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## **The Erotics of Sacrifice in the Qur’anic Tale of Abel and Cain**

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In his article “A Glance into the Archives of Islam,” Slavoj Žižek sidesteps the ideologico-ethical prescriptions and the explicit dogma that constitute the official tradition of Islam and probes the “archives” of Islam for their “fantasmatic secret history.” (Žižek 2009: unpaginated) Fantasmatic secret history is discernable through the traces of traumatic fantasies that are transmitted “between the lines” through lack and distortion of the explicit history, effectively sustaining the explicit mythical narrative of Islam’s “symbolic history.”<sup>1</sup> It is by identifying with the secret history that full membership of the community is established, not by simply identifying with its explicit symbolic tradition. For example, Žižek identifies the secret repressed history of Judaism and the source of its unprecedented vitality as: its “violent founding gestures,” which remain unacknowledged and disavowed by not being symbolized. (Žižek 2009:unpaginated) What is the secret repressed history of Islam? Relying on the work of the French psychoanalyst of Tunisian origin, Fethi Benslama, Žižek points to the story of the two sons of Adam, Abel and Cain, one killed by the other, as a constituting myth of Islam’s secret history (he also discusses the story of Abraham and his slave girl Hagar who bore him his first son Ishmael, but the

primary focus of this paper is on sacrifice and the tale of Abel and Cain). (Benslama 2009) Based on the Qur'anic retelling of the story of Cain and Abel, Žižek observes that in Islam God oscillates between two extremes: He is both against sacrifice and in favor of it. Islam's monotheistic stance that conceives God as thoroughly transcendent circumvents a symbolic economy of exchange between the believers and God based on a sacrificial logic.<sup>2</sup> In fact, like Judaism, Islam prevents Abraham's sacrifice of his son at the last moment (whereas Christianity opts for the sacrifice of the Son). Yet this transcendent God requires sacrifice from the two sons of Adam and inexplicably accepts one sacrifice but not the other. This paper aims to take Žižek's hints and insights into this Quranic narrative of sacrifice to their theoretical conclusions and in the process make a methodological contribution to the broader field of Islamic Studies.

At the beginning of the passage the Qur'an announces that the "truth" of this story will be told. But it is not clear what that truth may be. I will examine two overlooked layers of meaning in the text. First, I will discuss one overlooked issue that is noted in the Qur'anic narrative of Cain and Abel (quoted in full below): immediately after the killing the issue of the victim's exposed "shame/penis" becomes important. God's concern for this issue is so great that He sends a raven who scratches the ground to show the killer how to hide the shame of his brother. The importance of this exposure is further illustrated in the text by the regret of the murderer. Curiously this regret is not expressed for the killing but for failing to cover the penis of the victim. Considering the importance placed on this issue in the text I argue that the truth of this story is related to the penis of the murdered brother, leading us to conceptualize the exposed penis, which must be concealed, as the site of the archive in the text.

That the penis may be the archival site of the truth of the story is not a great insight in itself—though this latent meaning in the text does not seem to be of any interest to traditional or modern commentators. (Busse 2001-2006:1.270–72) We can be sure that the truth of this story goes beyond the penis, that is to say, the penis is not the signifier of the truth of the story. The questions remain: what is the truth of this mythical narrative? How is it produced, archived, and disseminated in the text? Exploring theoretical possibilities beyond the confines of traditional Qur'anic exegeses can occasion further investigative opportunities into possible answers to these questions. One particularly relevant theoretical possibility is offered by Jacques Lacan's concept of the phallus.<sup>3</sup> Using Lacan's formulation, I will argue that the concern with hiding the exposed penis in

this text alludes to the function of a master-signifier, which, though symbolically absent and unrepresentable in itself, reorients the subject in relation to the truth of this story. The phallus signifies the “truth” of the text beyond its reified archival site, the penis. However, the phallus is a relation to a *lack*, which means it is not a transcendental guarantee of the truth. In the case of this Qur’anic tale, the lack translates into the deferral of closure in the process of meaning production; even though the text promises a retelling of the truth of this story, that truth turns out to be the symbolic absence of the truth. Therefore I conclude that if there is a truth in the text, it is a relational truth conditioned by the absence or lack.

A second significant overlooked layer of meaning in this text is the latent sexuality in the key Qur’anic term for sacrifice (from the Arabic root form *Q-R-B*), which in addition to “approximating [the sacred]” produces a variant meaning: “closeness” as in “sexual intercourse.” This overlap of sacrifice and eroticism is not simply a coincidence of the Arabic language, but as shown by Georges Bataille it is related to a broader prehistoric theme that was only later organized by religions. Life and death are brought into harmony through similarities between sacrifice and eroticism, allowing for the continuity of being. The continuity of being at the nexus of sacrifice and eroticism further supports my conclusion that, just as deferral of consummation defines eroticism, the ultimate contours of the truth of this story too are deferred indefinitely.

In my Žižek-inspired inquiry into the latent meanings in this Qur’anic tale I am hoping to show unexplored interpretive paths that can be paved into Islam’s foundational texts by the strategic use of conceptual tools from postmodern theories. However, I am not merely reading this Qur’anic tale through a particular theoretical lens which in turn produces a particular result. My goal is to demonstrate how the symbolic resources of Islam can contribute to the postmodern project of decentering closed models of subjectivity that necessarily emerge within cultural norms and reified hermeneutics. Ultimately, it is hoped that this paper will contribute to the larger project of putting different areas of Religious Studies into productive conversation with each other.

### **The Story of the Two Sons of Adam**

The retelling of the tale of Cain and Abel in the Qur’an (5:27) is very similar to the biblical narrative. The two brothers, who remain unnamed in the Qur’an but in later commentaries

are identified as Cain and Abel, each present a sacrifice to God. God accepts the sacrifice of one but not the other, prompting the rejected son to kill the other. The Qur'an relates this story in the following passage, which begins by addressing Muhammad:

Recite to them the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam. They each presented (*qarraba*) a sacrifice (*qurban*) (to God): It was accepted from one, but not from the other. The latter said: "Be sure I will slay thee." "Surely," said the former, "God accepts (the sacrifice) of those who are righteous. (5:27) If you do stretch your hand against me, to slay me, it is not for me to stretch my hand against you to slay you: for I do fear Allah, the Lord of the worlds." (5:28) "For me, I intend to let you draw on yourself my sin as well as yours, for you will be among the companions of the fire, and that is the reward of those who do wrong." (5:29) The (selfish) soul of the other led him to the murder of his brother: he murdered him, and became (himself) one of the lost ones. (5:30) Then Allah sent a raven, who scratched the ground, to show him how to hide the shame of his brother. "Woe is me!" said he; "Was I not even able to be as this raven, and to hide the shame of my brother?" Then he became full of regrets (5:31) On that account we ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. Then although there came to them Our messengers with clear signs, yet, even after that, many of them continued to commit excesses in the land (5:32).

The Qur'an does not give the names of the two brothers. We are not told what their offerings were, nor are we informed why the sacrifice and offering are necessitated in the first place. Muslim commentators referred to Jewish and Christian sources for details of this and other Qur'anic stories.<sup>4</sup> We gather from the Bible (Genesis 4:4) that the murderer was Cain the farmer, and his offering the fruit of the earth, and the victim was Abel the shepherd, with the firstlings of his flock as his offering. Repeating their biblical predecessors by citing jealousy as motivation, traditional Muslim exegetes held that Cain and Abel were fighting over their sisters for marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Modern scholars offer a variety of explanations. Some have opined that Cain practiced "the religion of flowers" and therefore was unaware of "the religion of herders or animals." (Benslama 2009:192) In his socialist reading of this tale, Ali Shariati (d. 1977), the most influential ideologue of Iran's 1979 revolution, viewed this tale as a primordial class struggle unfolding ever since the fall in which Cain stands for "economic monopoly and private ownership ... feudalism, bourgeoisie, industrial capitalism and imperialism," and Abel is associated with "economic socialism (collective ownership) ... and the

industrial mode of production.” (Shariati 1980:111-114) Others have wondered whether God’s intentions are unfathomable, or perhaps God is “simply curious” to see what will happen; or at worst, God is “deranged and sadistic?” (Fewell and Gunn 1993:53) René Girard writes that it was a lack of “sacrificial outlet” in the form of sacrificial cults that motivated the murder of Abel by Cain; being a farmer and possibly lacking an outlet for violence, in the form of animal sacrifice for example, was the cause of Cain’s murderous act. (Girard 1972:4) Regina Schwartz points out that it is a scarcity-based context that projects “a cosmic shortage of prosperity” unto the representation of God in this passage: not as infinitely giving, but as bizarrely withholding. (Schwartz 1997:3) Why wouldn’t God accept both sacrifices and promote cooperation instead of competition and violence between the two brothers? But instead of speculating about the divine intentions it is best to search for what is *archived* in the text itself, as suggested by Žižek. What is archived in this mythical narrative? What “fantasmatic secret history” insists in this passage that effectively sustains its archival “symbolic history?”

On a didactic level, this mythical tale may be read as typical counter-historical narrative similar to stories found in the Bible wherein the records of those who failed because of their weaknesses are presented, not the strong heroes who succeeded, something that Martin Buber calls the “glorification of failure.” (Buber 1963:124–126) In this sense, Cain may turn out to be the hero of the story instead of a selfish murderer, because he is the one who draws Abel’s sins upon himself (5:30), becomes one of the “losers” (5:31), and later repents.<sup>6</sup> Abel on the other hand is the one who invites violence against himself to rid himself of his sin and condemn his aggressor brother to hell. Žižek is correct, not only Cain, Abel too wants the killing: “Abel himself actively participates in this desire, provoking Cain to do it, so that he (Abel) would get rid of his own sins also.” (Žižek 2009:unpaginated) Since the victim himself actively desires the killing which renders him a victim and sends him to paradise and the perpetrator to hell, Žižek is tempted to speculate that a hint of Muslim terrorists’ perverse wish to be killed is present in this passage: “From today’s perspective, one is tempted to play with the anachronistic speculation on how the “terrorist” logic of the martyr’s wish to die is already here, in *Quran* – although, of course, one has to locate the problem in the context of modernization.”<sup>7</sup> (Žižek 2009:unpaginated) In that case, Abel’s (or the suicide bomber’s) self-induced martyrdom represents an aggressive masochism, a simultaneous defense against and expression of inhibited aggression. Abel masochistically takes revenge against an anticipated aggression through

self-victimization, absolving himself while punishing the victimizing other.<sup>8</sup>

### The Site of Archive in the Text

It is significant that Cain expresses repentance not for killing his brother, but for not taking the necessary steps to conceal his “shame” (or corpse, depending on the translation) (5:32). The Arabic term translated as “shame” is *sau’a*, which means “the external portion of the organs of generation.” It could also mean “an unseemly sight,” as in the case of a corpse, or more precisely a corpse whose organs of generation are exposed—some translators of this passage have opted for “shame,” others for “corpse.” (Lane 1955–6:4.1458). In four other passages in the Qur’an this term is used in its plural form. In one instance God informs the Children of Adam that “We have revealed to you garments to cover your shame parts (*saw’ātahuma*)” (7:26). In other passages Satan makes manifest to Adam and Eve their “shame” which was hidden from them (7:20); after tasting the tree, and their subsequent fall, the very first thing that becomes apparent to them is their “shame” (7:22); and God warns the Children of Adam against seduction by Satan who got their parents out of the garden, stripped them of their clothes and exposed their “shame” (7:27). It is interesting that Cain’s regret over not “hiding” the “shame,” or as it may be correctly translated here as the “penis” of his dead brother, further exposes it. The idea of intending one thing while hinting at something else is implied in the Qur’anic term “to hide” (from the root *W-R-Y*). (Lane 1955–6:8.3052) This term twice precedes the term “shame” in the text, as if it is intended to act as a covering for the immanent exposures. This is a hiding that is necessitated by an exposure, but it also uncovers that exposure by its intended act of hiding. Paradoxically the intended object of covering remains textually exposed (also, we assume that the murderer eventually covers up the shame of his murdered brother even though this is not stated in the text). Isn’t nudity the ultimate veil, and the veil the ultimate nudity?<sup>9</sup> This is further supported by the interplay of clothing and nudity in the Qur’anic verses that refer to garments, either concealing the shame (7:26) or disclosing it once stripped (7:27).

Considering that by attempting to cover it, the text highlights the penis of the murdered brother, it is not farfetched to claim that the truth archived in this text is related to the penis of the murdered brother. To be more precise, the penis of the murdered brother

is the archival site in this text. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, archive is always located in “*a place of consignation*.”<sup>10</sup> (Derrida 1996:11, emphasis in the original) The archive is not an obscure location but always a publicly recognizable site. After all, the best-kept secrets are hidden in plain sight, which means plain sight is the greatest obstacle to vision. However, this most publicly recognizable site is not publicly accessible. Therefore, on an intersubjective level archive organizes relations of power. It empowers the few who control public-private boundaries, the issues of access, the ways in which secrets are recorded as well as instruments of recording. The power of the archive is related to the control of the process of production, classification, and dissemination of that which is to be archived.<sup>11</sup>

The highly emphasized Islamic tradition of male circumcision is not entirely irrelevant to this discussion and should be noted here. As a widespread practice in pre-Islamic Arabia, circumcision is primarily a purity ritual in Islam and constitutive of a Muslim man’s identity as a believer.<sup>12</sup> It does not play, however, the same function that it does in the Jewish faith where it represents a covenantal symbol signifying patrilineal descent and God’s promise of genealogical proliferation to Abraham. (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990:141–194) In Islam it is simply emphasized as a practice of the Prophet (*Sunna*), but it is not mentioned in the Qur’an and is not found as a marker of belief in early Islamic literature. (Kueny 2003:166–7, 180)

### **The Phallus and the “Truth” of the Story**

Concern for hiding the penis to the extent that necessitates God’s sending a raven to teach the murderer how to hide it points to something else beyond the penis as its archival site. That something else remains hidden and unrepresentable, yet functions as a master-signifier that reorients the subject in relation to all other signifiers, including, most importantly, to the truth of the story; or to use Žižek’s terms: in relation to the fantasmatic secret history of the text. Using the Lacanian theory of signification, that which goes beyond the penis and is its symbolic opposite, could be articulated as the phallus. Most importantly for the aims of this study, the phallus fulfills its signifying function only when veiled. (Lacan 1966:692; also see Lacan 1977:288) Though many may possess a penis, no one can “have” the phallus, it only “seems” to be there. (Lacan 1966:694) The phallus is neither a fantasy nor an imaginary effect, hence it must be distinguished from the penis

—the phallus is not the penis.

The phallus-penis relation is complex and confusing with many social and political ramifications. On the one hand, as Lacan's detractors have pointed out, more often than not the penis is taken as the compulsory referent of this hidden signifier. Privileging the phallus as the master-signifier can lead to privileging the penis, and with it a previously existing patriarchal order while upholding the superiority of the masculine in all arrangements of signification. (Grosz 1990:124) The distinction between the two cannot be easily made. As Judith Butler argues, despite theoretical distinction between the two, the phallus symbolizes the penis. (Butler 1993:57–92) She writes: "Indeed the phallus would be nothing without the penis." (Butler 1993:84) Butler argues that almost like the Hegelian terms of master-slave dialectics, the phallus and the penis are linked through negation and identity. The phallus is dependent on the penis for its signifying action, and the penis, by virtue of not being the phallus, provides the occasion for the signifying activity of the phallus. The penis thus becomes "the privileged referent to be negated." (Butler 1993:84, 263 n. 30)

On the other hand, as a symbolic configuration clearly distinguishable from the biological penis, the phallus can account for the gender differences that are irreducible to biology. (Mitchel and Rose 1982) More pertinent to the interpretation of Cain and Abel's story, the phallus functions as the hidden master-signifier that structures the process of meaning production in this story. In fact the structuring effect of this master-signifier is the only thing that can be discerned; its signified can never be known with certainty. (Lacan 1966:688) The phallus is thus conceptualized as the privileged signifier without a signified. (Gallop 1985:140) The phallus is not a thing, there is no relation between the phallus and any object like penis or clitoris. The phallus is primarily a relation to a *lack*, not to completion. (Muller and Richardson 1982:22) Biological genesis of this lack may be traced to the specific helplessness of our species at birth in contrast to others whose newborns are much readier to begin life on their own, an observation that prompted Freud to claim: "the initial helplessness of human beings is the *primal source of all moral motives*." (Freud 1953–74:1.318, original emphasis) The symbolic significance of the lack, however, far exceeds its biological origin, it is an intrinsic aspect of our being. James DiCenso explains the lack as: "[an] openness, upon which a series of dynamic processes is founded, ... a key to both the creativity and vulnerability of the human being." (DiCenso 1999:47)

In so far as interpretation of a text like the tale of Cain and Abel is concerned, the



absence of the phallus means the lack of closure of a definite referent in the process of signification. Any claim to the completion of the process of interpretation of this text would be like reducing the truth of this story to a mere recording of the previous events of sacrifice and murder noted in the text. In psychoanalytical terms this would be akin to binding the signifying operations of the phallus to the penis as its empirically designated site. Surely the penis noted in the text is not the signifier of the truth of the story and the truth of the story is irreducible to simple recording of the past events. This means sacrifice, murder and the exposure of the penis that necessitate hiding are not occasioning events whose truth are already determined and recorded in the text. It is the structural effects of the non-objectifiable phallus that produce the truths of these events archived in the text. In this context, the phallus is the signifier of the truth of the story.<sup>13</sup>

The question remains: What is the “truth” that the phallus signifies? To begin with, the formulation of the phallus as a radical hypothesis militates against definitive revelation of the truth of this story in a climactic moment. The phallus occasions a hermeneutical event anew every time the truth in this Qur’anic story is interpreted, reminding us of Kenneth Cragg’s caveat in his *The Event of the Qur’an*: “... the scripture of Islam is emphatically an event as well as a document.” (Cragg 1994:13) The truth *in* the story, thus, is more important than the truth *of* the story. Furthermore, the disclosure of a truth in this story is also a concealment, because on a very basic level revelation is inevitably bound up with the contingencies of symbols. Isn’t sacrifice ultimately a purely symbolic gesture, as Girard reminds us? (Girard 1972:1) Also, “the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam” is archived in a specific language and is subject to its semiotic restrictions and contingencies. The contingencies of the truth’s disclosure, which is indicative of its resistance to symbolization, is signaled at the outset of the Qur’anic passage where instead of hearing this “truth” narrated directly from God, it is the Prophet who is told to relate the truth of the story to the audience (or relate it truthfully, hinting at the possibility of untruthful narration). We can say, the disclosure of the truth of the story is possible only in its concealment, which means the truth is concealed in its symbolic disclosure.

The dialectics of disclosure and concealment make the presence of the “truth” in this story a secretive one, that is, the truth in this story is a secret. As a secret it cannot be withheld absolutely nor can it be divulged openly, because then it would not be a secret at all. (Kermode 1979:3) The content of secrecy, i.e. the precise “truth” archived in the text, will never be known. Symbolic gestures of sacrifice and language through which the story

is narrated are “veils,” to use Sufi terminology, they reveal when they hide but cannot hide unless they reveal. The veils over the secret will never be lifted. We cannot expect a satisfying answer to the question: What is the secret? It is evident in this text that only the symbolic evidence of the existence of the secret can be intimated, by the term “truth” at the outset of the passage and by the hiding of the uncovered shame of the murdered brother. To put this in Lacanian terms, the secret never “consists” in language, it “insists” in the metonymic displacement of one signifier by another in chains of signification that always sustain its presence but never its definite referent. (Lacan 1966:501–503) The secret (truth) is fundamentally incompatible with language and cannot be contained in any archive, only its effects can be intimated. The secret is something from the realm which Lacan calls the “Real,” a mode of psychical organization which is outside of language, marked by a radical indeterminacy and inassimilable to any process of symbolization. (Evans 1996:160) Žižek calls this the impossible-Real, “which is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way.” (Žižek 1997:163) Elsewhere he describes it as “exert[ing] influence, caus[ing] effects, cur[ving] the symbolic space.” (Žižek 2006-A:39). An apt analogy of the impossible-Real could be found in the Quranic concept of *‘alam al-ghaib*, an ontic reality that is translated as the “Unseen World.”

The truth of this Quranic tale is on the side of the impossible-Real, it cannot be engaged directly. It would be futile to try to answer the irrelevant question: what is that truth? Because as Sufis understood so well: “‘What’ is a question applying only to the entities of things, which is to say it can be asked only of the veils; the whatness of that which the veils veil can never be known.” (Chittick 1999:85) This is not to say that the Quran somehow undermines the existence of the truth. Muslim theologians (and Sufis) are understandably compelled to believe that the truth does indeed exist, even though it is inaccessible and ultimately unknown in itself. From an Islamic viewpoint, there is a truth, but it is distorted and shattered as it enters the symbolic world and language. This is evidently the point of the Quranic claim to disclose the truth of the story of the sons of Adam. From the monotheistic perspective of the Quran the truth is surely not “a void,” nor is it “a cause which in itself does not exist.” (Žižek 2006-A:39; Žižek 1997:163) Whereas the Lacanian model of inquiry is primarily concerned with the play of signifiers and lacks definite metaphysical underpinnings, Islam places a greater emphasis on “the Divine presence, which like a transcendental signifier (the Signified, or the Real of Lacanian theory) is both the prime cause and subject of the signifying process.” (Tourage 2007:65)

## The Erotics of Sacrifice

Another crucial overlooked point in this text, which supports its phallogocentric leaning, is the sexual undertone latent in the Arabic term for sacrifice. *Q-R-B*, the root form of the Arabic term *qurban* gives the meanings: “to be near, or to come near,” “to approximate,” or “to come close.” This term is identical to the Hebrew word *korban*, meaning “sacrifice” in the Hebrew Bible, expressing the idea of “approach” or “bringing near.” (Robbins 1998:286) Implicit in this term is the sense of approximating the sacred, which mirrors its Latin equivalent *sacrificium* (*sacer*, “holy;” *facere*, “to make”). (Henninger 2005:12.7997–8008) This narrative of the “truth” of the story of Adam’s sons begins with two variations of this term: *qarraba*, “became close,” and *qurbanan*, (by way of) a sacrifice. The sexuality of this approximation is best exemplified in the term *muqāraba*, a derivative of *QaRuBa*, meaning “Raising the leg [or legs, of a woman,] for the purpose of *jamaʿ* [sexual intercourse].” (Lane 1955–6:7.2505)

This overlooked linguistic connection between sacrifice and eroticism is not simply a peculiarity of the Arabic language. In his Hegelian take on the subject, the supreme archivist of eroticism Georges Bataille traces this link back to a prehistoric time, later organized by religions and carried into modern times in literature (and, it could be argued, increasingly in film). Implicit Sexual undertones of sacrifice bring Bataille to the discussion of similarities between sacrifice and eroticism. These similarities include: loss of blood-ejaculation, revealing of the flesh-violation of limits and taboos, violence and murder as the pinnacle of erotic excitement-orgasm as ‘*la petite mort*,’ and order/disorder (war, orgies). (Bataille 1957) Bataille argues that these similarities bring life and death into harmony and allow for probing the secrets of existence and the continuity of being. The *continuity of being* is the crucial part of Bataille’s assertions. He writes: “Along with our tormented desire that this evanescent thing [our individuality] should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is.” (Bataille 1957:15) Our yearning for the continuity of being necessarily entails the destruction of our evanescent individuality, an intrinsic violence that eroticism shares with religion (reproduced in religious contexts through rituals). Bataille reminds us: “In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation.” (Bataille 1957:17) In light of Bataille’s words we can translate the Qur’anic term *qurban* as: to surmount the torments of separation and individuality and approximate the continuity of being in the divine; to

obliterate the abyss of separation, even (or better!) in death. The mystical slant of this formulation of continuity of being in death (actual or symbolic) is reminiscent of what Sufis explain as the state of *fanā*: “annulment of the individual self” or “passing away from self.” (Chittick 1989:93, 207) In fact some Sufi orders commemorate the anniversary of a Sufi saint’s death as his “wedding” (*‘urs*). (Schimmel 1979:120) It is interesting that according to Sufi authorities sexual union can lead to the experience of *fanā*, however momentary. (Nasr 2007:64–65)

## Concluding Remarks

It is crucial to keep in mind that the archive is not a record of an ordinary event but a producer of it. In the context of the story of Cain and Abel there is no “truth” that can be discovered in the archive; every recovery of the truth is also a re-covering. The “truth” of the Qur’anic story of Cain and Abel, then, is the symbolic lack of the truth. The full disclosure of the truth is deferred indefinitely, a point already implied in the erotics of sacrifice when eroticism is considered to be the indefinite deferral of consummation. Therefore the “truth” as such is not the point of the tale of Cain and Abel—if there is a truth in the text of the Qur’an it is a relational truth for which no transcendental guarantee can be found. In other words, the contours of what may be known of the truth is not decided in advance.<sup>14</sup>

It is this characterization of the truth as relational—a relation primarily to a *lack*—that animates the erotics of sacrifice, bringing life and death into a harmonious relationship. It is precisely the lack that is the meaning of God’s action in accepting one sacrifice and rejecting the other, and it is the failure to recognize this lack that motivates Cain’s murderous act. Thus, the reason for sacrifice and its acceptance/rejection cannot be fixed because it is irrevocably bound to an absence. The master-signifier of secrets, i.e. the phallus, is not there. Yet, it is in its absence/disappearance, in its “seems to be there” that the phallus conditions the symbolic structure of the penis-phallus opposition and the dialectics of concealment and disclosure. Even though the text announces that “the truth of the story of the two sons of Adam” is to be told, what we are left with is the utter impossibility of guaranteed access to this truth. The “truth” of the story, then, turns out to be precisely this symbolic absence of the truth. That is to say, the truth of the story

is the *lack* that prevents closure in the process of meaning production. The full disclosure of the “truth” of the story is deferred indefinitely without bracketing interpretational possibilities generated by the structural function of the phallus. The phallus is the supplementary master-signifier that simultaneously conditions the possibility and impossibility of access to that truth at any interpretive event. In a postmodern context the lack may lead to alienation of signifiers, even from their own provisional meaning. In the religious context of the Qur’an the lack is meant to produce a sense of awe and wonder at the grandeur of the impossible-Real truth.

The erotics of sacrifice, in this case with the phallus as its master-signifier, also say something about the ontological fault-line dividing God and humans. In spite of His absolute transcendence the God of Islam still requires sacrifice, and with His inexplicable acceptance/rejection of sacrifices prevents cooperative possibilities between the two brothers. We may conceptualize these missed cooperative possibilities between the two brothers as “queer” possibilities, particularly considering that a surplus of erotic meaning is latent in the Qur’anic narrative of Abel and Cain. I specifically have in mind “queer” as a symbolic position in the text (it does not mean locating the textual evidence of non-heterosexual identities in this story, which is impossible and irrelevant at any rate). Imagining these queer possibilities even better underscores the indeterminacy of the “truth” of the story by envisioning the text to be “an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning.” (Sedgwick 1993:8) It also allows for questioning the structural effects of the phallus, which monolithically functions as the privileged signifier. Dyadic non-violent queer possibilities between Abel and Cain undermine the oppositional requirements of the compulsory triadic Oedipal structure of the truth-phallus-subject. With the intervention of the phallus this threat is averted. Following Lacan and taking a cue from Žižek we can argue that in this Quranic tale God appears as the ordering figure of the Superego who curtails cooperative possibilities by instigating a destructive competition by His unexplainable acceptance of sacrifices.<sup>15</sup> What if these queer possibilities turn out to be what is demanded as the ultimate sacrifice because of their constructive (threatening) potentialities? (We may add: What if the civilizational possibilities of the Freudian common crime lie in the communal suppression of cooperative possibilities not in the violence against the primordial Father as Freud argued?) Would that not make the sacrifice a measure of God’s desire for *His continuity of being*? Gerard is right on the target when he observes: “Violence is the heart

and secret soul of the sacred.” (Girard 1972:31) Finally, to take a Zizekian stance which is terrifying to thinking Muslim believers, this writer included: what if meanings hidden in the text, that is, the “truth” of the story, turns out to be precisely the anthropological truth hidden behind the myth of divinity?

<sup>1</sup> Žižek credits Eric Santner with articulating the key distinction between “secret history” and “symbolic history, but this formulation could be traced back to Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*. See Santner 2000:57–105.

<sup>2</sup> In the theological language of Islam God’s incompatibility/transcendence is articulated through the concept of *tanzih*, literally “to declare something pure and free of something else.” For a discussion of this term and its corresponding opposite *tashbih* (“to declare something similar to something else”), see Murata and Chittick 1994:70–77.

<sup>3</sup> The relevance of Lacan’s theoretical framework to interpreting the foundational texts of Judaism and Islam has been demonstrated by Wolfson 1999:113–154; and Tourage 2007:41–67.

<sup>4</sup> This produced a whole genre of literature called “Tales of the Prophets.” In some cases the preservation of many “oral” traditions is indebted to the efforts of Muslim exegetes, story tellers, and commentators. For an example, see Kisai 1997. For a comparative analysis of the fluid nature of scriptural exchange between Muslims, Jews, and Christians, see Saleh 2008; also, see Sherwood 2004:821–861.

<sup>5</sup> The story seems to be a convenient solution to the question: if Adam and Eve were the very first human beings, whom did their children marry? For a discussion of Muslim commentaries (primary sources), see Busse 2001–2006:1.270–272.

<sup>6</sup> It is a characteristic of Sufi hermeneutics to find a heroic figure beneath the most villainous character. For example, Satan has been viewed as the true lover of God and one of the true monotheists of the world (Muhammad being another), “even more monotheistic than God himself.” This is an allusion to the Qur’anic tale of Adam’s creation, where against His own imperative of not worshipping anyone but Him, God commands the angels to prostrate to Adam. They all obey except Satan (Qur’an 15:28–31). See Schimmel 1975:194–195. For a discussion of Satan in Sufism (for example, Satan can teach Sufis the deepest knowledge of their own vices and even be the cause of good deeds), see Awn 1997.

<sup>7</sup> On a related note, I believe Žižek would agree with the anthropologist Talal Asad who argues that what horrifies Westerners about the act of suicide terrorism is “the violent appearance of . . . the limitless pursuit of freedom.” See Asad 2007:91; for a discussion of Žižek’s personal style where his interpretations progress from proffering a banal opinion before flaunting a much cleverer one, only to proceed with its dramatic reversal, see Kay 2003:11–15.

<sup>8</sup> On this aggressive aspect of masochism see, Maleson 2002:332; also, see Freud 1953–74:19:19–172.

<sup>9</sup> On dialectics of clothing and nudity, see Perniola 1989:242. In addition to the text as a covering we can also view the corpse (alternative translation of “shame”) as a covering/clothing. For a discussion of bodies as clothing, Perniola 2004:45–49.

<sup>10</sup> I am well aware of the theoretical underpinnings that separate Derrida from Lacanian analysis (and by extension from Žižek), especially Derrida’s critique of the phallus. However, I believe Derrida’s formulation of the archive is largely an apt description of the function of the penis in this tale. A major difference would be that whereas for Derrida the play of signifiers makes the archive the locus of possibility and impossibility in itself, in the Lacanian model that im/possibility is conditioned by the supplementary master-signifier, discussed below. For a reading of Derrida and Lacan in comparative terms, see Hurst 2008. For Žižek’s critique of the Derridian deconstructive reading of Lacan (arguing that Derrida’s conclusions are based on reductive misreading of Lacan), see Žižek 2006-B:190–212.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida calls this “the *power of consignment*.” See his *Archive Fever*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the significance of circumcision in the Near Eastern cultures in general, and its original connection to fertility and later in the rabbinic period to a definitively Jewish mark, see Biale 1992:37–40, 48.

<sup>13</sup> In the Lacanian model the phallus is the signifier of desires. However, in a broader metapsychological and especially mystical context it can be taken as a signifier of esoteric secrets. For an example from Kabbalistic texts see the pioneering works of Elliot R. Wolfson, especially Wolfson 1999:119. For the theoretical underpinnings of similarities between psychoanalytical concept of “desire” and “esoteric secrets” that allow for the formulation of the phallus as the signifier of truth, see Tourage 2007:59–65.

<sup>14</sup> This is a conclusion already arrived at by some Muslim feminists, both in theory and praxis. For example, with arguments rooted in Islamic hermeneutics Amina Wadud and Laury Silvers argue against unjust patriarchal readings of the Quran, rightly pointing out that ultimately it is the reader who is entrusted with the responsibility of deciding on the fairest interpretations. They entertain the possibility of even saying “no” to certain divine “commands” addressed to the believers in the Qur’an, as in the “wife-beating” verse 4:34. In very practical terms I have heard some Muslim women have literally crossed this verse out of their Qur’ans. See Wadud 2006:190–192; Silvers 2006:171–180.

<sup>15</sup> Quoting Lacan Žižek writes: “the divine Real turns into the superego figure of ‘obscure gods who demand continuous blood.’” (Žižek 2009:unpaginated)

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