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CONFLICTING READINGS IN THE NARRATIVE OF CAIN AND ABEL (GEN. 4:1-26)

Youjin Chung

I. INTRODUCTION

The reading of the Genesis narrative is challenging. It gives a double-burden to modern readers in terms of similarity and dissimilarity. At first, modern readers may be shocked by its huge amount of similarity with Ancient Near Eastern Literature. But soon they are even embarrassed with its stark dissimilarity with contemporary modern thought. This discomfort may force modern readers to the place of a theological vacuum; they might be overwhelmed and thus neutralized by these double-betrayals.

Careful readers will not be defeated, however. They rather seek a reverse-drama by reconstructing both the similarity and dissimilarity. On the other side of the coin, the Genesis narrative underlines that there is a radical dissimilarity behind the parallels with oriental theology. Indeed, the author of Genesis is much closer to a revolutionary than a compromiser who is against the dominant worldview of his time. Also, the overriding concerns of Genesis imply that there are significant convergent points between ancient and contemporary worldviews. In this sense, the clash between similarity and dissimilarity is cast in a new light. Such a conflict leads the purpose of this paper to the forefront; not only does it distinguish the dissimilarity of the Genesis narrative from the Ancient Near Eastern Literature, but it also highlights the similarity with the modern culture.

In this respect, Genesis, especially the narrative of chapter 4, is quintessential; the story of Cain and Abel is a hotbed of conflicting readings, which include both similarity and dissimilarity. Conflicting readings of Cain and Abel, thus, are significant because the place where the clash begins becomes the very place where the transformation takes place. In paradox, ambiguity speaks louder than assurance; in other

words, the disagreement of conflicting readings may become a prelude to bring a new mode of solid agreement.

II. THE CONFLICTING READINGS OF CAIN AND ABEL

Eve's Words (4:1)

The conflicting readings in the narrative of Cain and Abel start with the controversial words of Eve, the mother of two brothers. אִישׁ אֶת־יְהוָה קָנִיתִי ("with the help of the Lord, I have gained a man," v.1). It surely describes the birth of Cain, but, as von Rad notes, "every word of this little sentence is difficult."[1] Eve's expression thus embraces two opposite interpretations: an expression of thanksgiving or self-arrogance.

First, some commentators see it in the positive sense; Eve thanks God for allowing her an offspring as the promise of a seed who will crush the head of the serpent. Eve's words thus reflect her joyful gratitude. Eve agrees that although she is a mother, Cain's birth is entirely attributed to God's blessing. As Eve understands God not as a mere instrument, but as the general cause, the interpretation as 'from God' (παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ) seems to be more compelling rather than that of 'through God' (διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ).[2] In this verse, God is represented as the surrogate father so to speak. [3]

With the same impression, Martin Luther comments that Eve intentionally calls her offspring a *man*, not a *son* because Eve posits Cain as the one who brings to an end the misery of sin.[4] Here Eve is so sure that Cain, her first son, is the sign of God's promise in 3:15.

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[1] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1972), 103.

[2] A.C. Geljon, "Philonic Elements in Didymus the Blind's Exegesis of the Story of Cain and Abel," *Vigiliae Christianae* 61 (2007), 286.

[3] T. A. Perry, "Cain's Sin in Gen. 4:1-7: Oracular Ambiguity and How to Avoid It," *Prooftexts*, 25, no. 3 (2005), 259.

[4] Martin Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 91.

However, it is an awful blunder that Eve confuses her own conviction with the divine approval. Ironically such a blind faith has been grafted to Abraham, the father of *faith*, who believes Ishmael is a seed of God's promise.

Second, others interpret Eve's remark in a less positive fashion. Since קָנִיתִ more commonly refers to 'create' rather than 'acquire' or, 'buy,' they wish to translate it as "I have created a *man* equally with the Lord," implying "I stand together with [God] in the rank of creator." [5] Owing to this sense, some of them even go further that here *man* even refers to *Adam*, so that it can be translated as; "behold, my husband is now in my possession!"[6] The crux behind this voice highlights Eve's remark as "a shout of triumph at putting [Eve] on a par with Yahweh as creator."[7] However, it is instructive to note Eve's last words in 4:25;

"God has *granted* me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him" (NIV, italics mine). If it represents Eve's humble confession –note the word *granted* –the nuance of her previous words are less doubtful. By showing the stark contrast between the two, Eve's arrogant declaration at the beginning serves to maximize her humble confession at the end.[8]

As such, Eve's words open the door for conflicting readings in the narrative of Cain and Abel; the mother of two brothers has become the mother of two interpretations. Eve's remarks can diverge into two extremes: either an expression of thanksgiving or boastful self-respect. Nonetheless, Eve's faith in promised redemption by her seed is illuminating. Although Eve puts her hope in the wrong place, she might have acknowledged God's blessing over her own effort and dignity. Therefore, it is quite plausible that Eve's words in this narrative denote a joyful fanfare for God's help and blessing: "With a

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[5] U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1989), 201.

[6] Andre LaCocque, *Onslaught against Innocence: Cain, Abel, and the Yahwist* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008), 47.

[7] Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), 101.

[8] John H. Sailhamer, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis-Numbers*, vol. 2 ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 61.

help of the Lord, I have gained a man!"

The Offering of Cain and Abel (4:2-7)

The second conflicting reading is one of the most famous, but enigmatic narratives in the Old Testament: the offering of Cain and Abel. Such a problematic question is mainly attributed to the silence of the narrative. The narrator simply states that the offering of Abel is chosen by God, but that of Cain is not; succinctly, God's response is so clear, but His reason is quite ambiguous. The various conjectures, as a result, are to be suggested.

First, H. Gunkel presumes that God may prefer a shepherd to a tiller.[9] Since the text does not indicate, it is arbitrary for Gunkel as to whether God might consider the nature of the offering of the two brothers.[10] Rather Gunkel calls attention to the occupation of the two brothers; Cain is a tiller of the ground who offers fruits of the field, whereas Abel is a keeper of sheep who offers an animal sacrifice. In this context, Gunkel regards the response of God as His preference of a shepherd to a tiller. For this reason, God accepts Abel's offering, but scolds Cain's. The previous chapter, moreover, reminds that the earth has already been cursed in consequence of Adam's sin (Gen. 3:17). Gunkel's hypothesis, however, seems quite naive because of the following questions: "Does God really have favouritism?" "Why, then, does God appoint Adam and Noah as tillers/men of the soil?" (Gen. 2:15, 9:20)

Second, the theory of sacrifice has been proposed. John Skinner, in particular, emphasizes the significance of animal sacrifice. In the primitive Semitic society, Skinner adds, it is commonly accepted that the animal offerings are always superior to the vegetable offerings[11] with a belief that "living beings differ from soulless beings by nature."[12] The ancient worshippers especially had believed that the fellowship with the gods could be declared and sealed by eating and

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[9] Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis,* trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997), 43.

[10] Ibid., 43.

[11] John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1994), 106.

[12] Geljon, 290.

drinking of the sacrificial meal together.[13] In this connection, Skinner concludes that while Cain's vegetable offering may not be appropriate to God, "animal sacrifice alone is acceptable to Yahweh."[14] In fact, if the earth was already cursed due to man's sin, so was the offering of the fruit of the ground.

The weakness of this assumption, however, is that the narrative justifies both offerings by describing them as "offerings" (*minhah)*, not as "sacrifices" (*tsebah*).[15] This indicates that Cain and Abel's offerings are both acceptable to God as an appropriate product of their work; both would have equally selected the best of what they can offer.[16] So, it is no longer compelling that God puts animal sacrifice over vegetable offerings. God, needless to say, is not fanatical about blood.

Third, some scholars find the thrust of this episode as the soul of the sacrificer. If the matter is not one of the ingredients of the sacrifices, it is to be replaced by the spirit which determines its value in the sight of God.[17] So, they suggest that, as Hebrews 4:11 justly infers, Abel is able to get divine approval by faith, not by fancy.[18] God's question in verse 7 also alludes that Cain has already sinned before God[19]; "Is there not forgiveness if you do well?" The grounds for difference thus become a matter of respect on the basis of the different motivation between Cain and Abel, only known to God.

Fourth, many commentators try to connect the soul of the sacrificer with the quality of the sacrifices. The LXX, unlike the Hebrew Bible, supports this interpretation by differently rendering Cain's offering as a

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[13] W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions* (New York: The Meridian Library, 1956), 271.

[14] Skinner, 105.

[15] Silhamer, 61.

[16] Gunkel, 43.

[17] S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuem & Co. Ltd, 1922), 65.

[18] Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1981), 57

[19] Tom Thatcher, "Cain and Abel in Early Christian Memory: A Case Study in The Use of the Old Testament in the New," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Oct, 2010, Vol. 72 Issue 4, 732-751.

θυσία (sacrifice), but Abel's offering as a δῶρον (gift)[20]; it, as a result, brings an impression that Cain's sacrifice is inherently insufficient and divinely rejected.[21] Specifically speaking, Cain's offering is simply described as 'some of the fruits of the soil,' but Abel's case is significantly emphasized in two expressions, 'from the firstlings and their fat portions.' Such a double-emphasis –the firstlings and fat portions –seems to successfully highlight Abel's sincere desire for Yahweh.[22] To put it differently, "While Abel was concerned to choose the finest thing in his possession, Cain was indifferent. In other words: Abel endeavored to perform his religious duty ideally, whereas Cain was content merely to discharge this duty."[23] In consequence, each sacrificer's different attitude makes the different quality of the offerings and it eventually brings in God's different response to their offerings. This suggestion –Cain's offering is rejected because of his hypocritical heart –soon meets with a great challenge, however.

Fifth, there has been a new group of scholars who elevate the mystery of divine election as an alternative interpretation. Since the text says nothing, it is misleading to believe that Abel is better than Cain in attitude as well as in quality of offering.[24] Furthermore, they urge that such an interpretation is a modern intrusion apart from the event described in the episode.[25] A series of scholars thus no longer seek the difference of God's favor in Cain's attitude, nor in the ritual. Rather they take a close look at the capricious freedom of Yahweh as the crucial key point; they even contend that it is Yahweh Himself who

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[20] Joel N. Lohr, "Righteous Abel, Wicked Cain: Genesis 4:1-16 in the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the New Testament," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, 2009, 486.

[21] Thatcher, 732.

[22] Kenneth M. Craig Jr.," Questions Outside Eden (Genesis 4.1-16): Yahweh, Cain, and Their Rhetorical Interchange," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* no 86 D 1999, 111.

[23] Cassuto, 205.

[24] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 296.

[25] Westermann, 297.

brings the trouble, not Cain himself.[26] In their eyes, Cain is even a victim whom God has created. God poses the crisis to Cain, so "[he] is envious not because Abel is more successful, but because YHWH looks at a blunderer like Abel while ignoring Cain."[27] God's inscrutable motive is to be epitomized in various terms. Westermann defines it as 'something immutable,'[28] while von Rad and Karl Rahner respectively delineate it as 'God's free will'[29] and 'the mysterious ways of God.'[30]

Recently, T. A. Perry (259) explains it with the concept of 'oracular ambiguity.' According to Perry, the problem is that God's language is too ambiguous for Cain to get the message correctly[31];

> If you act correctly, you will benefit from the preeminence of birth.
> If you do not, sin, [= he, Abel] lies at the door
> and his desire is towards you;
> but you must rule over him.[32]

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the heart of Perry's suggestion lies not on God's deceptiveness, but on Cain's mind which is distorted by its own passion.[33] Therefore, Perry conversely shows that oracular ambiguity is not attributed to God's inscrutable preference, but to Cain's dishonest desire.

The story of the offerings of Cain and Abel, by definition, is enigmatic. It contains so many layers of meaning that it is as if its original intention is to hide, not to reveal. But, special attention should be paid to the following. First, the narrative itself is neutral. There is no indication in the text that the offering of Abel is better than Cain's,

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[26] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1982), 56.

[27] Ellen Van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1-11* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1994), 52.

[28] Westermann, 296.

[29] von Rad, 104.

[30] Karl Rahner, "Mystery," *Encyclopedia of Theology: Sacramentum Mundi,* vol. 4 *(*New York: Header and Header, 1969), 133-136.

[31] Perry, 266.

[32] Perry, 266

[33] Ibid., 270.

nor vice-versa. Rather, both brothers bring their best in an appropriate way. Second, God Himself is neutral. There is, in other words, no hint that God discriminates or prefers one to the other. Third, God Himself is free. As such His freedom sometimes goes beyond logical comprehensions, so it creates even disruption, tension and a shadowy side of reality.[34] Fourth, Cain himself is volitional. Without a doubt, "God tells Cain that he can do better. Not in using a better technique of sacrifice, but in not taking God for granted."[35] Therefore, it is Cain's own choice to agree or disagree with God's word.

Cain's Words (4:8-14)

Cain's response to God's punishment is also problematic. The words of Cain in verse 13 in particular have been questioned as to whether they represent his complaint or repentance. With respect to this, the interpretation of עָוֹן (*avon*) is decisive. Some translate it as 'punishment,' but others as 'iniquity' or 'sin.'[36] Thus, while some read this verse as 'my *punishment* is too great to bear', others read it as 'my *iniquity* of sin is too great to be forgiven.'[37]

At first glance, the so-called 'punishment-interpreters' consider Cain's words as a "cry of horror at the prospect of such a life of unrest and harassment without peace."[38] Here Cain's interest merely focuses on suffering inflicted on himself, rather than the sin committed by himself; the cry of the murderer ironically swallows up the cry of the murdered. In his rapid grasp of the situation, Cain immediately seeks for the mitigation of his punishment.[39] Since Cain, by intuition, comes to realize that the human life without God's protection is cheap as well as lawless,[40] his bitter crying in verse 14 can be rendered as a sort of self-defense to appeal to how God's punishment on him is harsh and intolerable.

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[34] Brueggemann, 57.

[35] LaCocque, 25.

[36] Wenham, 108.

[37] Ibid., 108.

[38] von Rad, 107.

[39] Skinner, 109.

[40] Ibid., 110.

U. Cassuto, however, refuses this interpretation. Rather he takes notice of the possibility that עָוֹן (*avon*) is used with נָשָׂא (*nasa*), in another sense, to forgive iniquity.[41] Such an idea of forgiveness brings to Cain's words a different outlook: from a song of lamentation to a song of repentance. At most, not only does Cain recognize his iniquity, but also accepts his consequences.[42] Verse 15 gives another clue to this view. As God regards Cain's words as sincere remorse in despair, He does Cain a favor, saying, "Very well[43]; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Besides, Westermann's interpretation goes further. In his very detailed study, Westermann finds out that the word עָוֹן (*avon*) includes both 'sin' and 'punishment' in the Hebrew characteristics.[44] This dual connotation, Westermann adds, implies that "God has to do with the criminal and that the criminal has to do with God."[45] In this complexity, verse 13 is to be understood as a confession of Cain to the consequences of his iniquity.[46]

Cain's response to God's punishment, by definition, is speculative; there is a thin line between the interpretation of remorse and complaint. However, Matthew Henry's comment may give a clue to this riddle. Both of them, as Matthew Henry notes, are not intolerable to God; Cain's complaint is against the justice of God, whereas Cain's remorse is against the mercy of God.[47] So, the purpose of the narrative may not be to prefer one interpretation to the other. Rather it wishes to portray a hopeless and lifeless human condition apart from God's protection; without God's help, either Cain's remorse or complaint is by nature pointless. In essence, it thus may be given to highlight one main purpose: Cain is desperate for God's mercy.

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[41] Cassuto, 222.

[42] Cassuto, 222.

[43] Septuagint, Vulgate and Syriac version of translation.

[44] Westermann, 309.

[45] Ibid., 309.

[46] Ibid., 309.

[47] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible: Genesis to Deuteronomy*, vol. 1 (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company), 42.

Cain's Mark (4:15-16)

The narrative continues to take readers to enigmatic situations. Cain's mitigation of his punishment –or repentance –leaves him another kind of riddle: the so-called mark of Cain. Although most recent scholarship posits Cain's mark as a sign of God's protection, not as a disgraceful stigma, the bare hint of the text still makes its original intention uncertain and speculative. Nonetheless, there are some suggestions to consider.

First, some recognize Cain's mark as divine protection against would-be attackers[48]; it is *God* who puts a mark on Cain. A sign thus represents Yahweh's mysterious protective relationship with Cain beyond mere disgrace.[49] Indeed, God gives Cain a sign not to condemn him as a murderer, but to protect him from murderers.[50] It furthermore brings an assumption that Yahweh obviously places a visible sign on Cain's body,[51] such as a tattoo mark, an incision on the face, special hairstyle, or circumcision etc.[52] Rabbinic suggestion even infers that God may have given Cain a dog as his companion to assure God's strict protection.[53]

Second, others, in contrast, assume that Cain's mark is no other than his name.[54] Drawing attention to the similar sound between *qayin*;) ('Cain') and *yuqqam* ('shall be punished'), they suppose that Cain's name itself is such a sign of warning against attackers by automatically reminding them of divine retribution.[55] This hypothesis, however, seems less persuasive because the original meaning of the name of Cain (*qayin*) displays a different connotation as 'smith', 'metal worker', or even 'a creature.'[56]

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[48] Wenham, 109.

[49] von Rad, 107.

[50] Westermann, 311.

[51] Gunkel, 47.

[52] Wenham, 109.

[53] Westermann, 314.

[54] Wenham, 109.

[55] Ibid., 109.

[56] Cassuto, 198.

Third, there has been long debate whether Cain's mark is meant for a single person or for a group. While some prefer to connect such a sign with tribal markings, others give favor to individual intention. The former see the strong bond between Cain and the tribe of the Kenites. They even urge that "Cain is the embodiment of the tribe of Kenites."[57] In consequence, the identity of Cain with the nomadic tribe justifies that the mark of Cain has parallels in tribal marking.[58] Especially, in some pre-Israelite setting, as these Kenites were the first worshipers of Yahweh, such an assumption as tribal marking may even serve the precursors of the religion of Israel.[59] In short, "they mark the bearer as the property of the god and place him under his protection."[60]

The latter, however, underline the individual fashion of the mark; the sign is originally intended for an individual, specifically, Cain alone, not for his offspring. As such, the text gives a hint about why the sign is given, "Whoever found *him* would not attack *him*" (v.15) (לְבִלְתִּי הַכּוֹת־אֹתוֹ). In this emphasis on Cain, "אות (*oth*) serves not only as a general warning to others, but also as a specific promise to Cain."[61] Therefore, the sign (*oth*) clearly designates Cain's solid position which cannot be replaced; "Cain remains under the condemnation of God and that no one may intervene in carrying out."[62]

In fact, the explanation of the mark of Cain is conjectural. Despite Martin Luther's description of it as "a token of divine wrath and punishment,"[63] recent scholarship seems to agree on the predominance of the view of a protecting mark over the mark of authentication. It, however, needs a balance, "as a protective device against potential enemies it may stay death; in that sense, the anticipated punishment is softened. But at the same time it serves as a constant reminder of

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[57] von Rad, 107.

[58] Skinner, 112.

[59] von Rad, 107.

[60] Gunkel, 47.

[61] Cassuto, 227.

[62] Westermann, 313.

[63] Luther, 109.

Cain's banishment, his isolation from other people."[64] Therefore, the final-cut is that "as the clothing given to Adam and Eve after the fall served to remind them of their sin and God's mercy, so does the mark placed on Cain."[65]

Lamech's Words (4:23-24)

In a way, the enigmatic reading of Cain and Abel is genetic; it has been handed down to Lamech, the last genealogy of Cain. The so-called 'song of Lamech' –Lamech's words to his two wives –has been interpreted in varied ways. At first, under the name of 'Song of Sword,' it is commonly accepted that Lamech's words are the expression of boasting, arrogance, and rebellion. The text itself allows this interpretation by providing Lamech's boastful figure returning from the blood-revenge and brandishing his weapon before his wives as an Arab chief; "…truly I have killed a man for bruising me, a youth for hitting me" (v 23).

From this point, Lamech's 'Song of Sword' becomes a 'Song of bravado' because "I have killed a man"[66] may connote "I want to kill a man."[67] In one sense, it resembles Eve's arrogant shout at the beginning; "I have created a *man* equally with the Lord!" What is worse, however, is that Lamech even puts himself in the extreme position of cutting off the life of a *man;* "the earlier vaunt was *with the Lord*; the later, *against the Lord*."[68] In Lamech's eyes, it seems too passive and insufficient to satisfy the way of God's protection of Cain. So, here Lamech wants to become the direct execution of vengeance by refusing any hurt without a sevenfold and dire revenge.[69]

In contrast, Lamech's advocates have emerged. They suggest that Lamech's words are an appeal to a system of legal justice, especially

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[64] George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 65.

[65] Wenham, 110.

[66] Drive, 70.

[67] Cassuto, 241.

[68] Ibid., 243.

[69] von Rad, 111.

the Mosaic Law.[70] Taking a close look at both form-critical and lexical correspondence,[71] they assume that "this verse (v 24) is a later addition which links the old song with the Cain and Abel narrative."[72] In this connection, they also find the reason why Lamech's viewpoint has been changed from the first person to the third between verse 23 and 24.[73]

In light of this, Lamech's song echoes in a different code. Lamech justifies his violent action by appealing to the principle of *lex talionis* which is provided in the Mosaic Law.[74] In this principle, Lamech has not shed innocent blood, but he just has killed a man *for bruising him*, and *for hitting him* only (v 23).[75] Since Lamech does not hate his neighbours illegally, such an action is to be understood not as a boastful and cruel blood-revenge, but as a necessary and inevitable self-defense. His deed thus can be vindicated as a necessary evil to prevent the escalation of blood vengeance. In consequence, if Cain could be avenged from his committing fratricide, Lamech must be avenged from his killing in self-defense.[76]

Like many other episodes, Lamech's words still remain an open question. Nonetheless, one substantive fact is that the narrative portrays the development of human potential in a pessimistic perspective. The Song of Lamech indeed is the epitome of a dark portrait of human history which is intoxicated by the increase of sin; "First the Fall, then fratricide, and now the execution of vengeance."[77] The Song of Lamech expressly exhibits the cycle of fortune between human progress and the spirit of brutality; the more progress increases by human desire, the more the possibility of mutual destruction[78]

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[70] Silhamer, 67.

[71] Ibid., 68.

[72] Westermann, 335.

[73] Silhamer, 68.

[74] Ibid., 67.

[75] Ibid., 67.

[76] Ibid., 67.

[77] von Rad, 112.

[78] Westermann, 337.

increases. Lamech's song, in this sense, reminds us of God's warning against 'desire' in verse 7; "…sin is crouching at your door; it *desires* to have you, but you must master it." As Cain failed to master his desire, so did the family of Cain by becoming the servant of the same *desire*.

IV. CONCLUSION

Reading the narrative of Cain and Abel is painful. It needs readers to accept conflicting readings in patience. Indeed, such a discomfort is the hall mark of this short story; not only does the whole narrative consist of every enigmatic episode –from Eve's words to Lamech's words, but also each episode serves to provide a big riddle as a whole. Careful reading, however, finds a thrust passing through the whole story. As every enigma has its own answer, the narrative of Cain and Abel includes the crux under the name of mystery.

The conflicting readings in the narrative of Cain and Abel thus are two-fold; they are both centrifugal and centripetal. In the one sense, it is centrifugal, in that every human desire begins to come out from the inside: humanity's self-arrogance, hypocrisy, complaint, and self-defense, etc. It repudiates God's sovereign position. In the other sense, it is centripetal because all such human dimensions are to be convergent into one crucial point: the unfailing divine mercy. It brings us back to the heart of the human condition. The narrative thus is cast in a new light. As the balance of centrifugal and centripetal force is a precondition for the on-going revolution, so are the conflicting readings of Cain and Abel: human's condition needs God's mercy.

The significance is that such a tension by nature is creative rather than destructive. Every step of conflict –such as Eve's praising vs. arrogance, Cain's offering vs. Abel's, Cain's repentance vs. complaint, Cain's protection vs. stigma, and Lamech's pride vs. self-defense – ultimately serves to build a new horizon of reading. Indeed, the pain of conflicting readings in the narrative of Cain and Abel is a prelude to the opening of a womb. As a new life is to be born in pain, the narrative delivers sheer hope out of the hopelessness; humanity's condition is hopeless without divine mercy.