

Genesis 4
Cain and Abel

- I. Considerations
- A. To understand this passage it is important to set aside some preconceived notions about the context.
1. We often presume that the times were primitive and next to nothing was known about God or how the human person was to relate to God.
 2. The reaction of God to Cain thus seems arbitrary and unfair.
- B. But Other Biblical texts¹ suggest that more was known and understood that we might assume.
1. *Heb 11:4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts; he died, but through his faith he is still speaking.*
 2. *Luke 11:49 Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it shall be required of this generation.*
- C. The first text from Hebrews states that by faith Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice. Now faith comes by hearing. Thus God must have given a word, not recorded in the Genesis account which Abel could hear and heed. This word must have regarded the proper ways to worship God. See “E” below. It seems that Cain (as well as Adam Eve, and any others living) would have received this word too. This helps explain God’s reaction and rejection of Cain’s offering.
- D. The second text from Luke has Jesus declares that Abel was a prophet, the first prophet. This may also indicate that God, through Abel, had given instruction. Among other things it may have included the proper worship of God. Perhaps Cain’s initial sin was to fail to heed God’s first prophet?
- E. Elsewhere the Bible indicates two things that may be lacking in Cain’s offering:
1. that it is necessary to shed blood for the remission of sin.
 - a. After the first sin, God kills an animal and clothes them in its skins (Gen 3:21) There are many possible explanations for this, including clothing. But perhaps too it amounts to something of an atonement.

¹The Bible often interprets the Bible. Later texts comment on earlier texts and thus God gives us more information that help to interpret and understand prior texts.

- b. Heb 9:22 *Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*
 - c. This is confirmed all throughout the Old Testament wherein God specifies the sacrifice of certain animals for temple worship.
 - d. In the New Covenant Christ's shed blood is sufficient, thus supplanting all other animal sacrifices which could never really atone for sins but only pointed to Christ.²
 - e. This theory is not without a problem however since cereal offerings and other offerings from the harvest are elsewhere commanded and acceptable to God. (*cf* Lev 2:14³ for just one example)
2. The Bible also indicates that we are to offer the first-fruits of the harvest to God. While Abel offered the first-fruits of his flock it is not indicated that Cain offered the first-fruits of his harvest. This case seems more compelling in the context of the verses before us. Thus Cain erred by not presenting first-fruits and God did not regard his offering. We are not to give God leftovers.
- F. Thus we need to rethink Genesis 4 and not merely presume ignorance as to the proper way to worship God.

II. Conception

- A. 4:1 ***Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD."***
- B. The name for Cain is derived from the Hebrew Qanti - literally, "I have gotten"
- C. We have remarked before on the Hebrew word "know" which involves more than a theoretical knowledge. Rather it involves an intimate knowledge. Here it is equated with sexual intercourse.
- D. Notice how Eve describes her motherhood. She has "gotten" that is to say, received a child from God. Human life is ultimately God's doing. Husband and wife are instruments in God's work, but it is his work. The word pro-creation describes the lofty role of husband and wife and co-workers with God in coming forth of new human life. Yet God is sovereign.

III. Contrast

- A. ***2 And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel brought of the firstlings of***

²Heb 10:1 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near.

³Lev 2:"If you offer a cereal offering of first fruits to the LORD, you shall offer for the cereal offering of your first fruits crushed new grain from fresh ears, parched with fire.

his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

- B. Here our previous remarks are important to remember. Most commentators state that the reasons for God's actions are obscure. However, that blood sacrifice was required even at this early stage does not seem unlikely as later biblical texts state. See # 1 above.
- C. More compelling however is to note a detail that may also be the important difference between the two offerings:
 - 1. Abel gives of the firstlings (first-fruits) of his flock
 - 2. There is no mention that Cain gave of the first-fruits of his crop.
 - 3. In later legislation, God commanded that the tithe be given. But it was not any tenth that was to be given, rather it was the first tenth that was to be given. (*cf* Ex 23:16,19; 34:26; Lev 23:10 to name just a few)
- D. Nevertheless, it remains true that there is no explanation given for the rejection of Cain's offering *in this text*.

IV. Caution

- A. ***So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. 6 The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."***
- B. Cain is very angry, but he has not sinned yet. God says sin is lurking at the door and that Cain must be careful. Not only must he be careful, he must master it.
- C. Here is a call for all of us. Our passions are not sin but they can pre-dispose us to sin. We, despite our passions must master sin. We all know how anger can so easily lead to sin. We must learn to endure our anger and not let it push us toward inappropriate responses to it. The same is true for other passions.
- D. Note too, God says Cain has not done well (verse 7). This reinforces the fact that something was lacking in his offering. God was not being arbitrary, something was wrong with Cain's offering. Likely it was not first-fruits, or perhaps a blood sacrifice was required. Perhaps too there was some other more internal problem such as Cain's disposition. Did he offer with pride? Perhaps his was grudgingly offered? This is merely speculation however.

V. Crime

- A. ***8 Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.***
- B. Verse 7 stated that Cain was very angry. And now we know how angry he was.

Notice how his anger, not properly dealt with, issues forth in the first murder.

- C. It is also a premeditated murder, all the more shocking since God had specifically spoken to Cain and warned him not to yield to his extreme anger.
- D. God also warns us of our inclinations through our conscience. He has written his law in our hearts and in this way speaks to us. Having his law written on our hearts is one of the special blessings of the New Covenant and one of the special responsibilities of it:
1. Jer 31:33 *But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*
- E. The connection between resentful anger and murder is made by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:
1. Mat 5:21 *"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.*
 2. The message of Jesus is clear, we must respect⁴ the anger within us by dealing with it properly. It is wrong to let it fester and grow like a cancer so that it becomes bitter, resentful, and revenging. If we fail to respect our anger and in so doing to curb its power, it can become murderous.
- F. Other Biblical texts warn of anger:
1. Ps 4:4 *Be angry, but sin not;*
 2. Eph 4:25 *Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.*
 3. Prov 22:24 *Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare.*
 4. Prov 29:11 *A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man quietly holds it back.*
 5. Eccl 7:9 *Be not quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.*

⁴To respect anger means not to deny that it is there or to rebuke it. Anger within is often an appropriate response to injustice. It is also a protective instinct within us. Nevertheless it is often an unruly passion with which we must be careful. We must hear its voice but balance its volume with reason.

VI. Conviction -

- A. **9 Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" 10 And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12 When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."**
- B. Note that God, as before with Adam and Eve, enters into a dialogue with Cain about his brother.
1. He asks, "Where is your brother?"
 2. Cain is unrepentant and insolent. "Am I my brother's keeper?"
 3. So God is more direct: "What have you done?"
- C. God recognizing our sin looks for repentance and calls us to it. If true repentance⁵ can be found, perhaps God can deal with us mercifully. Notice how Adam and Eve avoided responsibility for what they did. Now Cain proves to be a chip off the old block. Not only is he unrepentant but he is insolent. Since he will not face what he has done God must directly rebuke him.
- D. Notice how God describes that his brother's blood cries out from the soil. Our sins are not hidden from God. Not only that but they continue to cry out for vengeance. There are similar calls in the New Testament:
1. Mat 23:35 *that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.*
 2. Rev 6:9 *When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.*
- E. While it is true, every sin cries out to God, the Bible singles out four sins in particular that cry to God for vengeance:
1. Voluntary Murder - Gen 4:10
 2. Sodomy - Gen 18:20
 3. Taking advantage of the poor - Ex 2:23
 4. Defrauding the working person of their wages - James 5:4
- F. Since the ground has received the blood, Cain will no longer be able to farm successfully. Now he will become a wanderer (nomad) on the earth. The punishment is not unlike the punishment of his father Adam who would have to

⁵Note however repentance is more than feeling bad about our sin. This is important but repentance requires more: a firm purpose of amendment, that is a change of behavior.

earn his food by the sweat of his brow and have the ground yield thorns and thistles. But Cain's punishment is more thorough: his farming days are over. Now he must wander.

VII. Concerns

- A. **13 Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. 14 Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me." 15 Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him. 16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden.**
- B. Cain still shows little sign of remorse. He is concerned for himself only.
- C. He is concerned that he will
1. Be driven out of farming
 2. Be hidden from God's face
 3. Be a fugitive and a wanderer
 4. And will suffer from blood vengeance
- D. Notice how the text locates the presence of the Lord with a certain land. Cain must dwell away from the presence of the Lord (v. 16) and from the face of the Lord be hidden (v. 13). Yet Psalm 139 reminds us that we can never fully be away from God:
1. Psalm 139:7 *Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with thee.*
- E. Despite Cain's sin and even despite his selfish unrepentance Cain does not lose his fundamental dignity nor his right to life. God puts a mark on Cain and forbids vengeance to be taken. Recently the Pope used this text to caution against the use of Capital Punishment for the purpose of vengeance.
- F. Finally note how the text subtly implies that there are more than four people on the planet. Though only Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel have been mentioned, this text seems to imply that there are other un-named individuals who might exact vengeance on Cain. In verse 17 and following suddenly we are introduced to Cain's wife (where did she come from?). Recall that we are dealing with poetic texts here and though historical, they do not claim to give us every detail.

VIII. Chronology -

- A. *17 Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. 18 To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech. 19 And Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. 20 Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have cattle. 21 His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. 22 Zillah bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah. 23 Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, hearken to what I say: I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. 24 If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." 25 And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, for Cain slew him." 26 To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time men began to call upon the name of the LORD.*
- B. Here and into the next Chapter beings a long list of begats that introduce us to other members of the human family, usually without much detail.
- C. The interesting thing to note here is not just the names but the expansion of professions and trades. From Farmer and Herder we now see:
1. Cattle farming - 20
 2. Musicians - 21
 3. Bronze smiths - 22
- D. Lamech, mentioned in vv. 19ff shows forth the increase in evil when he murders a man for wounding him. The fact that he has two wives is not commented on morally but he is generally a disreputable character. Not only does he murder but he also boasts of having vengeance seventy-seven fold. This probably refers to the strength and fierceness of his tribe.
- E. Cain's wife appears suddenly. Where did she come from? Adam and Eve had other children (5:4) so this must be her origin. Truth be told, she is his sister. What about incest? Clearly it was impossible to avoid at this early stage. Later rules of incest cannot be applied to this early stage where such relations were unavoidable. At first the legislation about incest seems only to have regarded parents with their children. Even as late as Abraham, we see that he marries his half sister (Gen 20:12) Even Moses own father Amram married his aunt, Jochebed ((Ex 6:20). With the coming of the Mosaic Law however extensive legislation forbidding many forms of incest had emerged and from this point forward it was a law strictly interpreted and followed.