

# As It Is Written

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Genesis 4:6-7 reads,

*Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? <sup>7</sup> If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."* (NIV)

*Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? <sup>7</sup> "If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." *(NAS)**

*"Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked Cain. "Why do you look so dejected? <sup>7</sup> You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master." *(NLT)**

Here's the underlying Hebrew. Note the highlighted (colored red) words:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־קַיִן לָמָּה חָרָה לָךְ וְלָמָּה נָפְלוּ פָנֶיךָ <sup>7</sup> הֲלוֹא אִם־תֵּיטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם  
לֹא תֵיטִיב לַפֶּתַח חַטָּאת רֹבֵץ וְאַלֶיךָ תִּשְׁוֹקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל־בּוֹ

Now, let's look at these three words from a grammatical perspective.

Hebrew	Translation	Grammar
חַטָּאת	Sin, sin-offering	Noun - common feminine singular absolute
תִּשְׁוֹקָתוֹ	Your desire	Noun - common feminine singular construct + 3ms
תִּמְשָׁל־בּוֹ	You will rule over it	Verb - Qal imperfect 2ms + prep 3ms

In the last clause, God commands Cain to “*rule over it*” (NIV), “*must master it*” (NAS), or “*must subdue it and be its master*” (NLT).

So, Cain is told that he must master or rule over something? Is it the sin crouching at the door? Is it his desire? Grammatically, neither of these choices can be correct since both are feminine nouns and the antecedent of ‘it’ (as in “*rule over it*”) points to a masculine term.

In biblical Hebrew, the face is considered to be extraordinarily revealing vis-a-vis a man's emotions, moods, and dispositions<sup>1</sup>. So, for example, a "hard" face is indicative of defiance (Jeremiah 5:3), impudence (Proverbs 7:13), ruthlessness (Deuteronomy 28:50). A "shining" face is evidence of joy (Job 29:24). A "shamed" face points to defeat, frustration, humiliation (2Sam 19:5). A "flaming" face is one convulsed by terror (Isaiah 13:8). An "evil" face is a face marked by distress and anxiety (Genesis 40:7). And, with respect to this narrative, a "fallen" face stems from very strong anger or displeasure.

Now here's the RSV translation of Genesis 4:5:

*but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.*

In this verse the Hebrew word from which countenance is translated is masculine and is the antecedent of 'it' in Genesis 4:6-7. In other words, Cain must master his emotions to avoid sin. Nahum Sarna writes as much in his magisterial commentary on Genesis. While Sarna describes this verse as bristling with difficulties the result of which is considerable controversy Sarna says that this passage stands as a forewarning of the danger inherent in Cain's emotional state. *"The underlying idea is that man is endowed with moral autonomy, with freedom of choice. He can (and must) subdue his primitive passions by an act of will."*

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, et al, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (REF 1782a)