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"My punishment is greater than I can bear"
Malagasy and Norwegian ordinary readers on Genesis 4:13

Knut Holter

In his monograph *Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scriptures* (2012), Hans de Wit visits the relationship between two groups of Bible readers, the professional exegetes of academia on the one hand, and the much larger group of so-called ordinary readers on the other. The former should be attentive to the textual experiences of the latter, he argues, and they should allow these experiences to unfold what he refers to as the meaning potential of the texts (2012, 68). De Wit uses two biblical texts as examples, the narratives about the widow and the judge in Luke 18 and about Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4, and he surveys how these texts were read by a large number of Bible study groups that were linked to the multinational intercultural Bible reading project (de Wit et al. 2004). Based on this empirical material, de Wit is able to demonstrate that ordinary readers through intuition—an intuition that reflects their human, spiritual, and cultural experiences—are sometimes able to accentuate aspects of the texts other than those seen and critically analyzed by the professional exegetes.

The following pages—which are dedicated to Hans de Wit, in gratitude and deep respect for the insights he has shared with us—will reflect on this possibility of letting the experiences of ordinary readers interact with the interpre-

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tation of the more critically and historically minded exegetes, and thereby facilitate an unfolding of the meaning potential of biblical texts. The empirical background for these reflections is a small research project I organized in 2011–12, as part of the intercultural Bible reading project directed by Hans de Wit (see www.bible4all.org). I asked two already existing Bible study groups—one in Madagascar and one in Norway—to read the Cain and Abel narrative in Genesis 4 and then in three rounds to exchange interpretive comments. A broader analysis of the exchange will be published elsewhere; here and now I will restrict myself to one particular aspect of the interaction—namely, how the two groups related to Cain's sigh of despair, as expressed in Genesis 4:13, when he realizes the depths of God's reaction to his killing of his brother. I will start with some words on how this question has been handled by the professional exegetes of academia, then go to the two Bible study groups, and finally devote some attention to Hans de Wit's concern that professional exegetes have something to learn from ordinary readers.

The consequences facing Cain, according to professional exegetes

Genesis 4 contains the paradigmatic Old Testament narrative of fratricide: Cain, a farmer, kills his brother Abel, a shepherd. After a narrative description of the context, the rivalry, and the vicious act (verses 1–8), verses 9–15a continue with a more reflective dialogue between YHWH and Cain:

- Verse 9a: YHWH asks Cain about the whereabouts of his brother.
- Verse 9b: Cain responds that he is not his brother's keeper.
- Verses 10–12: YHWH shows that he is aware of what has happened, and he points out the consequence for Cain: he will be driven from the land and made a restless wanderer on earth.
- Verses 13–14: Cain responds in despair that his *'awon* is too heavy to bear (13), then echoes YHWH's words about being driven from the land and made a restless

wanderer, and adds the possibility of being killed in revenge.

- Verse 15: YHWH responds that if anyone kills Cain, that person will suffer vengeance seven times over.

Crucial here is Cain's sigh of despair, as expressed in a condensed form in verse 13 of the narrative, when he realizes the depths of God's reaction to his killing of his brother: "My *'awon* is greater than I can bear." The verse has been read in various ways. The crucial term is the Hebrew noun *'awon* and its relationship to a verb expressing "to carry." One interpretive tradition (such as, for example, Luther's) has interpreted the noun in its most frequent meaning as "sin," whereas another tradition has interpreted it as the consequence of sin, that is, "punishment" (as in the King James Version). The first of these two interpretive traditions makes Cain a repentant sinner; God's judgment in verses 10–12 leads him to realize what he has done and he responds by repenting. Such an aspect of repentance, however, can hardly be said to be present in the rest of the narrative, and this interpretation finds little support in present biblical scholarship. The second interpretive tradition seems more reasonable; terminologically, with Cain as the grammatical subject of the verb expressing "to carry" plus *'awon*, it refers to carrying punishment, and structurally it makes verses 13 (where Cain's punishment is described in general terms) and 14 (where it is described in more concrete terms) parallel. Still, one could also argue that a dichotomy between "sin" and "punishment" in this text is an exegetical exaggeration; the two concepts are interrelated in the Old Testament (Westermann 1984, 309; Koch 1999, 551).

The consequences facing Cain, according to Malagasy and Norwegian "ordinary" readers

I asked two already existing Bible study groups—one from Fianarantsoa, Madagascar, and one from Stavanger, Norway—to discuss and interact about this text from Genesis 4, and in three rounds they exchanged reading reports. The two groups soon realized that they read certain aspects of the narrative dif-

ferently, and their interpretation of the consequence facing Cain—not least based on their reading of verse 13—illustrates this.

The Malagasy group has several Malagasy Bible translations at their disposal, all emphasizing the punishment perspective of the *'awon* in verse 13. The revised Protestant version renders it *valin'ny heloko*, "retribution for my sin," whereas the Catholic version renders it *saziko*, "my punishment." This perspective of punishment is therefore the obvious basis of the Malagasy group's reading of the narrative, and in the first reading report to the Norwegian group, they argue:

> Cain's punishment is the most terrible punishment in Malagasy culture; he is excluded from his own land (*tanindrazana*, which means "the land of one's ancestors"). This concept of *tanindrazana* is very important to Malagasies in the sense that the land of the ancestors is the place where one is born and buried, and the place where one continues to live with one's ancestors forever after one dies. For Cain to be driven out of his own ancestors' land means that he is now literally lost forever.

This interpretation is interesting in that it so clearly relates the text to traditional religiocultural concepts of land and ancestors. The land of the ancestors, condensed in the family grave, is crucial in traditional Malagasy religion, as, for example, can be seen in the *famadihana* ("turning of the dead") ritual, a fertility ritual whose basic idea is that wherever people die, they will eventually have to be brought to the ancestral grave to find rest (Bloch 1971). This ritual, and to an even greater extent the underlying concepts of the relationship of the ancestors to the land, are also reflected in varying degrees in contemporary Malagasy versions of Christianity, most explicitly in the Roman Catholic *famadihana kristiana* ritual (Razafindrakoto 2006). Accordingly, when Genesis 4 depicts Cain as a restless wanderer on earth, the Malagasy readers easily see a person who is "literally lost forever."

The Norwegian group, too, has several Bible translations at their disposal, and here the in-

terpretive variation is greater. On the one hand, the Norwegian Bible Society's 1930 translation renders the *'awon* in verse 13 as *min misgjerning* ("my sin"); the so-called Norwegian Bible of 1988 (a protest translation against the Bible Society's 1978 translation) also renders it this way. On the other hand, the two most recent translations, both by the Norwegian Bible Society, go in the other direction; the 1978 translation renders it *min straff* ("my punishment"), whereas the 2011 translation renders it *min skyld* ("my guilt").

In the reading of the Norwegian Bible study group, however, there is hardly any focus either on sin or on punishment, and they certainly do not see a Cain who is "literally lost forever." Rather, the Norwegian group emphasizes an aspect of grace and holds that Cain is still under the protection of God:

> He is angry and dangerous for his brother, but God is still gracious to him. Cain had killed and lied, he had no peace, but he was nevertheless protected by God. We, too, are under grace; every day is a day of grace.

We notice here a somewhat counseling tone. The sigh of despair in verse 13 is reduced to a quite vague "he had no peace," immediately followed by an assurance that Cain was still subject to God's grace, and so are we today. The counseling tone is then further developed in a psychologizing direction (although one can understand the implicit biblical reference):

> [Cain] was free because what he had done had been revealed. There is liberation in being revealed, the truth sets free. Sometimes it is important to expose the problems in the family, to talk about them together, and then to be done with them.

Whereas the Malagasy group right from the beginning explicitly argues that they intend to read the text through the lens of their Malagasy culture, the Norwegian group shows no awareness of the role of their cultural background. Actually, in their third reading report they admit that they have been reading "the text as Christians, not as Norwegians." Nevertheless, toward the end of the project they realize that "in retrospect we understand that we, too, are

influenced by the culture we live in." Their reading of the consequences facing Cain could probably serve as an example of this influence, as both the psychologizing perspective and the focus on grace rather than judgment can easily be explained by current theological and homiletical trends in Norway.

The quotes above come from the first reading report of each of the two Bible study groups. The topic is followed up in the next reports as well, although it is not made a key topic in their dialogue. In its second reading report, the Norwegian group returns to the consequence facing Cain, once more emphasizing the perspective of grace, and simply concluding that "here we actually reached a completely opposite view" from the Malagasy group's. The Malagasy group, too, returns to the fate of Cain, and in its third and last reading report they harmoniously argue:

> As we mentioned in our first report, expulsing someone from her ancestral land is a very big punishment. But of course you are absolutely right, an idea of mercy and protection lies behind it.

Toward unfolding the meaning potential of the text

As noticed above, Hans de Wit envisions an interaction between two major groups of Bible readers, the professional exegetes and the so-called ordinary readers, in which the former should be attentive to the textual experiences of the latter, allowing these experiences to unfold the meaning potential of the texts (2012, 67–68).

Let me add a couple of remarks, based on the Malagasy-Norwegian dialogue referred to above. First, I would like to emphasize that the text that is read by the ordinary readers is a translation, and as a translation it is already an interpretation that in most cases is informed by critical scholarship. Nevertheless, all interpretations—popular and scholarly, but indeed also the translations—are part of a never-ending dialogue between classical texts and contemporary contexts. Here the ordinary readers have a constructive role to play, that of being the "other." The role of the other is to challenge ethnocentric and culturally and socially

biased interpretations. Traditionally, this is a role that has been controlled by the professional exegetes, who have claimed access to a historical other, the assumed first reader of the text. Today—and not least because of Hans de Wit's focus on intercultural reading of the Bible—the one challenging our understanding of the texts can just as well be a culturally and socially other of our own time.

In the Malagasy-Norwegian dialogue referred to above, the two serve as others for each other, offering contrasting and socioculturally informed interpretations of the consequences facing Cain after he has killed his brother. In this way, the interaction between the two Bible study groups made both of them acknowledge a broader meaning potential of the text than they had thought of from the beginning. Moreover, the interpretive interaction between the two may also establish an other for the interpretation of the professional exegetes. On the one hand, the interpretation of ordinary readers is of course influenced by translations expressing scholarly discourse, such as whether the *'awon* in Genesis 4:13 is best rendered "sin" or "punishment." Still, on the other hand, the exchange of experiences with the text between the two Bible study groups may also offer interpretive perspectives on the textual work of the professional exegetes. One example is when the Malagasy group refuses to give up the judgment perspective on Cain's being exiled. Another example is when the Norwegian group continues to emphasize grace as a key aspect of the text.

Second, I would like to emphasize an ethical concern about the interaction between ordinary readers and professional exegetes. In spite of his focus on ordinary readers, Hans de Wit is not romanticizing their approaches to the texts, expecting from them a kind of interpretive innocence. Nevertheless, the professional exegetes have an ethical responsibility, he argues, to include the textual experiences of the overwhelmingly large group of ordinary readers (2012, 68). To this, I would add that such an ethical responsibility should include an awareness of the institutional power of the exegetes. In many parts of the world—in Madagascar, I tend to think, but to some extent also

in Norway—all interaction between professional exegetes and ordinary readers will reflect their unequal positions, where the ordinary reader is expected and indeed accustomed to accept the institutionalized expert interpretation of church and academia.

Perhaps this is what Hans de Wit has in mind when he likens the professional exegete to a crocodile (2012, 67–78). Referring to a Ghanaian proverb, "The crocodile lives in the water, and yet he breathes air," he points to the responsibility of the exegetes to be attentive to the textual experiences of ordinary readers. Some ordinary readers will probably nod, recognizing the image of the exegete as a crocodile. Perhaps they have discussed the meaning of a certain biblical text with their own professional exegete, the pastor, and they might have been reminded of the warning in Job's poem about Leviathan, who actually is depicted in the image of a crocodile: "If you lay a hand on him, you will remember the struggle and never do it again" (Job 41:8). A sensitivity to this aspect of power should certainly not prevent the exegetes from interacting with ordinary readers—that would be contrary to all we have learned from Hans de Wit—but it should encourage the ones in institutional power to create an atmosphere of interpretive equality.

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Hans de Wit and the intercultural Bible reading project

Hans Snoek, editor

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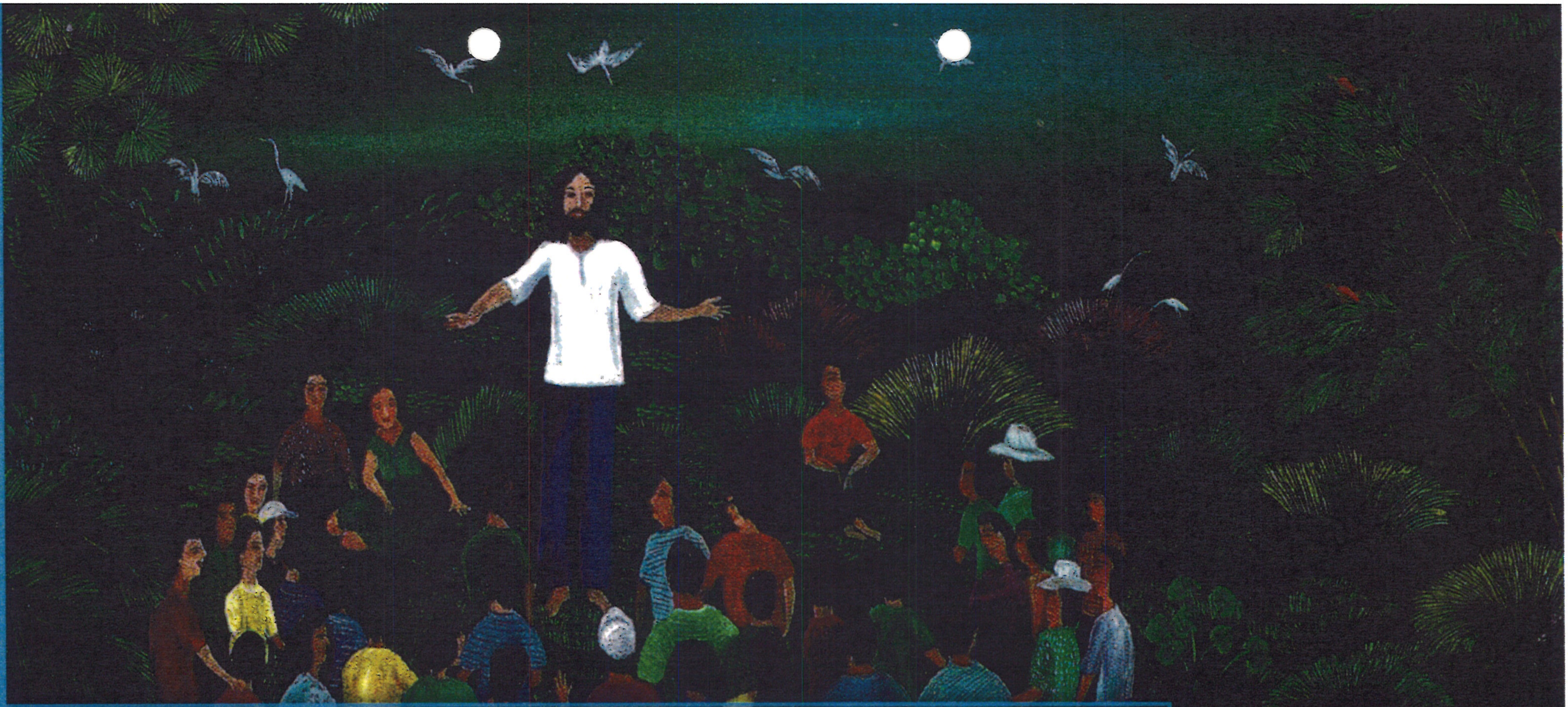

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Hans Snoek, editor

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In its focus on "ordinary" readers in small communities who read the same biblical text and exchange their readings with other communities of readers around the world, intercultural biblical hermeneutics is a creative and sophisticated approach in biblical criticism. It engages readers' social and existential situation in contextually pertinent ways, making possible a mutually enriching interplay between religious-theological and academic-scholarly interpretation of the Bible. Seldom has a new research area been recognized so soon as a worthy and even necessary concern for scholars and practitioners alike. Seldom has a new approach been identified with a single driving force as in the case of empirically grounded intercultural biblical hermeneutics and the work of Hans de Wit, whose legacy this book honors.

This Liber Amicorum begins by tracing de Wit's exegetical and hermeneutical biography through the years. It offers readers the chance to better understand why de Wit, while he is an exegete at heart, has pled for an empirical-hermeneutical approach in the intercultural Bible reading project. In the remainder of the book, friends and colleagues describe de Wit's legacy and engage in conversation with him, as they reflect on their transformative experiences with intercultural Bible reading.

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