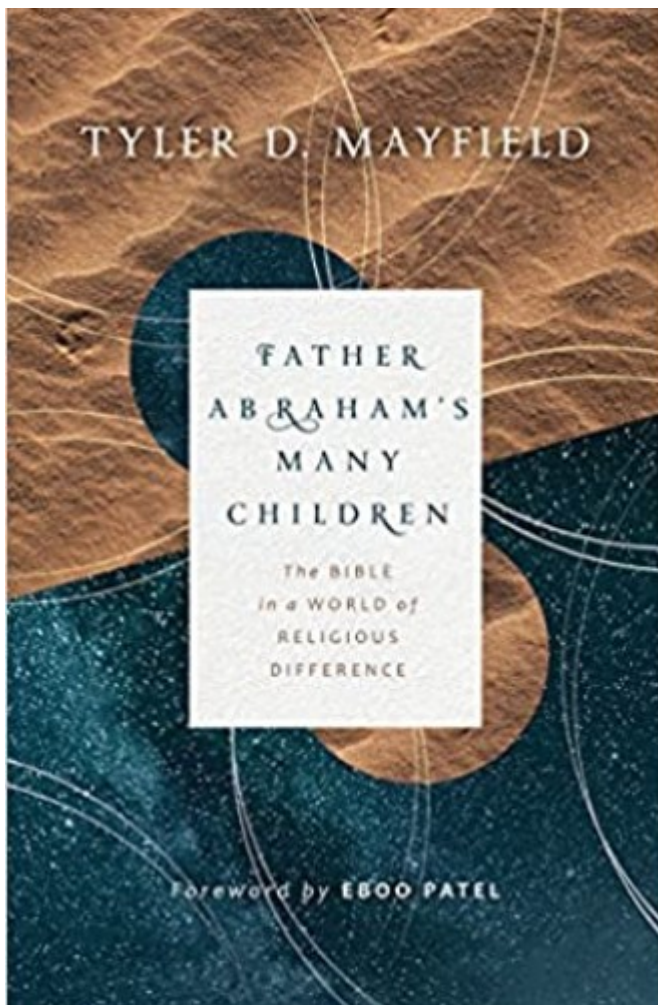


Approaching religious pluralism through the Bible's other brothers

Tyler Mayfield offers a fresh look at Cain, Ishmael, and Esau.

by [Sally Dyck](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Father Abraham's Many Children

The Bible in a World of Religious Difference

By Tyler D. Mayfield

Eerdmans

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This book isn't what it seems. I approached it expecting to find a description of different religions, specifically the Abrahamic faiths, with a strong encouragement to appreciate their unique aspects as well as the commonalities. I've read many such books and even taught them. But when I opened *Father Abraham's Many Children*, I knew within a few pages that I'd found something better.

Tyler Mayfield offers an expansive translation and interpretation of three familiar sets of brothers—Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, and Esau and Jacob—particularly in terms of what it means to be “chosen.” His bold premise is that the way we translate and view the forsaken brother in each duo, the one who is invisible and discounted in most interpretations, affects our ability to live in a religiously plural world, nation, and community and even our relationships at our own family tables.

Mayfield boldly states that “any claim to be God's chosen people seems to strike against the notion of religious traditions' validity and vibrancy . . . establishing a category called ‘God's people’ [that] runs the risk of leaving someone out.” His translation and interpretation of the three sets of brothers challenges us to align our reading of the Bible with our aspiration for religious pluralism.

While it's not always easy or comfortable to go along with Mayfield, it's definitely a journey worth taking. Wherever readers end up, they will have found plenty of food for thought along the way. Here are a few tantalizing tidbits from each of the brother duos.

In his reading of the Cain and Abel story, Mayfield focuses on God's three questions to Cain:

Why are you angry? An emotional question.

Where is your brother? A theological question.

What have you done? An ethical question.

The first question is useful for readers because when we engage with any person or idea that is other, we're likely to have an emotional reaction, as does Cain. We may even respond this way to the new interpretations of scripture we encounter in this

book, Mayfield writes, or to his proposal that there may be more than one people chosen by God. Faced with ideas that are not like what we're used to, ideas that make us uncomfortable, we may get angry. Mayfield encourages us to ask: What's really the emotion behind that anger? Engaged dialogue requires us to sit with that question and acknowledge the complexity of our emotions.

Then comes the second question: Where is your brother? This theological question asks us to sincerely regard whether we see the other in our dialogue as a beloved, sacred child of God, one who is just as chosen as we are. Are we ready to sit with that assertion, even as it challenges the traditional Christian belief that the only way to God is through Jesus Christ? Can we truly engage in interreligious dialogue and relationship if we adhere to strict insistence on salvation ultimately through Christ? I wish that Mayfield had parsed this critical point a little more—and that he'd raised the question of how this might sit with our Jewish siblings.

Finally, God asks Cain an ethical question about what he has done. Cain's anger led him to disregard the sacredness in his brother and thus to justify his violence against Abel. How do we face the impact of our own prejudice against others, often based in our sense of privilege as Christians? Mayfield challenges us here to face the Christian exclusivism that runs through our history. We have often acted like Cain, unable to see our sibling relationships as ones of value and concern. What damage have we done to those who are marginalized in the landscape of religious plurality? Again, I think Mayfield could have fleshed this point out more to give readers additional handles on addressing the question.

When we consider the Isaac-Ishmael story, our focus tends to be on Isaac. Mayfield shows, however, that the plain meaning of the biblical text indicates that both brothers receive the covenant of God through circumcision, both are free and beloved sons of Abraham, both receive the promise of a nation of many people, and both attend their father's burial. Ishmael's 12 sons and descendants are listed in full. Overlooking Ishmael reveals "our ability to read texts selectively and to construct theologies that leave out significant characters," Mayfield writes. This causes us to undervalue people of other faiths and miss their contributions, identities, and places in the overall religious narrative, diminishing our ability to live in a religiously diverse landscape.

Turning to Jacob and Esau, Mayfield shows that historically the translations and interpretations of their story have set up a binary judgment of Jacob as good and

Esau as bad. How often do we ask ourselves just what Esau did that was so wrong? Increasingly throughout Christendom, Esau has been maligned as “hated, godless, villainous, and evil,” writes Mayfield. He argues that some typical translations of biblical words that describe him are questionable. Further, the plain meaning of the text reveals that Esau is the one who takes the high road in terms of eagerly welcoming Jacob back and forgiving him.

Like Ishmael, Esau receives a lot of space in scripture, including a list of his descendants. In both cases, the listing of descendants suggests that they should not be forgotten. Esau and Ishmael are also each given the promise and realization of a nation. God doesn’t overlook either brother in Mayfield’s duos, and Mayfield suggests that we overlook them at our own peril.

Mayfield’s interpretations and unconventional translations of key words about each of the overlooked brothers will make many readers uncomfortable as they wonder how to integrate these insights into more familiar readings. But this discomfort may serve a positive purpose. As Mayfield puts it, “one way to navigate our religiously pluralistic world is to grow more comfortable with the ambiguity, and even value, of differences. . . . We can see differences as opportunities for conversation and possibilities for celebration.” This is, in fact, a key to living well in the face of any of our polarized differences today.

Father Abraham’s Many Children seems to be written for a Christian audience and is likely to provoke intra-Christian dialogue. But I am also curious about how its premises might be perceived in interreligious dialogue. Is it possible for Christians to stop seeing ourselves as saved by Jesus Christ to the exclusion of others? Would that help or hinder interfaith relationships, especially with respect to chosenness? As readers ponder these questions with the help of this book, Esau’s question to his father may continue to come to mind: “Have you only one blessing, father?” (Gen. 27:38).