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*Book Review:*

**Cain, Abel, and the Politics of God: An Agambenian Reading of Genesis 4:1-16**

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**Cain, Abel, and the Politics of God**  
*An Agambenian Reading of Genesis 4:1-16*

By Julián Andrés González Holguín

*Publisher:* **Routledge (New York, NY)**

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Julián Andrés González Holguín's debut title *Cain, Abel, and the Politics of God: An Agambenian Reading of Genesis 4:1-16* is one of the more striking examples of biblical criticism in recent years; not only does Holguín successfully reimagine the political consequences of this "well-known but not so well understood story" (8), but as well proposes an unprecedented "theoretical triangle" with which to do so (4). By radically compounding Giorgio Agamben's notion of the *homo sacer*, Jacques Rancière's ethical community and dissensus, and Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic interpretation of foreignness, Holguín's text demonstrates the need to urgently revisit Gen. 4:1-16 for the purposes of navigating the political and social deadlocks of late capitalism. From the migrant crisis in Europe, to the undocumented workers in the United States, Holguín nests Cain and Abel "in the context of the contemporary issues of human rights and migration" (4).

The book is composed of four chapters and a brief epilogue. Holguín first interrogates the interpretation and reception of Cain and Abel through the centuries. He highlights the uniqueness of the story in the Old Testament—specifically the ambiguities of the ancient Hebrew language as it is written in the Masoretic text. Holguín emphasizes the strained etymology and wording of Eve's conception, the birth of Cain, and Cain's ambiguous paternity as the raw linguistic material from which Cain's otherness was produced in the translations and interpretations of Philo, Targum Pseudo Jonathan, and St. Augustine. Holguín's observes that the reception of the story has been shaped and reshaped "by different readers

in different geopolitical situations,” emphasizing “a continuous attempt to make Gen. 4:1-16 adaptable and relevant to later generations of readers who did not have a grasp of ancient Hebrew culture” (6-7). For Holguín, analysis of the literary components of the text “should be accompanied by that of the social and even cultural elements,” including “community, brotherly love, the exile, the immigrant, and the figure of the father/sovereign” and addressing “the complex ways in which Gen. 4:1-16 may either underscore and justify injustices or provide alternative social models for change” (8).

In the first chapter, Holguín surveys ancient Jewish and Christian interpretations of Gen. 4:1-16, focusing on the many iterations of Cain’s otherness through the ages. According to Holguín, although both Jewish and Christian interpreters of the text “were trying to articulate a new doctrine through their reading of the story,” it was the Christian interpreters whose exegeses saw the story “in terms of the relationship between the two communities” (23). For this reason, Holguín focuses on Christian exegetes in more detail, and Augustine of Hippo in particular. For Augustine, according to Holguín, Cain and Abel respectively typified two separate communities in *The City of God*. As Holguín observes, “Augustine’s reading of Cain helped shape the stance of medieval and early modern church on the relationship between the two communities,” with Abel standing for the “city of God,” and Cain the “city of men” (48).

In chapter two Holguín turns critically to modern scholarship on the question of Cain’s otherness, the killing of Abel, and interpretations of the mark of Cain. Whereas “traditionally, Gen.4:1-16 is known as the story of Cain and Abel,” Holguín argues “that this designation misses the points because it excludes the character of God in the story” (72). By emphasizing the role of God, Holguín finds “ample opportunities for challenging the androcentric view of family and human relations” afforded in the story (72). Holguín challenges Spinoza’s “separation of biblical studies from topical political discussion” as a springboard for critiquing the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation. He cites Susanne Scholz, Musa Dube, and Vincent Wimbush against historical-critical approach to the bible (74-75), asserting that “Spinoza’s project thus badly needs re-evaluation because the Bible is part of the cultural production that continually informs

the symbolic texture of the modern society” (75). Here Holguín articulates a cohesive critique of the historical-critical approach to biblical criticism, while simultaneously indicting the deity as a sovereign power whose arbitrary actions produce Abel as *homo sacer*, or as the bare life essential for the sovereign to implement its authority through an act of exclusion.

Chapter three offers a rather unconventional departure from biblical scholarship, examining three poetic interpreters of Gen. 4:1-16: Byron’s *Cain: A Mystery*, Jorge Borges’s “Juan Lopez and John Ward” and César Vallejo’s “Los dados eternos” [“The Eternal Dice”] and “Voy a hablar de la esperanza” [“I am Going to Speak about Hope”], using the tools of literary criticism. Holguín persuasively argues that Byron’s *Cain* may be “nudged into the position of the ‘undocumented’ day laborer of modern capitalist societies” (112-113). For Holguín, the deity in Gen. 4:1-16 “maintains a relation” to the primeval family as non-citizens in a state of “unparticipated solitude,” emphasizing his arbitrary and indeed almost sadistic qualities (119). In his account of Borges’s poem (which was written in response to the 1982 invasion of the Falkland Islands by Great Britain), Holguín claims that “for Borges, Juan and John re-enact in the twentieth century the tragedy of Cain and Abel,” illustrating how otherness is structured in capitalism (142). Holguín concludes chapter three with a brief excursus on Vallejo’s poems, writing that “[Vallejo’s] work reflects the same existential anxiety as that tormenting Byron’s Cain,” effectively drawing a thematic parallel between interpretations which are temporally, regionally, and aesthetically quite unique from one another (144).

In the fourth chapter, Holguín returns to a more conventional approach to biblical criticism by turning our focus back on the Masoretic version of Gen. 4:1-16. However, his conclusion is far from conventional. Holguín explicates his reading “as a migrant, especially as an ‘undocumented’ immigrant...as one of the millions...around the globe who live a life that in a sense is not there in that it is largely invisible to the host societies and rarely heard by them” (165). In this chapter, Holguín makes one of his more radical observations of Gen. 4:1-16, declaring that, “Eve and Adam are migrants *par excellence*” (166). Holguín probes into what he earlier refers to as the “problem of ambiguous divine intervention in human affairs” (41), analyzing the divine discourse of the deity, and

ultimately concluding that “in a textbook instance of symbolic violence, the deity pushes Cain to murder his brother while retaining full deniability by never explicitly mentioning either Abel or a violent act of any kind” (178). In this way, Abel becomes *homo sacer* while Cain becomes akin to the “figure of the migrant without proper documents, the person who does not have the legal rights granted by birth or naturalization and thus lives in a kind of limbo or legal parenthesis” (10). This condition, Holguín claims, is representative of the contemporary socio-political paradigm. For Holguín, Cain is included by his exclusion under the sovereign rule of YHWH, just as migrants are included by being excluded by the state.

One possible limitation of the text is Holguín’s reading of the Lacanian subject in terms of the Lacan of the mirror stage, particularly in his explication of Byron’s *Cain*. Although Holguín does rely on Lacan’s subsequent disciples — Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou — on a number of occasions, his portrayal of the Lacanian subject seems dated at times. Despite this, Holguín’s admixture of psychoanalysis, political theory, and philosophy offers a radical and subversive reinterpretation of Cain and Abel and its multiple literary and theological permutations throughout the ages, featuring often surprising theoretical insights while seamlessly bridging the temporal divide between ancient and modern exegesis, and our contemporary political constellation. *Cain, Abel, and the Politics of God* is a crucial intervention into both biblical criticism and political theory simultaneously. Holguín rigorously demonstrates the viability and indeed necessity of reexamining traditional religious perspectives in order to break the deadlocks of contemporary capitalism, and, in the end, highlighting “the need for biblical exegesis to be politically responsible” (165).

Holguín’s work is reminiscent of Žižek’s theological writings, particularly *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* (co-authored with John Milbank, MIT Press, 2009). Like Žižek, Holguín engages with an impressive interdisciplinary array of thinkers to construct his radical reinterpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which in turn serves to rigorously indict the impasses of contemporary capitalism. Readers might also take note of Holguín’s affinity with the work of Daniel Bell, such as his *Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (Routledge, 2001), as both writers address the Liberationist tradition with a

critical yet sympathetic eye, seeking to uncover the revolutionary potential of the Judeo-Christian tradition toward social and political ends. Although the subject matter of Holguín's work primarily addresses biblical exegesis, the book has widespread sociopolitical potential, and is therefore recommended for researchers in the fields of philosophy and critical theory, and is an ideal work of scholarship for those whose engagement with theology and biblical criticism tends toward the critique of power and ideology.

*Anthony Ballas is a graduate of the University of Colorado at Denver where he studied philosophy, English and religion. Anthony is currently editing a collected volume entitled Cinema Liberation Theology.*