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**Your urge shall be for your husband?
A new translation of Genesis 3:16b
and a new interpretation of Genesis 4:7**

Abstract

Der Aufsatz legt dar, dass Genesis 3:16b und 4:7b als Bedingungssätze zu verstehen sind. Als Bedingungssätze reden die beiden Vershälften davon, dass zwei Menschen sich gegenseitig von Übertretungen abhalten sollen. 3:16b meint daher weniger eine Strafe als vielmehr eine göttliche Belehrung, die sowohl an die Frau als auch an den Mann gerichtet ist. Diese Belehrung ist ganz eng auf die in Genesis 3:6 erzählte Übertretung bezogen. Der Bezug zu 3:6 erlaubt es, die Bedeutung der Begierde (תשוקה) und der Herrschaft (משל) genauer einzugrenzen. Eine neue Übersetzung von Vers 4:7a lässt dessen innere Beziehung zu 3:16b erkennen: Während 3:16b (und 4:7b) von der *gegenseitigen Verhinderung* von Übertretungen sprechen, damit negative Folgen gar nicht erst entstehen, geht es in 4:7a um *gegenseitige Hilfe* beim Tragen der Lasten (עצבון), die durch bereits geschehene Übertretungen entstanden sind. Viele bisherige Interpretationen denken bei 4:7a zu sehr an Kains eigene Sünden, da dieser kurz darauf zum Mörder wird. Im Unterschied dazu richtet diese Interpretation ihr Augenmerk besonders auf die vorausgegangenen Verse und versteht Kain wesentlich als den Diener des seit 3:17 verfluchten Erdbodens, der somit an den Folgen der Übertretung *anderer* zu tragen hat (נשא). In der neuen Übersetzung von 4:7a *lagert* nicht mehr die Sünde, sondern Kain darf trotz Übertretungen *ausruhen* (רבץ).¹

¹ This article represents a summary of parts of my MA-thesis (*Gen 3:16 und 4:7 im Rahmen der harmonistischen Interpretation der Urgeschichte von Benno Jacob*) written at the Institute for Jewish Studies at Freie Universität Berlin under the supervision of Prof. Tal Ilan.

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1. Problem

3:16b	ואל-אישך תשוקתך והוא ימשל-בך	<i>Your urge shall be for your husband, but he shall rule over you.</i>
4:7a	הלוא אס-תטיב שאת ואם לא תיטיב לפתח חטאת רבץ	<i>Surely, if you do right, there is uplift, but if you do not do right, Sin couches at the door,</i>
4:7b	ואליך תשוקתו ואתה תמשל-בו	<i>its urge is toward you, but you shall rule over it.</i>

Genesis 3:16b and 4:7 are two of the most difficult verses in the Primeval History. Even if 3:16b does not provoke a patriarchal offence,² the exact meaning of the verse remains vague. How is the urge/desire (תשוקה) of the woman to be defined? What is the nature of male rule (משל)? In the punishment of the snake it reads, *because you did this* (3:14), and in the punishment of the man it reads, *because you listened to the voice of your wife* (3:17). Unlike these statements there does not appear to be a direct connection between the punishment of the woman and the transgression in 3:6. What is the relationship between 3:16b and 3:6?³ Is 3:16b meant to be prescriptive (*Your urge shall be for your husband, but he shall rule over you*) or descriptive (*Your urge is for your husband, and he does rule over you*)?⁴ Did the relationship between the sexes change because of the transgression (e.g. in opposition to 2:23 *flesh of my flesh*)?⁵

4:7 is no less puzzling. In אס-תטיב שאת there is no object. What is it that Cain has to bear? חטאת is feminine and therefore should not be connected to the masculine רבץ. The common translation assumes a personified sin, *couching at the door*. In the midrash (Bereshit Rabba 22:5) it is named, “drive toward evil” (יצר הרע). Modern interpreta-

² Carol L. Meyers calls Genesis 3:16, “perhaps the most difficult verse in the Hebrew Bible for people concerned with human equality”, Art. ‘Eve’, in Carol L. Meyers (Ed.), *Women in Scripture*, Boston 2000, pp. 79-84, 81.

³ According to Benno Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora – Genesis*, Berlin 1934, p. 117, and Christoph Dohmen, *Schöpfung und Tod. Die Entfaltung theologischer und anthropologischer Konzeptionen in Gen 2/3*, Stuttgart 1996, p. 120, there is no reference back to 3:6 in 3:16 at all.

⁴ See e.g. Ina Willi-Plein, “Sprache als Schlüssel zur Schöpfung. Überlegungen zur sogenannten Sündenfallgeschichte in Gen 3”, in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 51 (1995), pp. 1-17, 10 and Helen Schüngel-Straumann, “Feministische Exegese ausgewählter Beispiele aus der Urgeschichte. Rückblick auf ein Vierteljahrhundert feministische Auslegung von Gen 2 und 3”, in André Lemaire (Ed.), *Congress volume*, Leiden 2002, International Organisation for the Study of the Old Testament (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, Vol. 92), pp. 205-223, 220.

⁵ See Walter Vogels, “The Power Struggle between Man and Woman (Genesis 3,16b)”, in *Biblica* 77 (1996), pp. 197-209, and Jürgen Ebach, “Liebe und Paradies. Die Logik einer Erzählung und die Logik der Grammatik”, in J. Ebach, *Ursprung und Ziel. Erinnernte Zukunft und erhoffte Vergangenheit*, Neukirchen 1986, pp. 111-125.

tions suppose a connection to a group of demons, called *rābiṣu* in Accadian, who were believed to be couching at doors. But such a concept of sin seems nonsensical in divine speech and does not appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.⁶ Additionally, it must be asked whose is the urge directed at Cain in 4:7b? Is it the urge of the couching sin or the urge of Abel?⁷ And lastly, 4:7b represents nearly an exact repetition of 3:16b, hence the need for an inner connection between the two verses.⁸

2. Basic Assumptions of this Interpretation

Traditional and new interpretations of 3:16b and 4:7 lead me to the following five assumptions which assist in the search for answers to the aforementioned questions:

- 3:16b and 4:7b are conditional clauses and as such speak about mutual prevention of transgressions;
- אִם־תִּיטֵיב שֵׂאת has its most important reference in עֲצָבוֹן *hardship* (3:16, 3:17, 5:29). In other words, אִם־תִּיטֵיב שֵׂאת speaks about Cain's capability and willingness to bear parts of the burden that originated in the curse of the ground (3:17). In a broader sense it talks about his willingness to carry the burden of *others*;
- The crux לִפְתַּח חֲטָאת רַבָּץ is to be divided in the *two* sentences, לִפְתַּח חֲטָאת and רַבָּץ;
- לִפְתַּח חֲטָאת is an extremely short phrase for return, that is, for the inner confession of transgressions, and if necessary, for the open acknowledgment of them. Like other verses in Scripture this sentence speaks about taking sin into the open and about the removal of sin;
- The subject of רַבָּץ is Cain. רַבָּץ means to repose, *despite* own transgressions. It represents the exact counterpart to שֵׂאת. Contrary to present interpretations, רַבָּץ has a markedly positive connotation.

⁶ Klaus Koch, Art. חֲטָא, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament II*, Stuttgart 1977, pp. 857-870, 861, Claus Westermann, *Genesis. Erster Teilband Gen 1-11*, Neukirchen ³1983, p. 408.

⁷ See Bernd Janowski, "Jenseits von Eden. Gen 4,1-16 und die nichtpriesterliche Urgeschichte", in Klaus Kiesow, Thomas Meurer (Ed.), *Textarbeit. Studien zu Texten und ihrer Rezeption im Alten Testament und der Umwelt Israels*, Festschrift für Peter Weimar, Münster 2003, pp. 267-284, 273ff.

⁸ See Karel A. Deurloo, "תְּשׁוּקָה >dependency<, Gen 4,7", in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99 (1987), pp. 405f.

3. Conditional Clauses with ו

To my knowledge an attempt has not yet been made at translating 3:16b and 4:7b as conditional clauses, although it is possible offhand. I would like to cite three examples of conditional clauses which begin only with ו (instead of אם or כי):⁹

Judges 6:13	ויש יהוה עמנו ולמה מצאתנו כל־זאת	<i>If the Lord is with us, why has all this befallen us?</i>
1Samuel 16:2	ויאמר שמואל איך אלך ושמע שאול והרגני	<i>Samuel replied, how can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.</i>
Genesis 44:22	לא־יזכר הנער לעזוב את־אביו ועזב את־אביו ומת	<i>The boy cannot leave his father, if he were to leave his father he (his father) would die.</i>

Accordingly, Genesis 3:16b and 4:7b can be translated as follows:

3:16b	ואל־אישך תשוקתך והוא ימשל־בך	<i>And if your drive is against your husband, then he shall dominate you!</i>
4:7b	ואליך תשוקתו ואתה תמשל־בו	<i>And if his drive is against you, then you shall dominate him!</i>

At first glance this translation may not seem very different from the first one presented above, but it is noteworthy that 4:7b as a conditional clause forms a fluent continuation of its two predecessors which are introduced with אם:

...אם־תיטיב...	<i>if you do it right...</i>
...ואם לא תיטיב...	<i>if you do not do it right...</i>
...ואליך תשוקתו...	<i>and if his drive is against you...</i>

4:7 can be regarded as a chain consisting of three conditional clauses. At this point I may anticipate and paraphrase the third sentence in order to stress the inner connection of the three clauses:

if you do it right...
if you do not do it right...
and if he intends to do something that is not right...

Next I will take a closer look at 3:16b and its relation to 3:6 since new ideas for the interpretation of 4:7 arise from there.

⁹ P. Joüon, T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Vol. 2, Rom 2005, p. 628, “The relationship between the two clauses can be expressed by a Waw. In this case it is common for the protasis also to begin with Waw...the first Waw [in Genesis 44:22] can be explained only as intended to bring out the correlation of the two clauses.”

4. Genesis 3:16b as a Conditional Clause and its Reference to 3:6

A better understanding of 3:16b can be gained by a close comparison to 3:6 which narates the transgression:

3:6	ותרא האשה כי טוב העץ למאכל (deed)	וכי תאוה הוא לעינים ונחמד העץ להשכיל ותקח מפריו ותאכל ותתן גם-לאישה עמה ויאכל	<i>The woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes and a tree to be desired to make one wise. She took of its fruit and ate and gave some to her husband and he ate.</i>
3:16b	ואל-אישך תשוקתך (instruction)	והוא ימשל-בך	<i>And if your drive is against your husband, then he shall dominate you!</i>

The allurement of the tree and its effect on the woman is emphasized in 3:6 by several expressions of pleasure (טוב למאכל, תאוה לעינים, נחמד להשכיל). The woman is deeply touched and is unable to restrain herself. She forgets about the prohibition (2:16f) and eats the fruit. 3:16b refers to this with the single word, תשוקה *desire/drive*, which likewise has a connotation of pleasure (see Song of Songs 7:11). Furthermore, the woman gave the man the fruit (ותתן גם-לאישה עמה). This too reappears in 3:16b namely as ואל-אישך. The same word איש is used, while only the preposition ל is altered to אל. As soon as ואל-אישך תשוקתך is translated as a protasis it becomes visible that these words allude to the behaviour of the woman in 3:6. 3:16b is indeed closely connected to 3:6. In 3:6 the drive of the woman has been against her husband. In this context תשוקה receives a negative tone because it is linked to the transgression of the divine commandment (2:16f – 3:6 – 3:16b).¹⁰

In order to understand the apodosis, והוא ימשל-בך, the behaviour of the man is to be observed. He has allowed the woman to give him the fruit. In other words, the man has let the woman dominate him and he is therefore responsible for the transgression alike. According to God's commandment he was not allowed to let her give him the fruit and he was not allowed to eat it by himself. *He shall rule over you* says what the man in 3:6 should have done. Therefore 3:16b contains a rebuke towards the man because of his neglect in 3:6.

Despite the precise reference to 3:6, the phrasing of 3:16b is as general as possible and is targeted at preventing future misconducts. 3:6 serves 3:16b as a model for transgressions which may take place similarly.¹¹ 3:16b can be translated and interpreted as fol-

¹⁰ The understanding of 2:16f is of no importance for this interpretation.

¹¹ See *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* by Hermann Samuel Reimarus from 1767/68, in Martin Metzger, *Die Paradieseserzählung. Die Geschichte ihrer Auslegung von J. Cle-*

lows: *And if in the future your drive will be once more against your husband, (i.e. you intend to tempt him to violate one of my commandments), then he shall dominate you, (i.e. he shall prevent you from the transgression and not let you tempt him) because then, you will not have to bear the consequences.*

This understanding narrows the meaning of תשוקה and משל down sufficiently.¹² תשוקה drive points directly to the transgression of a divine commandment. משל is a ruling that is in the service of the prevention of transgressions. 3:16b forms a definition of leadership among humans according to the divine will and is clearly meant in a prescriptive manner. Who is governed by whom is secondary. Therefore the relationship between Cain and Abel can be described with the very words in 4:7b.¹³ The observation of the divine commandment is essential as it must be the eminent concern of the divine legislator.

The tone of punishment is not very distinct in 3:16b. It lies in the fact that it is unpleasant to be rebuked (although it is better to be rebuked than to bear the consequences of the transgression).¹⁴

3:16b is first and foremost an instruction. It contains a universal and basic principle of human behaviour. As a conditional clause, 3:16b says that two humans shall prevent each other from transgressions instead of instigating one another. Even if one person has lost self-restraint, transgressions can still be prevented so that no negative con-

ricus bis W.M.L. DeWette, Bonn 1959, p. 160: “But, our primeval parents are incapable of dominating their own lustfulness to the extent that they hurry to feel around for the forbidden and easily push away warnings against damage. They offend in exactly the same manner humans do in present days; namely in following their sensual lusts without asking reason or listening to it. This is the cause of all human destruction up to this day.”

¹² Although Carol L. Meyers does not translate 3:16b as a conditional clause, she does write, “whatever the particular nature of the dominion in Gen. 3:16 may be, it does not come about by inherent right. It is a conditional and sometimes a temporary authority”, “Gender Roles and Genesis 3:16 revisited”, in Carol L. Meyers, M. O’Connor (Ed.), *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth; Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, Winona Lake 1983, pp. 337-354, 347.

¹³ See 1Samuel 25:32. David lets Abigail prevent him from a momentous transgression. It also has to be pointed out that in Genesis 3:16b, משל ב is used and not רדה ב as in Genesis 1:28 which talks about human rule over animals. משל seems to describe rule among equal beings; to conform someone to the divine will. Schmitt is right to a certain extent by proposing to translate משל, contrary to the exact wording, as a Nifal to equal. John J. Schmitt, “Like Eve, Like Adam: mšl in Gen. 3,16”, in *Biblica* 72 (1991), pp. 1-22, 16. Walter Vogels, “The Power Struggle between Man and Woman (Gen. 3,16b)”, in *Biblica* 77 (1996), pp. 197-209, 206, is right in criticizing Schmitt’s assumption because משל ב clearly means to rule over.

¹⁴ See e.g. Proverbs 28:23, *He who reproves a man will in the end find more favor than he who flatters him.*

sequences are to be endured.¹⁵

5. Notes on the Interpretation of 4:7b

וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשְׁוֶקֶתָּ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשַׁלְּבוּ *And if his drive is against you, then you shall dominate him!* Since 4:7b forms a variation of 3:16b, and because of the fact that there is no demon “sin” in the Hebrew Bible, several scholars are convinced that 4:7b, like 3:16b, is about the relationship between humans, namely between Cain and Abel.¹⁶ This reading seems probable to me.

תִּשְׁוֶקֶתָּ in 3:16b reminds the reader of the transgression in 3:6 with regard to future misbehaviour. Accordingly, תִּשְׁוֶקֶתָּ in 4:7b carries a hint of a future misconduct of Abel which has to be prevented by Cain, much like the man should have prevented the transgression of the woman in 3:6.

The story remains silent about the mistake of Abel, but it tells of Cain’s attempt to dominate his brother, *he killed him* (4:8). Obviously, Cain is incapable to act on the divine advice and to rule Abel in a way which will preserve the blessing according to the intention of מִשַׁל.¹⁷ Cain’s extreme behaviour represents the opposite of Adam’s passiveness in 3:6. Adam did nothing to prevent the transgression, Cain in contrast kills Abel and the curse of Cain (4:11) amounts to the curse of the ground (3:17).

The obscurity of 4:7b lies in the fact that no past or future misbehaviour of Abel is told explicitly to which תִּשְׁוֶקֶתָּ could be linked.¹⁸ On the contrary, the story bestows the image of moral integrity upon Abel. God *pays heed* to Abel and his offering (4:4). Furthermore, Abel can be

¹⁵ Possibly all of the three punishments consist of a punitive and of an instructive part. This means that besides 3:16b, 3:15b and 3:18 can also be understood as conditional clauses. 3:15b (the punishment of the serpent): *He shall strike at your head if you strike at his heel!* It is a fight between the occasions to new transgressions and the human ability to identify these sort of dangers in time. 3:15b says that humans shall come out on top in this everlasting fight, so that the burdens caused by transgressions remain at a bearable size. 3:18 (the punishment of the man): *And if it sprouts thorns and thistles for you, then the grass of the field shall be your food!* According to Benno Jacob *grass of the field* is an expression for animal food (*Genesis*, p. 121). This would mean, *And if tilling the ground becomes too hard, you may switch to cattle-breeding* (see Isaiah 7:23ff). 3:18 would already point at Abel’s profession.

¹⁶ Joseph Halevy, *Recherches Bibliques*, Vol. 1, Paris 1895, p. 88; Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, Vol. 1, Leipzig 1908, pp. 20f; Benno Jacob, *Genesis*, p. 139; Karel A. Deurloo “הַשְׁוֶקָה >dependency<, Gen 4,7”, in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99 (1987), pp. 405f; Bernd Janowski, “Jenseits von Eden. Gen 4,1-16 und die nichtpriesterliche Urgeschichte”, in Klaus Kie-sow, Thomas Meurer (Ed.), *Textarbeit. Studien zu Texten und ihrer Rezeption im Alten Testament und der Umwelt Israels. Festschrift für Peter Weimar*, Münster 2003, pp. 267-284.

¹⁷ See Leviticus 19:17: וְלֹא־תִשְׂנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֶטְאֵךָ *You shall not hate your brother in your heart: you shall in any wise rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin upon him.*

¹⁸ Even though 4:7b as a conditional clause does not demand it.

sure of the sympathy and compassion of the readers because he is the victim in Cain's murder (Matthew 23:35 Hebrews 11:4). I would like to add some thoughts on Abel's mistake as I understand it.

In contrast to Abel's perfect image, infallibility is not an attribute of biblical characters, as it is shown by the other stories about dispute between brothers in Genesis. Joseph tells his brothers his dreams which have a tone of arrogance in them and he thereby does not contribute to the easing of the conflict (37:5ff *they hated him even more*). In the story of Jacob and Esau the matter is elaborated more clearly. Jacob exploits a moment of weakness and tries to get Esau's birth-right (25:29-34). Later he betrays him and takes the blessing which was meant for Esau. As a consequence Esau intends to kill him (27:8ff). These stories of dispute between brothers indicate that there is a contribution made by the potential victims to their fate. In the extremely short story of Cain and Abel it is only the negative tone of תשוקה which indicates a mistake expected to be made by Abel.

A misbehaviour of Abel would suit the story of Cain and Abel well. Cain has already accumulated a considerable amount of hatred within himself (4:5) so that it takes only a slight mistake in the hands of his brother for Cain to release this hatred violently (4:8).

Which typical human mistake might the story have in mind (which would deserve the name הבל *voidness*)? I would like to suggest a comparison to the stories of Sarah and Hagar. In Genesis 16 Sarah gives her maid to Abraham as a wife. While Sarah waited for children over ten years Hagar becomes pregnant immediately. To put it in terms of the story of Cain and Abel, God *paid heed* to Hagar but *did not pay heed* to Sarah. It is this point especially which becomes Hagar's temptation against her childless mistress, *When she saw that she was pregnant, her mistress was lowered in her esteem.*¹⁹ Sarah turns to Abraham and he replies, *Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right* (16:6a). But the relationship between Sarah and Hagar will never be fixed (16:6b 21:10). Transcribed to the unsuccessful Cain and the successful Abel one could phrase the sentence: *When Abel saw that the Lord paid heed to him and to his offering but paid no heed to Cain and his offering, his elder brother was lowered in his esteem.* The divine instruction 4:7b suits as an answer, *and if his drive is against you, then you shall dominate him.*

¹⁹ Transgressions happen easily in situations of plentifulness: *of every tree of the garden you may freely eat* (Genesis 2:16f). Deuteronomy 8:11-14: *Beware that you forget not the Lord your God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command you this day: Lest when you have eaten and art full, and have built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.*

6. Interpretation of 4:7a

a) Considerations on the Structure of 4:7a

	הלוא
שאת	אם-תיטיב
לפתח הטאת	ואם לא תיטיב
רבץ	

The problem of the different genders of *שאת* and *רבץ* may be dealt with by understanding *לפתח הטאת* and *רבץ* as two separate sentences. The apodosis, *לפתח הטאת*, will be analysed later. First of all, the following complex sentence has to be examined:

שאת	אם-תיטיב
רבץ	ואם לא תיטיב

These sentences consist of two pairs of opposites. The dichotomy between *אם-תיטיב* and *ואם לא תיטיב* is obvious because of the negation *לא*. But the apodosis *רבץ* (*to rest/to lie down*, in other words *not to carry*) is also meant as an opposite to *שאת* (*to bear/to carry/to lift*).²⁰

The sentence: *If you do it right, then bear it, and if you do not do it right, you may rest* sounds paradoxical. This is because the two pairs of opposites are connected in a questionable way. It would seem that *to rest* and *to bear* have been interchanged accidentally: *If you do it right, then you may rest, and if you do not do it right, then you will have to bear (the consequences)*. But if one thinks of mutual help (2:18 *עזר כנגדו*) with all kinds of troubles the sentence makes sense without any change: *If you can do it right, then bear (the burden of others), and if you do not do it right, you may rest (because others will help you)*.²¹

Now the basic principle of 3:16b can be remembered: two humans shall prevent each other from transgressions so that no consequences are to be borne. But if this fails and there are burdens to be carried, the principle of 4:7a comes into effect: humans shall help each other to carry burdens. If everyone carries what he can carry best (*אם-תיטיב*), the amount of burdens can be reduced to a bearable degree and everybody can *rest* (*רבץ*) despite transgressions (*לא תיטיב*). And because mutual help is self-evident the whole sentence is introduced with *הלוא* (*Is it not*). While 3:16b and 4:7b define *rule ac-*

²⁰ See Genesis 49:14f and Exodus 23:5. The dichotomy of *שאת* and *רבץ* in 4:7 has been noticed so far, see e.g. Benno Jacob, *Genesis* p. 139 and Rashbam's interpretation.

²¹ See Ecclesiastes 4, Matthew 6:9-13 and Galatians 6.

ording to the divine will (משל), 4:7a defines what it means *to do good* (היטיב).²² The common denominator is the reduction of burdens.

b) Consideration of the Context

I will now elaborate these ideas in the context of the story of Cain and Abel. How can the ambiguity of תיטיב and שאת be narrowed down according to the context of Genesis 3 and 4? Because Cain is a tiller of the soil (4:2) and thus already has to bear the consequences of a transgression he did not commit, it is reasonable to think of the consequences of transgressions, and especially of those of others, in אִם־תִּיטִיב שאת.²³

In the punishments 3:14-19 the readers for the first time experience a divine thunderstorm. Eve and Adam learn of the consequences of the transgression which they will have to bear (עצבון). But the reader is not told how the first humans coped with the burdens of the cursed soil. To this end, in 4:2 the professions of Cain and Abel are told because they differ in their relationship to the soil. Cain as a tiller of the soil directly bears the burden of its curse. He has to deal with thorns and thistles firsthand. In Abel's profession sheep and goats do the job. Abel uses animals to mitigate the burden of the cursed soil and God approves of him doing so (4:4). Abel's "harvesting" of animals is closer to Adam and Eve's fruit picking in the garden than Cain's work with the soil is. As a shepherd Abel can farm areas much too difficult for Cain's agriculture.²⁴ The successful Abel can give his offering out of plentifulness and thankfulness and he may be content with his lot. This is not the case with Cain.

If Cain, as a tiller of the soil, bears the burden of the curse, why should God say with אִם־תִּיטִיב שאת, that he shall continue to carry the burden? This would only make sense if Cain did not want to carry the burden any longer (or if it became too heavy). In my opinion there are at least three indications in the story that this is indeed the case.

In 4:3 there is the inconspicuous phrase, *it happened at the end of some days* (ויהי מקץ ימים). How does this come to be known by the reader? Other occurrences of מקץ might help to explain this: In Genesis 8:6 Noah is sitting in the Ark, waiting for the waters to run off. *At the end* (מקץ) of forty days he sends out the raven. In Genesis 16:3 Sarah

²² There is a connection to Genesis 1. In Genesis 1 creation is constantly defined as *good*. Human doing good can add nothing good to this absolutely perfect creation. It can only prevent transgressions and help to bear the burden of human mistakes. Genesis 4:7a complements the absolute divine good-doing of Genesis 1 with the relative human good-doing.

²³ The murder which happens immediately after 4:7 functions like a mental blockade. The reader thinks only of Cain's own sins and not of the fact that he bears the burden of Adam's and Eve's mistake.

²⁴ See Ludwig Philippson, *Die israelitische Bibel. Erster Theil: Die fünf Bücher Moscheh*. Leipzig 1844, p. 21.

wants to have a child, and *at the end* of ten years she cannot wait any longer and gives her maid, Hagar, to Abraham as a wife. In Genesis 41:1 Joseph has been jailed innocently and awaits his release until *at the end* of two years the Pharaoh has a dream finally leading to Joseph's discharge. In Exodus 12:41 the bondage of the people of Israel comes to an end, *at the end* of the four hundred and thirtieth year when all the ranks of the Lord depart from the Land of Egypt. In 2Samuel 15:7 Abshalom cannot await the death of his father David, he wants to become King before. *At the end* of the forty years he tries to bring him down. When in Genesis 4:3 it reads, *it happened at the end of some days*, this alludes to the fact that someone is waiting for the end of a certain era. The keyword *days* is reminiscent of *all days of your life* (בל־ימי חיידך) in 3:17. It therefore seems to me that Cain, the tiller of the soil, was waiting impatiently for the end of the curse (or at least for an attenuation of it) and that his offering is associated with it.²⁵

This leads to the second notion. At the end of some days Cain brings an *offering*, or *present*, from the *fruit of the soil* (4:3). Not only is the keyword *fruit* reminiscent of the transgression in 3:6,²⁶ but it may also be the case that the choice of the word מנחה was not accidental. מנחה sometimes functions as a request for mercy or forgiveness. In Genesis 32 Jacob sends several *presents* to Esau because he hopes to soothe his anger:

- 32:12 *Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike...*
 32:14 *He spent the night there and he took of that which came to his hand a present (מנחה) for Esau his brother:*
 32:15 *Two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats; two hundred ewes and twenty rams...*

The soothing tendency of the word מנחה fits well in the context of an angry God as shown in Genesis 3:14-19. Genesis 3:17b can be compared directly to Cain's voluntary action in 4:3:

- 3:17b *...cursed be the soil because of you, by hardship shall you eat of it all the days of your life.*
 4:3 *It happened at the end of some days, Cain brought from the fruit of the soil an offering (מנחה) to the Lord.*

Cain did not bring about the curse of the soil and therefore may think that he can ask with his present for a lessening of the burden. But God insists exactly on what he has

²⁵ I would ascribe to Cain a kind of waiting which appears in Genesis 5:29. In the year 1056, not long after Adam's death in 930, the father of Noah longs for a relief from the toil (see Benno Jacob, *Der Penta-teuch*, Leipzig 1905, p. 6). It seems that the burden of the curse of the soil has become severe through additional transgressions. Lemech sets his hope in his son, *And he named him Noah, saying: This one will provide us relief from our work and from the hardship of our hands out of the very soil which the Lord placed under a curse. And after Noah's offering* (Genesis 8:21f) God indeed assures a certain relief.

²⁶ See Joseph Halevy, *Recherches Bibliques*, Vol. 1, Paris 1895, p. 87.

said to Adam, *all the days of your life* (כל־ימי חיידך), and pays no heed to Cain's offering, meaning that he does not reduce the curse of the soil.²⁷ Abel's flock instead continues to increase. Cain feels that he has been treated unjustly and this feeling is strengthened by the contrast to Abel's success. Cain becomes very angry, and furthermore *his face fell* ויפלו פניו (4:5).

This takes me to the third point, that Cain's offering implies a request. ויפלו פניו is reminiscent of the biblical phrase, *to lift someone's face* (נשא פנים).²⁸ Shortly before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot asks that he may flee to Zoar and the angel expresses his approval with the words, *I lift your face* (Genesis 19:21). When Abigail pleaded to David that he may refrain from his plan to kill all males in Nabal's line, and David respects her will, he answers, *I lift your face* (1Samuel 25:35). In the story of Jacob and Esau the lifting of the face appears together with the acceptance of the מנחה:

Genesis 32:20b

כי־אמר *For he said:*
 אכפרה פניו *I will appease him (cover his countenance)*
 במנחה ההלכת לפני *with the present that goes before me,*
 ואחר־יכן אראה פניו *and I will see his countenance thereafter,*
 אולי ישא פני *maybe he will uplift my countenance.*

Cain's fallen face seems to be an expression of his great disappointment with God who does not respect the request for a mitigation of the curse which lies in the offering. God's question *Why is your face fallen?* may be translated as *Why are you so disappointed?*²⁹

Although God maintains the curse of the soil, the answer אִם־תִּיטִיב שאת, implies a relaxation: only *if or as far as* Cain can do it right shall he bear the burden.³⁰

c) לפתח חטאת *as an Expression of the inner and open Acknowledgment of Failures*

Now I will take a closer look at רבץ – לפתח חטאת – ואם לא תיטיב. If someone does something *not right* or is confronted with difficulties and wants others to help him, he must be made to or become aware of the mistakes, he has to admit them to himself or if

²⁷ This would answer the question of how Cain recognized that God paid no heed to his offering. It is possible that only Cain himself recognized it because only he connected this special hope with his offering.

²⁸ Therefore many scholars connect אִם־תִּיטִיב שאת to Cain's face which is not surprising due to the foregoing question *Why is your face fallen?* But it does not answer the question of what 4:7 is all about and it provides no explanation for the opposition of שאת and רבץ.

²⁹ See Leviticus 19:15.

³⁰ When Cain and Abel are to be found in the field together this may indicate an attempt at mutual help which lead to the deadly argument. 4:8 does not say that Cain lead Abel into the field with the object to murder him undisturbed, but, *It happened when they were in the field בשדה* (4:8).

necessary to others and he must be willing to change his behaviour. This is the precondition for others to be able or willing to help. In 4:7aβ *לִפְתַח חַטָּאת* is placed between the doing, which is not right (ואם לא תיטיב), and the ability to rest (רבץ). It therefore seems to me that *לִפְתַח חַטָּאת* must be an extremely short phrase of return (i.e. of the inner and open acknowledgment of mistakes).

There are several possibilities to translate *לִפְתַח חַטָּאת* as a sentence. It could be translated as *The sin belongs to the door*. However, it seems to me that in *לִפְתַח חַטָּאת* the verb *to bring* (להביא) has been omitted, that *לִפְתַח חַטָּאת* is a shortened form of *הביאה לִפְתַח חַטָּאת*.³¹ The sentence would then have to be translated as *Put the sin to the door!* or, *Bring the sin into the open!* Sin would become the object. Cain has to do something with the sin. He shall no longer hide it from himself or from others.

Unfortunately, the exact phrase *לִפְתַח חַטָּאת* does not appear again. It is therefore necessary to understand it with biblical analogies. 4:7aβ consists of three steps: *1 not to do it right – 2 acknowledgment of the failure – 3 relief*. These three steps appear in longer versions in other biblical books:

(tables are from right to left)

Genesis 4:7aβ

3	2	1
רבץ <i>then you can rest</i>	<i>לִפְתַח חַטָּאת</i> <i>(bring the) sin to the door!</i>	ואם לא תיטיב <i>And if you do not do it right</i>

(See Leviticus 4 as a whole, Numbers 15:22ff) **Leviticus 4:13f**

ונסלח להם <i>and they shall be forgiven.</i>	ונודעה החטאת אשר חטאו עליה והקריבו הקהל פר בקרבך לחטאת והביאו אתו לפני אהל מועד... <i>then the sin which they sinned shall become known and the community shall offer a bull of the herd as a sin offering and bring it before the Tent of Meeting...</i>	ואם כל־עדת ישראל ישגו ונעלם דבר מעיני הקהל ועשו אחת מכל־מצות יהוה אשר לא־תעשינה ואשמו <i>If it is the whole community of Israel that has erred and the matter escapes the notice of the congregation, so that they did any of the things which by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done and they have become guilty,</i>
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³¹ See Proverbs 23:12: *למוסר לבך להביא Apply your mind to discipline!* להביא is used in Genesis 4:3 for Cain's מנחה.

Psalms 32:3-5

<p>ואתה נשאת עון חטאתי</p> <p><i>and you carried the guilt of my sin</i></p>	<p>חטאתי אודיעך ועוני לא־כסיתי אמרתי אודה עלי פשעי ליהוה</p> <p><i>Then I acknowledged my sin to you, I did not cover up my guilt, I resolved: I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,</i></p>	<p>כי־החרשתי בלו עצמי בשאגתי כל־היום כי יומם ולילה תכבד עלי ידך נהפך לשדי בחרבני קיץ</p> <p><i>As long as I said nothing, my limbs wasted away from my anguished roaring all day long. For night and day your hand lay heavy on me. My vigor waned as in the summer drought.</i></p>
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(See Job 22:23) Job 11:14ff

<p>ואחפרת לבטח תשכב ורבצת ואין מחריד וחלו פניך רבים</p> <p><i>and, entrenched, you will rest secure, you will lie down no one will make you afraid, many will appease your countenance.</i></p>	<p>הרחיקה ואל־תשכן באהליך עולה...</p> <p><i>remove it and do not let injustice reside in your tent...</i></p>	<p>אם־און בידך</p> <p><i>If iniquity be in your hand,</i></p>
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לפתח חטאת is reminiscent of expressions which describe return as the putting away of sin, like for example, Deuteronomy 13:6: ובערת הרע מקרבך *thus you will sweep out evil from your midst* (17:7,12 19:13,19 21:9,21 22:21f,24 24:7).

The use of the word פתח in לפתח חטאת can be understood according to Job 31:33f. These verses speak of the confession of mistakes in front of others, *Did I hide my transgressions like humans do, did I bury my wrongdoing in my bosom? Did I fear a great multitude, or did the contempt of families terrify me, that I kept silence, and went not out to the door?* (לא־אצא פתח).

Since the meaning of חטאת is both *sin* and *sin offering* it leads to the idea of a sin offering in לפתח חטאת, to think about an acknowledgment of sin as it is done with a sin offering in front of the Tent of Meeting (פתח אהל מועד e.g. Leviticus 4). It could be that God is asking Cain for a sin offering with לפתח חטאת. However, it seems to me that the cultic ring of חטאת is more a criticism of Cain's מנחה that has been refused by God moments before. The phrase לפתח חטאת may be a contrast to the phrase מנחה ליהוה in 4:3. The appearance of חטאת shortly after a refused offering, and the ambiguity of

whether it is meant as a *sin* or as a *sin offering*, seems to be a prophetic criticism of sacrifices without either a real acknowledgment of wrongdoing or a real change of action (Leviticus 26:31) because the crucial point is not the sin offering but the sin. The sin offering can only be a symbol for it.

d) On the Continuation of the Story

Cain's further fate to stray restlessly, נע ונד (Genesis 4:12,14), forms a contrast to רבץ in Genesis 4:7. Jeremiah 4:1 and Jeremiah 7:3 (7:7 25:5 35:15) may serve as a comparison:

Jeremiah 4:1

<p>3 ולא תנווד</p> <p><i>you will not have to stray.</i></p>	<p>1+2 אם־תשוב ישראל נא־מ־יהוה אלי תשוב ואם־תסיר שקוציך מפני <i>If you return, o Israel</i> – declares the Lord – <i>if you return to me,</i> <i>if you remove your abominations</i> <i>from my presence,</i></p>
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Jeremiah 7:3

<p>ואשכנה אתכם במקום הזה <i>and I will let you dwell in this place.</i></p>	<p>היטיבו דרכיכם ומעלליכם <i>Mend your ways and your actions,</i></p>
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With the murder of his brother, Cain achieved the opposite of what he wanted to bring about with his offering. The soil will give *him* nothing, *If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you* (4:12). Cain produced a burden of sin that he himself, *and nobody else*, is able to bear, *Is my guilt too great to be carried?* (4:13) and, *Anyone who meets me may kill me* (4:14).³²

³² The first two appearances of the verb נשא *to carry* (Genesis 4:7 and 4:13) insofar as they are reminiscent of the carrying of the sins of others (of forgiveness), may be a part of the connections to the story of Joseph and may form a frame around the book of Genesis. Genesis 50:16f: *So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before his death your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive I urge you (נא נא), the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive (נא נא) the offense of the servants of the God of your father..."* At the beginning of Genesis there is the catastrophe of fratricide and Genesis ends with the reconciliation of Joseph with his brothers. According to Eve's words in 4:25, Seth is a compensation for Abel. When Adam, the father of mankind, has lived 130 years (5:3) he gains a compensation for the killed Abel. When Jacob, the father of the people of Israel, has lived 130 years (47:9) he is reunited with Joseph. Seth replaces Abel but Joseph replaces Jo-

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