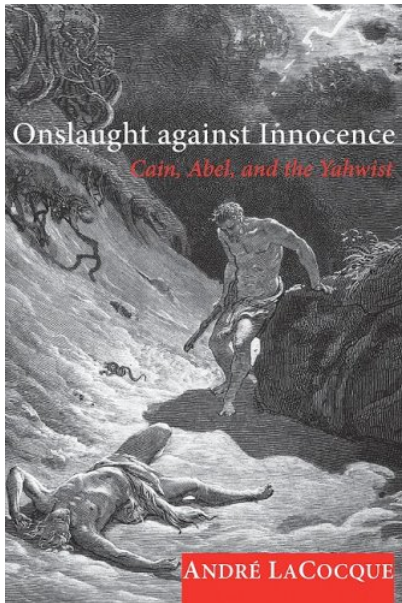


RBL 11/2009



LaCocque, André

***Onslaught against Innocence: Cain, Abel, and the Yahwist***

Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2008. Pp. viii + 177. Paper.  
\$22.00. ISBN 1556357893.

Mark McEntire  
Belmont University  
Nashville, Tennessee

The present volume is an obvious sequel to André LaCocque's 2006 work, *The Trial of Innocence: Adam, Eve, and the Yahwist*. The author considers the two books combined to be an "essay on the dialectical anthropology according to J in Gen 2:4–4:1," but, at the same time, he contends that they "can be read independently" (1). LaCocque, now Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at the Chicago Theological Seminary, has had a venerable career as an innovative interpreter of biblical texts. In this case, as usual, he brings an enormous wealth of interpretive tools to the task. The prospect of LaCocque's creative brilliance coming into full contact with a text so full of potential meaning as Gen 4 brings great anticipation. The results are mixed, as they are bound to be, in such a creative rereading of a text so well-worn. The stream-of-consciousness style of the work can be hard to follow, but there are gems of insight to be found.

The bulk of the book consists of the middle three chapters: "The Anthropological Dimension"; "The Theological Dimension"; and "The Psychological Dimension." It is unclear whether the title of the second chapter, "The Anthropological Dimension," indicates that LaCocque will be focusing on the human characters in the story or looking at the story through the lens of the field of anthropology. Both seem to happen in this exploration of Gen 4, so perhaps the title is deliberately ambiguous. This is a well-known

text, and its interpretive issues are familiar to most readers. LaCocque addresses nearly all of them, sometimes offering new insights, sometimes repeating old ones, sometimes advancing prior interpretations into new territory, and sometimes simply disguising old readings in new terminology. While the notion of Cain and Abel representing settled/agricultural and nomadic/pastoral ways of life, respectively, has been around for a long time, the combination of these insights with the archaeology of Israel and Judah and the biblical stories of these two nations during the monarchic period creates a more complete picture of how these archetypal forces might be at war in Gen 4 (26–28). Like readers for over two thousand years, LaCocque is at pains, however, to explain the different divine responses to the offerings of the two brothers and, despite some fancy Bakhtinian maneuverings, still falls back on the notion that Abel's offering was better because the sheep was "from the firstborn," while Cain's produce can be assumed to be ordinary, since the text does not describe it. This is a reading as old as Philo and Genesis Rabbah. There are lengthy attempts to resolve the interpretive problems in verses 7 and 8, with verse 7 labeled as a *crux interpretum*. Thus, the center of LaCocque's interpretation will be the choice that Cain finds before him and his individual responsibility to God, his brother, and the world.

The third chapter is called "The Theological Dimension," and once again it is difficult to determine exactly what this means. Early on, LaCocque is psychoanalyzing Cain, rejecting any interpretation that Cain may have repented, and accusing him of behavior that "is a frequent feature among psychotic people" (68). Later he identifies something called a "Cain complex," which he defines as "the stubborn pursuit of the destructive choice that entails a 'curse from the ground' as it sterilizes everything around and uproots the human from the very concrete world in which he/she claimed to be rooted" (77). There are two lines of reading that LaCocque seems particularly determined to reject in this chapter. First, he will not consider any possibility that Cain is a victim in the story. He makes claims such as "The truth is that Cain's murder is a premeditated crime," without any explanation of how he knows this. Second, he dismisses even more vehemently any questions about the justice of God. The possibility that God showed arbitrary favoritism, creating unnecessary animosity between Cain and Abel, or that God failed to prevent the murder when God could or should have done so are deemed unacceptable readings. Perhaps this latter is the primary concern that points toward a theological dimension. This is all part of a circular argument that began in the introduction with this convoluted sentence: "It belongs to a false conception of God to apply a logic according to which if God does not shield the innocent from being slaughtered, he has the power to do so but does not (perhaps by whim)" (11). I am not entirely sure what that means, but it appears to be a dictum with which LaCocque enters into his exploration of the Cain and Abel story and which closes off certain avenues of exploration. Most frustrating is LaCocque's

unexplained and unexamined assumption that the author of this text is innocent. This assumption is visible in his critique of certain often unidentified readings of the text. “There is, I say, an obscene—because complacent—accusation of God. Some of the postmodern attempts at excusing Cain are imposing a self-serving, self-exonerating agenda on the text regardless of content and context” (73). Of course, one of the basic tenets of any postmodern reading is that texts often impose their own self-serving, self-exonerating agendas. Thus, when LaCocque is offering a defense of God, he is really offering a defense of the Yahwist’s portrayal of God. Further, he asserts that “God’s non-intervention before Abel’s murder is God refraining from manipulating human history, a manipulation that would sterilize history or, at least, reduce the human drama to a puppet show” (73). This seems an odd conclusion to draw about a story in the midst of so many stories of a heavy-handed, interventionist God who casts Adam and Eve from the garden, banishes Cain while preventing Cain’s murder, and floods the earth killing all but eight human beings. The noninterventionist God is the God found at the end of the book of Genesis, as W. Lee Humphreys so ably demonstrates in *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis*, not at the beginning of it.

Chapter 4 presents “The Psychological Dimension,” and this title is also difficult to interpret. Much of the chapter does address questions about whether Cain repents and whether he can be rehabilitated, though these questions have arisen earlier in the book. The final section of this chapter begins to address, more directly than earlier, the genealogy of Cain in 4:17–25. LaCocque has previously described this text as an “eclipse of God” (80), a “society cursed with violence” (31), and a place where “work is further fragmented” (18), so his view of Cain and Cain’s progeny remain extremely negative, despite the creative ingenuity this line of people demonstrates. This focus leads into the fifth, and final, chapter of the book, “Genealogy and Culture.” LaCocque ably demonstrates the Yahwist’s general suspicion of technology and city-building and their tendencies toward violence and domination, exemplified in the figure of Lamech. His reading of Gen 4 ends in hope, although he objects to the interpretations of Westermann, Gressman, and Delitzsch that 4:26b is a general statement about religion. Instead, according to LaCocque, “when the Name of Yhwh is invoked, the relationship is not any longer ‘religious’ but covenantal.”

The purpose of this book becomes more clear in LaCocque’s conclusion, where he admits that “siding with Abel is also siding with J’s God” (143). The goal has been to portray Abel as the model of innocence who is overwhelmed by the power of evil, represented by Cain. Innocence has a continuing presence in the world, represented by the crying out of Abel’s blood from the ground. “J’s string of primeval cameos (Genesis 2–11) is like a movie about ‘not doing well’” (144). These failures are redeemed by Abraham and the continuing story of the Bible into the New Testament and its portrayal of divine love.

LaCocque can, and does, name the modern analogs to this story—the Holocaust, Stalinist Russia, Cambodia, and Darfur—but the clarity of these examples may only serve, for many readers, to reveal how unclear most of life is.

This intriguing study will lead the reader to do some careful thinking about the familiar story in Gen 4. Even when LaCocque's conclusions are dissatisfying, they reveal and challenge our own assumptions about the narrative.