

Genesis 4:1-26

Cain and Abel

One of the challenges historians face, especially in studying ancient texts like the Bible, is that we are not often told what we consider to be most interesting. That is to say, the authors, both ancient and modern, tend to write for their own purposes, not for ours. The Bible is no exception. The Bible is God's Word of redemptive history, and it contains all the information necessary for us to understand God's eternal plan of salvation. It also contains many other things, but its primary focus is to relate God's sovereign plan and faithful work among men. While we may wish it addressed other matters, it often does not, and as students of scripture, we must be satisfied with trying to understand what it does say.

This is a passage that contains more questions than answers. What was the relationship between Abel and Cain as brothers? Why did God reject Cain's offering? Where did Cain's wife originate? We will simply have to approach the text carefully and, though we may draw some educated conclusions, we must be mindful to not read into the text what is not there. After all, there is still plenty there from which we can learn.

The narrative begins with an optimistic opening that, unfortunately, is not reflected in the body of the passage that follows. Indeed, it is a rather undulating account, moving from the continued life and prosperity of the garden as demonstrated in the birth of two sons, to the fratricidal murder of Abel by Cain, to the notable cultural beginnings and achievements of Cain's descendants, to the wickedness of Lamech, to the continuation of Adam's line through a new son, Seth. Indeed, the narrative concludes as optimistically as it began, with men beginning "to call upon the name of the Lord" (v. 26).

Life Outside the Garden

Having been driven from Eden, Adam and Eve found comfort in each other. Nature then took its course and "the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain" (v. 1). The phrasing "had relations" describes more than the sexual act. It implies a 'knowing' that involves a deep understanding of one another. While the term can be applied to both homosexual (Genesis 19:5) and incestuous (Genesis 38:26) relationships, the Old Testament normally uses phrases such as "lie with" (Genesis 39:7) instead to mark such ungodly sexual acts.

But this was more than merely sex. This was the fulfillment of the promise by God that they would continue to populate the earth. Painful as the delivery certainly was, Adam and Eve had a child. No mention is made of Adam's response to the birth of his son, but Eve is recorded as saying, "I have gotten a manchild with the help of the Lord" (v. 1). Eve acknowledged that God had given her a child. Though this was the first human not directly created by God, Eve still recognized God's role in creating life.

This is worth emphasizing. Eve saw that she was fulfilling her God-ordained role. She admitted her dependence of the Lord for provision. She understood her need to rely upon His Word and His promises. It may be that Eve presumed Cain was the promised child who would bruise the serpent's head. But no matter that her understanding was limited. She had learned to believe God would do what He said. That lesson of the garden, at least, had been learned.

But there was more to come. “Again, she gave birth to his brother Abel” (v. 2). The family was growing. But on the timing of all this Scripture is silent. We do not know how much time elapsed between the births of Cain and Abel. It was not likely a very long time, since natural propagation among peoples with limited means of birth control and the need to populate the earth demanded regular births at an almost yearly rate.

Overtime each young man found a vocation. “Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground” (v. 2). Cain, the firstborn, followed in his father's footsteps and worked the land. Abel chose to help the family in another direction. There is no indication that one was more valuable than the other. Each of these professions was common in early societies. As civilizations advanced, they developed specialized labor. And shepherding and agriculture bred a natural rivalry as the two competed for both land and water. No doubt there were many conflicts between the two brothers as they tried to expand their own particular way of life.

Worship and Murder

Whatever sibling rivalry may have existed between the two young men, we do catch a glimpse of something wonderful happening east of Eden. “³It came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. ⁴Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions” (v. 3-4). There was some sense of worship and of owing God something for what had been received. The fact that it occurred “in the course of time” may indicate that this was a regular, and not a unique event. Finally, it seems from the text, that the two brothers worshipped together, and each brought what would be expected - a farmer bringing food products, and a shepherd bringing animal products.

The term used for the offerings is a generic term for any kind of gift. It can refer to a gift among men as equals, to a king, or even to the Lord.

“So he [Jacob] spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau” (Genesis 32:13).

“²⁶Saul also went to his house at Gibeah; and the valiant men whose hearts God had touched went with him. ²⁷But certain worthless men said, ‘how can this one deliver us?’ And they despised him and did not bring him any present. But he kept silent” (1 Samuel 1:26-27).

“Now when anyone presents a grain offering as an offering to the Lord, his offering shall be of fine flour, and he shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it” (Leviticus 2:1).

However, the pleasantness of the two brothers worshipping together did not last. “⁴The Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; ⁵but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard” (v. 4-5). Was it the gift or the giver that displeased God? Through the years, many have offered their opinion. Some have suggested that, at the time the account was written, a blood offering was seen as more acceptable in the eyes of God, than a grain offering. That however would not be true of the Mosaic audience that first read the narrative, since both grain and blood offerings were acceptable at that time.

Others have argued that it was divine disapproval of the role of the farmer as opposed to that of the shepherd, but this is equally unlikely since agriculture was the vocation specifically assigned to Adam both within and outside of the garden. We can see from the text that it is both Cain and his offering that were judged inadequate. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that there was some deficiency in the material offered for worship, as well as in the intention of the worshipper.

The text seems to suggest that while Cain brought only “an offering” it was Abel whose offering was distinguished by its being “of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions,” that is the very best he had to offer. This emphasis on “first fruits” would not have been missed by the Mosaic audience.

“Also you shall observe the Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your labors from what you sow in the field; also the Feast of the Ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in the fruit of your labors from the field” (Exodus 23:16)

“However, a firstborn among animals, which as a firstborn belongs to the Lord, no man may consecrate it; whether ox or sheep, it is the Lord’s” (Leviticus 27:26).

“You shall consecrate to the Lord your God all the firstborn males that are born of your herd and of your flock; you shall not work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock” (Deuteronomy 15:19).

Cain’s response to the rejection of his offering revealed his character. He could have been remorseful and acknowledged that he had not given God his best. He could have determined to never be found a disappointment in that area again. He could have been resolute in his conviction to put the Lord first. He did none of these things. Instead, “Cain became very angry and his countenance fell” (v. 5).

The quality of the gift reflected the heart of the giver. One cannot but recall God’s words to His prophet Samuel, “But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’” (1 Samuel 16:7). As throughout redemptive history, God made a choice and was the judge of what was acceptable in His sight. And though the text is not specific as to why God made such a choice, that, too, is a lesson. God is not accountable for explaining Himself or His ways to us.

There is another point to be noted. Being the firstborn, we might expect God’s favor to be on Cain. After all, Eve thought him the child of the promise. But the Bible clearly teaches that our position in God’s eyes is not due to our birth rank, but to our character. Primogeniture was very important to the ancient Israelites, but it was often overruled by God if the person proved unworthy. We can think of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph as examples among the patriarchs. It was a lesson to be learned by the Israelites, that God, not nature was in control. As Moses reminded the people, “⁷The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

God was aware of Cain's displeasure, so He graciously asked "why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?" (v. 6). Knowing the answer, God continued with some wise advice. "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" (v. 7). God's point was not to scold Cain, but to offer him the opportunity to reflect on his own sin and to urge him to repentance. The rebuke seems to be given with the purpose of encouragement, if anything. Furthermore, God even forewarned Cain that righteous behavior in the future would be rewarded, but a wrong action invited sin.

Such a word from God would come often to His people,
"Seek good and not evil, that you may live;
And thus may the Lord God of hosts be with you" (Amos 5:14).

Descriptively, the word for 'crouch' is related to an Akkadian word for a mythological demon who lurked in the doorways of buildings. Thus was sin portrayed. The word for 'desire' is the same word as was used of Eve's desire for her husband now that sin had entered the world. There was a choice before Cain. He could either 'master' the sin or be its slave. This is not a matter of sin nature as much as a matter of free choice. We can all testify to how sin works. As with Cain, often our response to correction and discipline is often more far-reaching than the original sin for which we are rebuked. Cain had the opportunity to correct himself and reset himself on the proper course. Tragically, he did not.

Scripture tersely states what happened next. "Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him" (v. 8). Some versions elaborate the narrative to state that Cain told Abel to come out into the fields with him. Whatever was spoken between the two brothers, it is clear that this was a premeditated ambush. The word used to describe the act is actually more severe than that used in the sixth commandment, which included manslaughter. This referred exclusively to murder. Cain had determined to kill his brother. There is no suggestion that it was a crime of passion. It was deliberate. It was planned. Cain's heart toward God was revealed in the treatment of his brother. As the apostle John succinctly stated it, "¹¹for this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; ¹²not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous." (1 John 3:11-12). It was an act of unchecked envy and jealousy on the part of Cain.

This was the type of crime that would be specifically addressed in the Law. "¹¹But if there is a man who hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and rises up against him and strikes him so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities, ¹²then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there and deliver him into the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die" (Deuteronomy 19:11-12).

Confrontation and Judgment

God was aware of it all. Still, God offered grace. Encountering Cain, God began with a question, as He had done with Adam, for the purpose of eliciting a sense of contrition and repentance. But as with God's questions to Adam, the answer He received was evasive.

God began the conversation, “where is Abel your brother?” (v. 9). Cain answered, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (v. 9). Such arrogance - to challenge God’s questioning him as if it were inappropriate. This was an act of great boldness before his Creator. Cain efforts to offer instead what he believed to be a rhetorical question we futile as God replied, “what have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground” (v. 10).

Though there is no particular command to ‘keep’ our brother, this was merely a loophole which Cain was trying to exploit. It fooled no one. To the people of the time of Moses, when the narrative was recorded, the answer to Cain’s question would have been in the affirmative. Cain *was* his brother's keeper. “¹⁷You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:17-18). Though no such codified law was available at the time of Cain and Abel, that hardly sufficed for an excuse.

The terms ‘brother’ or ‘neighbor’ often referred to any member if the Israelite community. In fact, it could even be applied to aliens living among them. “³³When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. ³⁴The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:33-34).

This idea of kinship was so embedded in the culture of the Israelite community, that special treatment was extended to those whose family origins were connected with their own, such as the descendants of Lot (Moabites and Ammonites) and the descendants of Esau (Edomites) at the time of the conquest of Canaan.

The voice of the Abel’s blood cried out from the ground. The image is that of the persecuted Israelites in Egypt, or the afflicted stranger, widow, and orphan so frequently mentioned in Scripture as being oppressed. For such a violation of the *imago dei*, Cain was summarily punished. “¹¹Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹²When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth” (v. 11-12).

This was not the same punishment as given to Adam. Adam, was to receive the fruits of the ground, but only by hard and unfulfilling labor. Cain’s efforts were to be fruitless. But Cain was spared. He was not executed on the spot, as one might have expected for such an offense. Even so, Cain protested. “¹³My punishment is too great to bear! ¹⁴Behold, You have driven me this day from the face of the ground; and from Your face I will be hidden, and I will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me” (v. 13-14).

Cain’s concerns were justified. In a time of such primitive cultural structures, a person outside of any family protection would have been very vulnerable indeed. We must remember that this was an ancient culture, and rather than codified laws, blood vengeance was the main vehicle of justice. This was the whole point of cities of refuge in the later Israelite community. His nomadic lifestyle would only increase

the chances of harm befalling him as he traveled among various peoples without others to support and defend him. Yet, the irony of the murderer protesting that he might be murdered cannot be missed.

To demonstrate that vengeance was God's business, God announced "therefore whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord appointed a sign for Cain, so that no one finding him would slay him" (v. 15). The mark was not clearly defined, but it could either have been an actual physical mark, or perhaps a sign of cognition that those who encountered Cain would have had revealed to them. More importantly, we can note that the mark was not the sign of the curse, but rather the opposite. It was a mark of God's protection.

We do not know why God extended His grace to Cain. Scripture is silent on God's motives. Clearly there was nothing in Cain to recommend leniency. In fact, the real punishment was the separation from God. That was worse than death itself.

Progress and Poverty

The punishment was quickly enforced, and without further detail. "Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (v. 16). There is no reason to assume that Nod was already an established community when Cain arrived. The author may have been simply referring to a place that came to be known by that name. What is important is that, despite the despicable character of Cain, his family was allowed to prosper and even flourish. They contributed to the development of animal breeding, music, and metallurgy. All of these are fundamental aspects of civilization.

Scripture records the next hundreds of years matter-of-factly. "Cain had relations with his wife and she conceived, and gave birth to Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city Enoch, after the name of his son. Now to Enoch was born Irad, and Irad became the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael became the father of Methushael, and Methushael became the father of Lamech" (v. 17-18). Note that Cain's son built a city. Surely his father was still alive (the biblical records of long life at this time are famous) and there is no reason to think that Cain did not cease his nomadic lifestyle and live there. Perhaps this was an act of defiance. Perhaps God mitigated the punishment and allowed Cain to establish himself more permanently. Certainly, we can assume it was done as a means of providing safety, but more than that we cannot, with certainty, state.

The narrative moves quickly until it comes to Lamech. He was distinguished as the first person to engage in polygamy. "Lamech took to himself two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other, Zillah" (v. 19). Though polygamy became common among the patriarchs, it was clear that in Israel's history it produced nothing but trouble in those families where it occurred. We can recall Abraham (Sarah and Hagar) and Jacob (Leah and Rachel) as examples where Scripture does not clearly condemn their acts of polygamy, but nevertheless articulates quite dramatically the disfunction it caused.

By the time of the Mosaic Law, the situation had deteriorated to the point where efforts needed to be made to ameliorate the family issues involved.

"If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, then it shall be in the

day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn. ¹⁷But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn” (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

Yet, even Lamech prospered and had progeny that produced great things. ²⁰Adah gave birth to Jubal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. ²¹His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. ²²As for Zillah, she also gave birth to Tubal-Cain, the forger of all implements of bronze and iron; and the sister of Tubal-Cain was Naamah” (v. 20-22).

Jabal was the ancestor of those who practiced a pastoral lifestyle. There is no contradiction between Jubal’s accomplishments and what Adam had already done, for the words clearly distinguish between small animals (and small scale) as opposed to what we might consider today as livestock. Jubal, was the founder of those who play various musical instruments, an advance in culture not to be discounted. Tubal-Cain developed the arts of metallurgy. Some have pointed out that while the bronze age was in full development at the time of the ancients, the iron age did not begin until about 1200 B.C. Therefore, they argue, this is an anachronism. Again, though, if we look at the wording in the original Hebrew, the word has to do with the idea of working with iron rather than its excavation and processing. That is, Tubal-Cain probably developed the skills for working with bronze and such iron as was available on the surface of the earth.

This last achievement, however, had tragic consequences. ²³Lamech said to his wives,
‘Adah and Zillah,
Listen to my voice,
You wives of Lamech,
Give heed to my speech,
For I have killed a man for wounding me;
And a boy for striking me;
²⁴If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (v. 23-24).

The phrasing rendered in the past tense in the NASB can refer to a particular incident or to a more general threat. That is, Lamech might be simply boasting of what he would do if injured. Included in this boast is that he would take his vengeance on even a child. His sin is multi-faceted. Intoxicated by his own apparent security, Lamech felt as if he could take vengeance on being wronged, he believed that to kill in return for simply being wounded was appropriate, and he presumed upon God’s protection for his act. He saw Cain’s mark as a badge of honor.

A New Beginning

The passage ends on a more promising note. ²⁵Adam had relations with his wife again; and she gave birth to a son, and named him Seth, for, she said, ‘God has appointed me another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain killed him.’ ²⁶To Seth, to him also a son was born; and he called his name Enosh. Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord” (v. 25-26).

Eve clearly saw that despite the sin of Cain, God was to be ever faithful. But more intriguing, is the line of Seth, begun here with a description of Enosh. It was during the time of Enosh, apparently, that some form of organized worship began to develop. Though Cain and Abel had worshipped God, the idea of calling “on the name of the Lord” refers to a more systematic and structured form of worship. This would continue to develop under the patriarchs. “Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord” (Genesis 12:8).

Another aspect of this worship is that, although Adam, Eve, and Cain talked with God, it is at the time of the birth of Enosh that men began to call upon God as *Yahweh*. Though some argue that the holy name by which He would be known was introduced to Moses, in fact Scripture here demonstrates that worship of God by that name occurred in the most ancient of times. It was the continued revelation of the name and attributes of God that would be revealed to Moses, and to others as time passed.

Takeaways

As we look through such a passage as this, there is much to consider. Yet, one thing I find important is the reaction of Cain to God’s correction. It is impossible to miss the tragic consequences of Cain’s refusal to take direction from God. Let us ever keep before us the words of Solomon,

“¹¹My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord

Or loathe His reproof,

¹²For whom the Lord loves He reproves,

Even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights” (Proverbs 3:11-12).

Humility is essential to heeding His correction and to setting ourselves upon the proper track. To elaborate excuses, to look for exceptions, to slyly try to mitigate our sin is a sure path to destruction. Let us be honest with ourselves and with our God. Let us allow Him to be our loving Father.

But more than this, if we want to consider the root source of the issue, is that the tragic story of Cain and Abel began with Cain’s half-hearted worship of God. He did not give his best to the Lord. His worship was selfish, in that he kept the best for himself. Such was his heart. Today, we do not bring the fruits of the land or animals to offer, but we do give our energy, attention, and resources to God. It is worth reflecting on whether or not we give our best. And, if we find that we do not, let us humble ourselves and receive the correction we deserve, and let us commit ourselves to better efforts in the future.