*labbtēh*) him greatly / lest he hesitate to do so. The Evil One and his troops consulted / with Cain, the disciple of falsehood, so that they might prevail over the glorious one, / the one who rebukes their actions. The Evil One said to Cain: / "Kill your brother who persecutes us, / and show us a sign that you love us / in the death of this son of your mother. Let this one die for he did not allow us / to lift up our horn in sin. And let not this one / who oppresses us in his prayer live among us" (177b-78a).⁹⁵

The attribution of Cain's sin to Satan's instigation is not entirely surprising. In addition to being the ultimate source of evil, it is quite easy to read him into God's admonition in Gen. 4:7 ("And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it"). Nonetheless, Jewish recastings of the story do not seem to have mentioned Satan inciting Cain, so that again the Quran seems closest here to (Syriac) Christian sources.

The very end of the story might also suggest an affinity with Christian recastings of the narrative. "He then became one of the *nādimīna* (*fa-aṣbaḥa mina l-nādimīna*)", v. 31 tells us, but what exactly does this mean? It is often taken as meaning that Cain became repentant or remorseful. Did Cain indeed sincerely repent? Was he forgiven? Since such a tradition was current in rabbinic sources, a few Western scholars who

⁹⁵ See the analysis of Satan's role according to Isaac in Glenthøj, *Cain*, 126-27.

thought Cain had repented in the Quran adduced this as yet another instance of Jewish influence on the Quran.⁹⁶ This, however, is built on a faulty premise, since the Quran makes no mention of Cain's repentance.

Two arguments suggest that Cain did not repent sincerely or that his repentance was not effective.⁹⁷ First, the Quran does not mention any divine response to Cain's *nadam*. Were it sincere, one might have expected some indication of divine forgiveness. Such is the case with Adam (Q 2:37), Moses (Q 7:143-44), David (Q 38:24-25), Solomon (Q 38:35-36), and Jonah (Q 21:87-88).⁹⁸ Second, semantically the root *n-d-m* is never used in the Quran to describe sincere and effective repentance.⁹⁹ As Denny observed: "In most of its Qur'anic occurrences there is a sense more of being caught out and exposed, or at best of simply being terribly sorry, than there is a true change of heart, a *metanoia*, such as can be discerned in the other terms, especially *tawba*".¹⁰⁰ A comparison with the root *t-w-b* is instructive. In two verses *tā'ibīna* or *tā'ibāt* is a positive epithet for the believers.¹⁰¹ God is said to love the *tawwābūna* (Q 2:222). He himself is known as *al-Tawwāb*, i.e. "the One who accepts repentance".¹⁰² *Nādimīna*, on the other hand, occurs always in negative contexts. In Q 5:52 those who strive for pacts with the Jews and Christians will become *nādimīna* after God brings the believers victory. Following the unnamed messenger's appeal for help, God assures him in Q 23:40 that the people who reject his message will shortly become *nādimīna*. And indeed in the next verse we are told that they were seized by the cry and turned into scum. Likewise, in Q 26:157 the

⁹⁶ See Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes* 18 (citing the *Tanḥuma*), Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen*, 87, Masson, *Monothéisme coranique*, 336, and Stillman, "The Story of Cain and Abel", 237-38 (where Christian sources are also cited).

⁹⁷ That Cain did not show repentance in the religious sense is assumed already in T. H. Weir, "Repentance (Muhammadan)", in J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York, 1908-27), 10:735.

⁹⁸ For an overview, see U. Rubin, "Repentance and Penance", *EQ* 4:426-30.

⁹⁹ See A. Khalil, *Early Sufi Approaches to Tawba: From the Qur'ān to Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī* (University of Toronto, 2009), 61-64 (unpublished dissertation).

¹⁰⁰ F. Denny, "The Qur'anic Vocabulary of Repentance: Orientations and Attitudes", in A. T. Welch (ed.), *Studies in Qur'an and Tafsir*, *JAAR* thematic issue 47 (1980): 653.

¹⁰¹ Q 9:112, Q 66:5.

¹⁰² Q 2:37, 54, 128, 160; Q 4:16, 64; Q 9:104, 118; Q 24:10; Q 49:12; Q 110:3.

people of Thamūd become *nādimīna* after they hamstring the mysterious female camel. In the next verse we are told that the punishment then took hold of them. Finally, in Q 49:6 the believers are warned lest they hurt people unwittingly based on a false report and then become *nādimīna*. The only other occurrences of the root in the Quran are also in negative contexts. In Q 10:54 and Q 34:33 we are told that when the sinners see the punishment in the world to come they will feel *nadāma*.¹⁰³ Therefore rather than denoting repentance, in the Quran the root *n-d-m* seems to imply self-pity or disappointment. In short, Cain regretted what he had done, but did not repent of it: his feelings arose from the fact that the deed proved to have dire consequences for him, not from the fact that it was sinful.

The classical exegetes too seem to agree that Cain did not truly repent. It is true that, departing from Quranic usage, a prophetic tradition equates *nadam* with *tawba* (*al-nadamu tawbatun* or “Remorse is repentance”), but this is not true of Cain. In the exegetes’ reading Cain regretted everything but the sin itself. Thus he felt bad about carrying Abel’s corpse for a long time before burying it; about being bested by a raven; he missed his brother; suffered his parents’ wrath and so on, but his regret did not amount to repentance (*lam yandam nadama l-tā’ibīna*), as al-Zamakhsharī puts it.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, al-Rāzī states that Cain’s regret was not the result of fear of God and was therefore meaningless.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ The Arabic phrase *asarrū l-nadāma* is not entirely clear. The regular meaning of the verb *asarra*, “to conceal”, seems inappropriate in this context; see the interpretations cited in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s commentary and the comment in Paret, *Kommentar*, 224. Paret notes an intriguing parallel in Q 5:52 where the people regret the thoughts they harbored within themselves (*fa-yuṣbiḥū ‘alā mā asarrū fī anfusihim nādimīna*). Perhaps the use of *asarrū* to describe their reaction to the punishment is a literary device employed to highlight the “measure for measure” aspect of the punishment. In A. A. Ambros and S. Procházka, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 132, the verb in these two verses is rendered as “to feel s.th. deeply”.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:660.

¹⁰⁵ See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 11:210. A different approach is found in the anonymous opinion cited in al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi’*, 7:423. Here it is stated that in the time of Cain *nadam* was not considered as *tawba*. See also Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī ‘ilm al-tafsīr* (Beirut, 1964), 2:339, where this last position is attributed to al-Ḥasan b. al-Faḍl, perhaps a corruption of al-Ḥusayn b. al-Faḍl [al-Bajalī].

Having concluded that the Quranic Cain did not repent, let us examine the Jewish and Christian traditions. In the Bible Cain does not repent, but from early times Genesis 4:13 was construed in such a way as to allow this notion. Cain's protest, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" was rendered in several translations as an admission of guilt: "My sin is too great to forgive". This then led some sources to depict Cain as having been absolved. This exegetical move may have been inspired by any number of factors: a desire to emphasize the virtues of repentance,¹⁰⁶ a misunderstanding of the Hebrew, a notion that God's merciful response in v. 15 must have been preceded by repentance, and the fact that Cain was able to dwell in the land of Nod in spite of v. 12 where God says he will be a fugitive and wanderer.

This reading is widespread in rabbinic sources, though one also finds opinions that Cain did not repent.¹⁰⁷ A good example of both opposing approaches is found in *Genesis Rabba* 22:13 to verse 16:

Then Cain went away etc. Whence did he go out? R. Aibu said: It means that he threw the words behind him and went out, like one who would deceive the Almighty. R. Berekiah said in R. Eleazar's name: He went forth like one shows the cloven hoof, like one who deceives his Creator. R. Hanina b. Isaac said: He went forth rejoicing, as you read, *He goeth forth to meet thee, and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart* (Exodus 4:14). Adam met him and asked him: "How did your case go?" "I repented and am reconciled", replied he. Thereupon Adam began beating his face, crying: "So great is the power of repentance, and I did not know!" Forthwith he arose and exclaimed: *A Psalm, a*

¹⁰⁶ See Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 155.

¹⁰⁷ For a basic overview of the rabbinic approaches, see R. Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain* (Berkeley, 1981), 5-13. Detailed references to rabbinic sources in which Cain repents are found in M. Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah* (New York, 1993), 1:205. See also Urbach, *The Sages*, 1:467-68.

*song for the Sabbath day: It is a good thing to make confession unto the Lord (Psalms 92:1).*¹⁰⁸

A repentant Cain is found in Jewish sources ranging from the Aramaic Targums to the Zohar, but is rarely represented in the Christian tradition.¹⁰⁹ Aphrahat adduces Cain three times as an example of an unrepentant figure (*Demonstrations* 7.8, 7.16, and 14.42).¹¹⁰ In Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis* 3.6-8, God's questions in vv. 9-10 ("Where is your brother Abel?", "What have you done?") were meant to offer Cain a chance to confess so that "if he repented (*tāb*), the sin of murder that his fingers had committed might be effaced by the compunction (*twātā*) on his lips". "But Cain was filled with wrath instead of compunction" and refused to confess, thus bringing upon himself God's punishment. Then when the trembling and the shaking lead him to utter v. 13 ("My offence is too great to be forgiven"), this is not accepted as compunction since it comes too late under the constraint of the punishment.¹¹¹ John Chrysostom also stresses that the time for repentance was before the judgment was given in vv. 11-12. Though he calls Cain's utterance in v. 13 a "complete confession", he adds that this came too late. "You see, he should have done this at the right time when he was in a position to find mercy from the Judge".¹¹²

Repentance or lack thereof it is a major theme in Isaac's homily. In Abel's response to Cain's insincere request that Abel be his advocate, Abel urges him to be impudent and beg mercy for himself, for the pleading of an advocate cannot accomplish what the repentance of the sinner can (175a-176b). Rather than heed this advice Cain

¹⁰⁸ ET slightly adapted from Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 1:191-92.

¹⁰⁹ Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain*, 12-13; Glenthøj, *Cain*, 289-90 ("One may wonder if there was not direct polarization between Jews and Christians on the question of Cain's repentance").

¹¹⁰ Ed. Parisot, 1:324, 337, and 696.

¹¹¹ See ed. Tonneau, 49-50. The ET in Mathews and Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, 127-28, should be used with caution.

¹¹² R. C. Hill, *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on Genesis 18-45* (Washington, 1990), 29.

proceeds to attack Abel, who tries to persuade him to desist without success. God's question, "Where is your brother Abel?", was meant to allow Cain to confess and be forgiven (181b), but the killer misconstrues this as ignorance and is emboldened to lie and suggest that Abel is busy with his flock (182a-182b). God then judges him harshly and the issue of repentance is taken up yet again:

It was not that God did not / know about the murder of Abel. / It was repentance from the murderer / that the judge thirsted to hear. / He asked him as if He did not know / so that he might confess that he killed and He may absolve him. / Since he did not confess before the Inquisitor / He brought his folly on his head. / For if when the murderer / was asked by the Judge, / he had confessed that he killed, the Merciful One / would have had pity and compassion over him. / After he did not confess and Justice came / it shut His mouth, / when the fool confessed that his sin / is too great to be forgiven (183a-183b).

Thus when Cain finally confesses God can no longer forgive him. Isaac develops this theme and likens Cain's behavior to the two worlds. His denial when given a chance to repent depicts this world, whereas his belated repentance which was not accepted (*tāb dawyā w-lā etqabbal*) depicts the world to come in which there is no mercy. "The beginning of his questioning resembles / this world of justice, / whereas the end of his sentencing [resembles] that world without mercy. / A murderer who confesses in time / saves his body from torments, / whereas he who denies his sins / increases the suffering of his flesh" (183b). Had Cain repented as David did, he would have been forgiven in the same manner (183b-184a).

Again in Narsai's fourth homily on creation it is said that God feigned ignorance in asking "Where is your brother Abel" in order to allow the insolent one to repent (*nettwe*) and be granted forgiveness. Cain, however, follows in the footsteps of his master

Satan and fails to confess. It is only after he is punished that he shows regret, but this was involuntary (*ba-twātā d-lā b-ṣebyānēh l-bāroyā metkaššap wā*) and therefore did not mitigate his punishment.¹¹³ Likewise, in Jacob of Serugh's homilies *On Cain and Abel*, Cain is portrayed as unrepentant. After God rejects his offering and admonishes him so that he might repent from his evildoing (*da-ntub men surḥānā*) Cain pays no attention.¹¹⁴ When asked about his brother's whereabouts after the murder, Cain yet again refuses to confess and repent.¹¹⁵ His response to the punishment in v. 13 ("My offence is too great to be forgiven") is itself another instance of rejecting repentance. In embracing despair rather than begging for mercy and pleading for forgiveness, Cain magnifies himself and depicts God as weak. "He shut close the gate of repentance before justice / so that abundant compassion would not go after him. He blocked that bridge of mercy with despair / so that love would not pass and lead him to forgiveness. He closed the road before petition so that it not proceed in it / and answered the Lord: 'My offence is too great to be forgiven'".¹¹⁶ Indeed when reunited with his parents he confesses (*awdi*) the murder, but only because his trembling limbs testify against him anyway. The confession itself is more of an attempt to justify himself than a true recognition of his guilt and responsibility. Cain accuses Satan of leading him astray and compares his sin to that of Adam and Eve, insinuating that they are no better than him. He stresses the awful consequences of the murder for him but never repents of the sin itself.¹¹⁷

An exception to the Syriac tendency to portray Cain as unrepentant is the *Syriac Life of Abel* 19-20, where after Cain returns to his parents' house and informs them of what had happened he proceeds to weep for Abel whom he now loves, his heart of stone crushed. Cain addresses Abel, saying: "may these eyes of mine consume away, those that

¹¹³ Ph. Gignoux, *Homélie de Narsai sur la création*, PO 34.3-4 (Turnhout, 1968), 632-34.

¹¹⁴ Homily 147 in *JSB*, 5:12.

¹¹⁵ Homily 148 in *JSB*, 5:23-25.

¹¹⁶ Homily 149 in *JSB*, 5:34-36.

¹¹⁷ Homily 149 in *JSB*, 5:41-43.

saw your tears and had no pity over you; and may those ears of mine grow deaf, because they were stopped at your suppliant cry. O that someone would give you back to me in this humiliation that has come upon me, my brother; would that someone would remove the dust from your eyes, and so you might see to what a low level your mother's son has descended".¹¹⁸ There is, however, no indication that his repentance is accepted or has any effect on his punishment.¹¹⁹ Cain confesses his wrongdoing and begs forgiveness in stanza 55 of the East Syriac version of the dialogue poem as well, but this seems secondary and is not as widely attested as the other two West Syriac versions.¹²⁰ Here too there is no mention of God accepting Cain's petition.

Thus we see that in the Christian tradition Cain's confession was involuntary and came too late, therefore having no effect on his fate.¹²¹ The Quran, which ends its description of Cain with "He then became one of those who pity themselves", seems to share the same understanding.

5.4.2. Lexical issues

Let us now examine the vocabulary used in these texts. The Quran and the Syriac texts share several words: In the Syriac texts (following the Peshitta to Gen. 4:3-4) the Biblical *minḥa* ("offering") is rendered as a *qurbānā*. *Qurbān* in this sense appears only twice in the Quran: here in Q 5:27, and in Q 3:183 (itself probably an echo of the related

¹¹⁸ Brock, "A Syriac Life of Abel", 482; ET slightly adapted.

¹¹⁹ See the comment in Glenthøj, *Cain*, 289 ("It is quite conceivable that [the *Syriac Life of Abel*] knew a similar Jewish dialogue between Adam/Eve and Cain, but he himself adapted this tradition to the normal Syriac view, widespread in Greek, too, that Cain repented at a wrong time and that he would be punished accordingly").

¹²⁰ Brock, "Two Syriac Dialogue Poems", 348 (Syriac) and 358 (ET). In Brock's translation the stanza runs as follows: "Cain was astounded by that curse, / how it came on him all of a sudden, / and in his folly he confessed he had done wrong, / asking a great deal for forgiveness". However, in the Syriac the third stich is *wa-b-saklutēh awdi d-hāb*, which should be rendered "and he confessed his folly for he had done wrong".

¹²¹ The Quran too stresses on several occasions that late repentance is of no consequence. Q 4:18 teaches that "God shall not turn towards those who do evil deeds until, when one of them is visited by death, he says: 'Indeed now I repent', neither to those who die disbelieving; for them We have prepared a painful chastisement". See also Q 5:34; Q 10:90-92; Q 23:99-100; Q 40:85; and Q 63:10-11.

Biblical episode in 1 Kings 18); it has already been noted as a loanword from Jewish Aramaic or Syriac.¹²² Likewise the verb used in the Syriac texts is *qarreb*, as opposed to the Hebrew “brought”, *hevi*, and Targumic *ayti*. The verb *qarraba* in this meaning appears only here in the Quran. The use of this verb with the related noun is found both here in the Quran (*qarrabā qurbānan*) and in the Syriac texts where we find, for example, *qarreb[w] qurbānhon* and *qurbānā l-kinā qarreb[w]*.¹²³

Note also the following shared vocabulary: Syriac *qāṭelnā lāk* and Arabic *la-aqtulannaka*,¹²⁴ the various forms of the root *q-b-l* used by the Syriac authors and the Quran: Syriac *etqabbal*, *metqabbal*, *qabbel* etc. and Arabic *tuqubbila*,¹²⁵ Syriac *ṭlumyā* and Arabic *al-ẓālimīna* (Q 5:27),¹²⁶ and finally *lā tawṣeṭ idāk ba-dmā da-triṣā* (Isaac 177b) and *la-in basatta ilayya yadaka* (Q 5:28).

Although these words (with the exception of Arabic *qurbān* and *qarraba*) are quite common in both languages, their occurrence in a similar cluster in both traditions suggests that the story was indeed transmitted through an Aramaic channel. However, since many of them are found in the Targums as well (though not necessarily in Gen. 4), the linguistic evidence by itself is not sufficient to conclude that the channel of transmission must have been Syriac.

¹²² See *FV*, 234-35. Since some Targums also render *minḥa* as a *qrbn*’ one cannot go much further here; see Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. In Onqelos and Neofiti *qrbn*’ exists as a variant reading.

¹²³ See Brock, “Two Syriac Dialogue Poems”, 342 (Syriac) and 351 (ET) stanza 11 (“When they reached high ground and the presence of the Lord / they held out their offerings and presented them [*qarreb[w] qurbānhon*]”) and Isaac (173a) where the brothers are said to have “offered an offering to the Just One (*qurbānā l-kinā qarreb[w]*)”. See also Brock, “A Syriac Life of Abel”, 472 (*lamqarrābu qurbānē*).

¹²⁴ The Arabic probably displays a dissimilation of two consecutive emphatic consonants; E. Lipiński, *Semitic Languages: Outline of Comparative Grammar* (Louvain, 2001), 198.

¹²⁵ For the Syriac, see, e.g., Brock, “Two Syriac Dialogue Poems”, 342-45, *id.*, “A Syriac Life of Abel”, 472, and Isaac 175a. The Syriac texts are probably inspired by the Peshitta’s rendering of “accepted” (Gen. 4:7) as *qabblet*; see Glenthøj, *Cain*, 102. The Arabic word occurs three times in verse 27 (*fa-tuqubbila – yutaqabbal – yataqabbalu*) all in the fifth form, though the first and second occurrences are attested also in the first form; see Abū al-Baqā’ al-’Ukbarī, *I’rāb al-qirā’āt al-shawādh*, ed., M. al-S. A. ’Azzūz (Beirut, 1996), 1:434, and al-Khaṭīb, *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt*, 2:255.

¹²⁶ Thus in the refrain of the dialogue poem it is said: “[...] cry woe to the murderer / who slew his brother unjustly (*ba-ṭlumyā*); Brock, “Two Syriac Dialogue Poems”, 340 (Syriac) and 349 (ET).

5.4.3. The context of the story in the Quran and its typological function

“God, exalted and magnified be He, gave you the two sons of Adam as examples. Follow the good one and leave the evil one”, says the Prophet in a *ḥadīth* attributed to him.¹²⁷ But a close reading of the Quranic story in its context reveals that it serves as more than a mere ethical exhortation for the Muslims. Primarily it fulfilled a polemical purpose against their enemies, most probably the Jews.

Although traditionally treated as a hodgepodge of smaller units, recent scholarship has demonstrated that even the long chapters of the Quran are coherent.¹²⁸ Two recent studies by Neal Robinson and Michel Cuypers are specifically dedicated to demonstrating the careful composition of Q 5.¹²⁹ A full review and critique of their studies is beyond the scope of this chapter. Here I wish only to examine how the coherence of Q 5 affects the understanding of the Cain and Abel story.

The story is immediately preceded by the Israelites’ refusal to enter the Promised Land (Q 5:20-6), itself an example of the Jews’ unfaithfulness and their breaking of covenants (see Q 5:13).¹³⁰ In addition to their proximity, there are parallels between the two events which suggest that they were not juxtaposed randomly. Both feature two brothers (Moses and Aaron, and Cain and Abel) one of whom refers to the other as “my brother” (*akhī*), and in both a *nafs* is mentioned (vv. 25 and 30-31),¹³¹ though the

¹²⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 8:346-47.

¹²⁸ For a survey, see Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 493-512.

¹²⁹ See N. Robinson, “Hands Outstretched: Towards a Re-reading of *Sūrat al-Mā’ida*”, *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 3 (2001): 1-19, and Cuypers, *The Banquet*.

¹³⁰ The story is adapted to present the Jews in a very unflattering light. Rather than pray for the Israelites as he does in Numbers 14:13-17, in Q 5:25 Moses asks God that he and Aaron be separated from the rest of them.

¹³¹ Moses’ mention of his brother as his only follower in v. 25 is somewhat puzzling: “He said: ‘O my Lord, I rule no one except myself and my brother, so separate us from the wrong-doing people’”. But v. 23 mentions “two men of those that feared” and they too must have followed Moses. See the discussion in al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:656. It is perhaps not irrelevant that this problematic verse serves as a link with the following passage.

relationships between the pairs are contrasting. Unlike Cain, Moses looks after Aaron. In v. 25 the *naḥs* is under Moses' control, whereas in v. 30 it leads Abel astray.¹³²

The Cain and Abel story is followed by the punishment of those who wage war against God and His Prophet (*yuḥāribūna llāha wa-rasūlahu*) and hasten to wreak corruption in the land (Q 5:33), suggesting that it too should be read as alluding to enemies of Muhammad and the Muslims. The language in v. 33 is general,¹³³ but perhaps this too is aimed primarily against the Jews. Again the two passages are linked, this time by use of similar phrases in inverted word order: *fasādin fī l-arḍi* ("corruption in the land") and *fī l-arḍi fasādan* (vv. 32 and 33).¹³⁴ V. 33 essentially enlarges on the mention of the corruption in the land in the previous verse, specifying which punishments are prescribed for this.¹³⁵ That those waging war against God are indeed the Jews is suggested by their fate at the end of v. 33: "That is for them degradation in this world (*khizyun fī l-dunyā*); and in the world to come awaits them a mighty chastisement (*'adhābun 'aẓīmun*)". The very same language is used in v. 41 to describe the Jews: "for them is in this world degradation (*fī l-dunyā khizyun*); and in the world to come awaits them a mighty chastisement".¹³⁶ But the stylistic argument on its own is inconclusive.

¹³² These similarities are noted in Robinson, "Hands Outstretched", 8. Further similarities are noted in Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 196-97, but these are not as distinctive.

¹³³ Similar language is used in Q 9:107 concerning those who established a place of worship as an outpost for those who waged war against Allah and His Prophet (*man ḥārabā llāha wa-rasūlahu*).

¹³⁴ Robinson, "Hands Outstretched", 8. For the coherence of Q 5:27-40, see Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 213-14. In his analysis the passage comprises three parts: Cain and Abel (27-31), the prescription for the Children of Israel (32 except the last sentence), and a discussion of crimes and punishments (end of 32 to 40). All three parts show links to the others. A different take on the message of these verses is found in H. Busse, *Islam, Judaism, and Christianity: Theological and Historical Affiliations* (Princeton, 1998), 69-70. There the section consisting of Q 5:19-34 is understood as targeted against the Jews of Medina. Verses 20-26 stress that the believers must go to war when commanded; vv. 27-32 confirm that killing is sometimes permissible; and vv. 33-34 list the punishments for those who fight against God and His Messenger.

¹³⁵ See the remark in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 8:359.

¹³⁶ The parallel is noted in Robinson, "Hands Outstretched", 8. To Ibn 'Abbās is attributed the position that those who fight against God and his Messenger are a group from among the People of the Book who broke their pact with the Prophet and spread corruption in the land; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 8:360. Others interpret the verse as referring to apostates; *ibid.*, 361-67. The common legal interpretation of the verse as concerning brigandry has no basis in the text.

Another and more subtle indication that Cain was a literary proxy for the Jews is found in a parallel between the endings of vv. 29-31 concerning Cain and vv. 51-53 which exhort the believers not to take the Jews and Christians as allies. Compare “(30) [...] that is the reward of the evildoers (*al-zālimīna*) (31) [...] and thus became one of the lost (*fa-aṣḥaba mina l-khāsirīna*) (32) [...] He then became one of those who pity themselves (*fa-aṣḥaba mina l-nādimīna*)”, with “(51) [...] Indeed Allah will not guide the wrongdoing people (*al-qawma l-zālimīna*) (52) [...] And they will become... self-pitying (*fa-yuṣbiḥū... nādimīna*) (53) [...] And they have become lost (*fa-aṣḥabū khāsirīna*)”. Although the language is formulaic, these are the only two instances in which the three words occur in the rhyme of three consecutive verses, as Robinson notes. To him this suggests that “[t]he believers were surely meant to infer that the Jews of Arabia... were false brothers and potential fratricides”.¹³⁷

Moving now to the way the story itself is presented, the introduction already suggests that it serves a polemical purpose. V. 27 opens with “Recite to them the story of... (*wa-tlu ‘alayhim naba ‘a*)”, but does not specify who the audience is. The context¹³⁸ as well as the fact that all three other Quranic occurrences of the formulaic phrase “Recite to them the story of...” are polemical,¹³⁹ suggest that the audience is the Jews, as some exegetes understood.¹⁴⁰

Likewise, the comment which follows the story in v. 32 (“Our messengers have already come to them with clear signs, but many of them indeed commit afterwards

¹³⁷ Robinson, “Hands Outstretched”, 12-13. Robinson’s observation concerning the endings of the verses is in conformity with his contention that the Sura displays a chiasmic structure in which vv. 51-58 correspond to vv. 27-32.

¹³⁸ In Ibn ‘Atīyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz*, 2:178, it is argued that the pronoun in *‘alayhim* refers to the Israelites for two reasons: first, the preceding verses concerned them and adduced arguments against them on account of their plan to attack the Prophet (v. 11), and second, the Cain and Abel story belongs to their lore and is therefore fitting to be used against them.

¹³⁹ Q 7:175 (possibly directed at the Jews), Q 10:71 and Q 26:69 (both directed at the heathens).

¹⁴⁰ In al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān*, 8:317, the account is to be recited by way of warning to the Jews who intended to attack the Prophet and his followers (see Q 5:11). In Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Taḥfīl al-kabīr*, 11:203, there are two identifications of the audience: the people generally (*al-nās*) and the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*). According to Muqātil, however, the reference is to the Meccans.

excesses in the land”) clearly suggests that the People of the Book or the Jews are the target of this narrative.

But it is also the way the story itself is phrased that leads to the conclusion that it is told with enemies of the Prophet in mind. Compare the similar phrases in vv. 11 and 28:

v. 11	v. 28
O you who believe, remember Allah's grace to you when a certain people planned to extend their hands against you (<i>an yabsutū ilaykum aydiyahum</i>), but [Allah] restrained their hands from you. Fear Allah and let the believers put their trust in Allah.	If you extend your hand against me to kill me, I will not extend my hand against you to kill you (<i>la-in basaṭta ilayya yadaka li-taqtulanī mā anā bi-bāsiṭin yadiya ilayka li-aqtulaka</i>). Indeed I fear Allah, the lord of all.

This use of *b-s-t* to denote an attack is not common in the Quran,¹⁴¹ and its occurrence in both verses suggests that Abel and Cain stand for the Muslims and their enemies respectively, or perhaps even the Prophet and his enemies. V.11 does not spell out who these enemies are, but several exegetes identify them as Jews (at times specified as belonging to the tribe of the Banū al-Naḍīr) who plotted to assassinate Muhammad.¹⁴² And indeed several exegetes understood that the Cain and Abel story was meant to be read as commentary on the tensions between Muhammad and the Jews.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ It appears in Q 60:2 and perhaps in Q 6:93 (see al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2:44-45).

¹⁴² See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 8:228-31. Others identify the enemies as Bedouin Mushrikūn who planned to kill the prophet; *ibid.*, 232-33. Since vv. 12-13 address the unfaithfulness and treachery of the Jews and call upon the prophet to pardon them, al-Ṭabarī himself prefers them as the culprits. V. 8 (“Let not the detestation of a people move you not to be equitable”) is also connected by some exegetes to the Jews’ plan to kill the prophet; *ibid.*, 223.

¹⁴³ See, e.g., al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, 8:346, where it is stated that the Cain and Abel passage was meant to urge the followers of the Prophet to have recourse to pardon and forgiveness with regard to the Banū al-Naḍīr and to inform them that this sort of behavior is characteristic of their forefathers. See also al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān*, 5:290; al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi'*, 7:408; and cf. Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-manār*, 6:339.

That the Cain and Abel story be directed against the Jews is not surprising seeing that this very same polemical use is well known from Christian texts. Already in Matthew 23:35 the Jews are held accountable for the blood of the righteous Abel. In several Christian sources John 8:44 is understood to mean that Cain is the father of the Jews.¹⁴⁴ Thus Aphrahat quotes Jesus as saying to the Jews: “You are the children of Cain, not children of Abraham” (*Demonstrations* 16.8).¹⁴⁵ Ephrem calls the Jews “the people of Cain”, refers to Judas as “the master of Cain, the murderer”, and remarks that: “Cain is not as reprehensible as the crucifiers, who greatly followed his craft”.¹⁴⁶ Many comparisons are drawn between them and Cain in Christian tradition, Syriac and other.¹⁴⁷ This of course is related to the typological understanding of Abel as foreshadowing Christ. Such a reading is suggested already by Hebrews 12:24 and is quite common in early Christian authors.¹⁴⁸

This typological reading is also found in the Syriac texts dealt with in this chapter. Often the comparisons are explicit. Thus in the *Syriac Life of Abel* we read concerning Abel’s friendly attitude towards Cain: “How symbols of our Lord were prefigured in the slain Abel! Abel rejoiced as he went with Cain – just as our Lord Jesus, when he said to the Jews: ‘I am he whom you see’. The day that Abel died was in Nisan, for it is written that Cain offered up a sheaf, and Abel a lamb: sheaves and lambs are seen at their best only in Nisan; maybe the day was Friday, too, for it was on a Friday in Nisan that his

¹⁴⁴ See the authors cited in N. A. Dahl, “Der Erstgeborene Satans und der Vater des Teufels”, in W. Eltester and F. H. Kettler (eds.), *Apophoreta: Festschrift für Ernst Haenchen* (Berlin, 1964), 77.

¹⁴⁵ Ed. Parisot, 1:784.

¹⁴⁶ See Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1-11*, 144-45.

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, the remark of Ambrose: “These two brothers, Cain and Abel, have furnished us with the prototype of the Synagogue and the Church. In Cain we perceive the parricidal people of the Jews, who were stained with the blood of their Lord, their Creator, and, as a result of the child-bearing of the virgin Mary, their Brother, also. By Abel we understand the Christian who cleaves to god...”; ET in Savage, *Saint Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, 362. See also the elaborate typology in Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 12:9-13 (ET in R. Teske, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean* [Hyde Park, New York, 2007], 130-34). A discussion of this theme with further (later) texts is found in Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain*, 92-98. See also Glenthøj, *Cain*, 26, 61, 89, 116, 119, 125, 134, 154, 179, 207, 210, 218 and 222.

¹⁴⁸ See Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1-11*, 145-49, and Glenthøj, *Cain*, 26, 61, 93, 134, 153, 170, 175 and 218. For an overview of the typological approach to the narrative, see *ibid.*, 249.

Lord died. And if the time also agreed, then he would resemble his Lord's son in all things".¹⁴⁹ Likewise, Isaac likens Abel's interaction with Cain to that of Jesus with Judah Iscariot and to a lamb wagging its tail before the slaughterer (174b-175a).

In the *Syriac Life of Abel* the two murders take place in a similar fashion: "At the moment when he slew him with his hands and arms stretched out, the symbol of Him whose hands and arms were stretched out on the wood [of the cross] was clearly depicted. The earth too was rent where he was laid upon it. He depicted the symbol of Him whose body was *laid in a new grave, wherein no one had been laid*".¹⁵⁰ But the similarities do not end here. Thus we read: "In Abel is depicted a type of the killing of the Lord, and at the same time a type of His resurrection is depicted in the raising of his corpse – even though he did not rise to life as did Lazarus; but he did rise from his place of burial and was removed. For when they brought up his corpse to wrap it in garments and lay it with themselves on high, then the resurrection of the Son was depicted in him".¹⁵¹ The raising of the corpse is assumed to have occurred on the third day like that of Christ and so on. The very end of the *Syriac Life of Abel* reinforces this typological reading: "To the slain Son, the symbols of whose death were depicted in the just, the righteous and the prophets, - He who received the offering of Abel and took vengeance on his murderer, and both rebuked and rejected the rebellious people who had acquired Cain's stiffness of neck, - to Him let us ascribe glory and honour...".¹⁵²

At times the typology is expressed more subtly as in the refrain found in one of the manuscripts of the dialogue poem (Harvard syr. 103):

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 473-74.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 477. The allusions are to Matthew 27:60 and Luke 23:53.

¹⁵¹ Brock, "A Syriac Life of Abel", 484. The second burial was meant among other things to prevent Abel's body from being devoured by a wild animal. Abel too in his plea for mercy begged that Cain not leave him in the field as food for the birds of the sky, the dogs and wild animals (*ibid.*, 475). Eve expressed a similar fear when requesting that Cain show her where the body was before it was devoured by wild animals and torn up by birds of prey (*ibid.*, 482). See Glenthoj, *Cain*, 145 and cf. the positive role of the raven in the Quran.

¹⁵² Brock, "A Syriac Life of Abel", 485. Brock (*ibid.*, 492) adds references from other Christian authors to Cain as a type of Israel.

O People ('*ammā*) and Peoples ('*ammē*), come, listen and hear
the story of Abel and Cain:
cry woe to the murderer
who slew his brother unjustly (*ba-ṭlumyā*).¹⁵³

The People and Peoples is a common reference in the Syriac tradition to the Jews and Christians, respectively.¹⁵⁴ This invitation is also reminiscent of the way the Quranic story is introduced: “Recite to them the story of the two sons of Adam truthfully...” (Q 5:27). The dialogue poem alludes to Jesus also in stanza 47 where Cain approaches Abel and makes him kneel down “like a lamb about to be slaughtered”.¹⁵⁵ Likewise, as Brock notes the reaction of the mountains and deaf rocks to Abel’s moans and weeping in stanza 49 was perhaps suggested by the description of the crucifixion in Matthew 27:51.¹⁵⁶

It would seem then that in this instance the Quran draws upon a Christian anti-Jewish polemical use of the Cain and Abel episode.¹⁵⁷ In both traditions the story is used to portray the Jews as villains. Their victims are, however, different: in the Quran Jesus is replaced by the Muslims or Muhammad. A trace of this process is found towards the end of Q 5 where Jesus’ interaction with the Jews is described in similar language to that used to describe their attack against the Muslims. Compare v. 110, “When God said: ‘Jesus Son of Mary, remember My blessing upon you and upon your mother... when I restrained

¹⁵³ Brock, “Two Syriac Dialogue Poems”, 340 (Syriac) and 349 (ET). According to Brock (*ibid.*, 359), this is likely to be the original refrain.

¹⁵⁴ See Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 41, note 1.

¹⁵⁵ Brock, “Two Syriac Dialogue Poems”, 346 (Syriac) and 356 (ET). As Brock (*ibid.*, 362) notes, the language is based on Isaiah 53:7. This verse was understood as a reference to Jesus.

¹⁵⁶ Brock, “Two Syriac Dialogue Poems”, 362. In the later medieval dialogue poem the typological references are overt. Cain is compared to Judas and Jesus to Abel: “Praise be to the true Shepherd / who in his love became a lamb, / dying on the wood on Golgotha, like Abel in the valley”; *ibid.*, 367 (Syriac) and 373 (ET).

¹⁵⁷ A similar conclusion was reached recently in Cuypers, *The Banquet*, 214-19; his analysis of the structure of Q 5 led him to study its relationship with previous scriptures and to conclude that many Biblical figures in the Quran are treated typologically (*ibid.*, 476-78). Cuypers, however, focused on New Testament texts and therefore was not able to supply a Christian source for the Quranic dialogue. The closest text he found is Matthew 23:33-36, which indeed mentions Abel, but it does not retell his story, nor does it include a dialogue with Cain.

(*kafaftu*) from you the Children of Israel...” to v.11, “O you who believe, remember Allah’s grace to you when a certain people planned to extend their hands against you, but [Allah] restrained (*kaffa*) their hands from you”.¹⁵⁸

The story establishes the murderous tendencies of the Jews, beginning with Cain’s killing of Abel. This evil behavior continues with their assault against Jesus and with their attack against the Muslims. As v. 32 stresses: “Our messengers have already come to them with clear signs, but many of them indeed commit afterwards excesses in the land”.

5.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that major elements in the Quran’s version of the Cain and Abel story stand in the Syriac tradition. These include primarily the dialogue between the brothers, Abel’s passive reaction to Cain’s aggression, Abel’s attempt to dissuade his brother from sinning, and the typological use of the story against enemies of the Prophet. Though inconclusive, other elements too (the role of the *nafs* in Cain’s sin, his regret as opposed to repentance, and the diction of the narrative) are suggestive of a Syriac background.

But the Syriac sources do not include all the details of the Quranic version. I have discussed at some length the motif of burial as inspired by a bird. It is found in the Quran and in Jewish and Christian sources but not in the Syriac texts. Though I have raised some questions concerning the widespread assumption that the Quran is indebted to the midrashic parallels on this point, this does not change the fact that the Syriac tradition as we have it does not include this motif. Moreover, the quotation from the Mishna evidently reflects knowledge of a rabbinic text.

¹⁵⁸ The parallel is noted in Robinson, “Hands Outstretched”, 15.

My analysis of the way this quotation is used in the Quran offers an explanation for the relationship between the Jewish and Christian materials. The Quranic retelling of the Cain and Abel story draws on both Jewish and Christian traditions, but the overall spirit seems to be guided by Christian anti-Jewish approach. Even the quotation from the Mishna serves a sharp anti-Jewish polemical purpose. In the next chapter we shall see a similar mixture of Jewish and Christian elements concerning Abraham, and again I shall argue that a Jewish tradition is used polemically against the Jews.

Regarding methodology, I wish to stress the combined examination of motifs, literary form, diction, and typological function. Together these four types of evidence suggest that the Quranic Cain and Abel story is closely related to a strand of Syriac tradition. Taken individually, some of the parallels may not be compelling, but in conjunction they lend each other the power of persuasion. In the chapter devoted to the Joseph story we shall argue along similar lines.