

CAIN AND HIS OFFERING

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Introduction

Partially because of the laconic style in which the Cain and Abel story¹ is told and partially because of prejudgments, scholars are divided in their opinions why God rejected Cain's offering. This essay aims to answer that question.²

Prejudging that our story reflects the development of Israelite religion, Skinner proposed that the story represents an early stage of Israelite religion in which animal sacrifice alone was acceptable to Yahweh. He explained: "It is quite conceivable that in the early days of the settlement in Canaan the view was maintained among the Israelites that the animal offerings of their nomadic religion were superior to the vegetable offerings made to the Canaanite Baals."³ Disregarding the unity of Genesis and ignoring God's mandate that Adam, the representative man, till the ground (2:5; 3:23), Gunkel claimed: "This myth indicates that God loves the shepherd and the offering of flesh, but as far as the farmer and the fruits of the field are concerned, He will have none of them."⁴ Cassuto, by contrast, perceptively compared this story with the Creation story and the Garden of Eden story.

There is a kind of parallel here to what was stated in the previous chapters: the raising of sheep corresponds to the dominion over the living creatures referred to in the story of Creation (i 26, 28), and the tilling of the ground

¹ For an excellent commentary on the Cain and Abel story see "Cain and Abel" in *The New Media Bible Times* 1/3 (published by the Genesis Project, 1976).

² For the function of offerings see Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (BKAT 1; 3 vols.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974-82) 1.401f.

³ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910) 106.

⁴ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis ubersetzt and erklart* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922) 43.

is analogous to what we are told at the beginning and the end of the story of the Garden of Eden (ii 5, iii 23).⁵

Some orthodox commentators, coming to the text with the pre-judgment that fallen man may approach offended God only through blood, think that God rejected Cain's sacrifice because it was bloodless. Candlish, for example, wrote: "To appear before God, with whatever gifts, without atoning blood, as Cain did--was infidelity."⁶

This writer comes to the text with the prejudgments that the storyteller drops clues in his text demanding the audience's close attention to details in the text, Gen 4:1-16. Leupold underscored that in the lapidary style of Scripture "significant individual instances are made to display graphically what course was being pursued."⁷ The second presupposition entails that the interpreter also listen to the rest of Scripture in order to determine the text's meaning and/or to validate his interpretation of the narrative.⁸ Although the Cain and Abel story probably enjoyed preliterate independence, it must now be read as part of the Pentateuch. Skinner⁹ rightly noted that the exegete must pay attention to the audience to whom a story is addressed. Unfortunately, he reconstructed the wrong audience! Shackled by his presuppositions of source criticism and lacking the modern tools of literary criticism (sometimes called "rhetorical criticism"), he interpreted the story in the light of hypothetical "first hearers" instead of the readers of the Pentateuch to whom the text in hand was addressed. (Prior to and/or apart from the modern emphasis to hear a text wholistically, studies by William Henry Green,¹⁰ H. Segal,¹¹ and D. J. A. Clines,¹² each in his own way, put the unity of the Pentateuch beyond doubt.)

⁵ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1961) 1.203. Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1982) also demonstrated the unity of Genesis 3 and 4.

⁶ Robert S. Candlish, *Studies in Genesis* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black; reprinted Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1979) 94.

⁷ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1965; orig. 1942) 1.187.

⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, "Is It Right to Read the New Testament into the Old?" *Christianity Today* 27/13 (September 2, 1983) 77.

⁹ Skinner, *Genesis*, 105. For this common error see also S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen & Co., 1904) 64.

¹⁰ William Henry Green, *The Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch* (1896; reprinted, Baker Book House, 1978).

¹¹ M. H. Segal, *The Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967).

¹² D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOT Supp. 10; Sheffield, England: University of Sheffield, 1978).

We commence our study with the observation that the text syntactically distinguishes between the offerer and his offering: "The LORD looked with favor on ['el] Abel and on ['el] his offering, but on ['e1] Cain and on ['el] his offering he did not look with favor" (Gen 4:4b-5a).

I. *Cain's Offering*

1. *Offerings in the Pentateuch.*

The Torah, especially the priestly legislation (the so-called "P document"), has a rich and precise vocabulary to represent the sacraments offered to the LORD on an altar; each term denotes a physical object representing a spiritual truth upon which the worshipper could feed spiritually in his approach to and communion with God.¹³

The most inclusive term for presentations to God on the altar is *qorban*, "offering," from a root signifying "to bring near." This term is not used in the Cain and Abel story.

Offerings can be analyzed broadly into two classes: voluntary and involuntary. Involuntary offerings include the "sin offering" (*hatta't*) and the "guilt offering" (*'asam*).¹⁴ These sacrifices make "atonement" (*kpr*)¹⁵ and involved shedding blood for removal of sin. Were Cain presenting an involuntary offering, he would have been rejected for failure to offer blood. In fact, however, in the Cain and Abel story, a part of the Books of Moses, neither "sin offering" nor "guilt offering" is used.

¹³ G. Lloyd Carr, "*mnh*" in *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament* (ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke; Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) 1.515; C. Brown, "Sacrifice," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. Colin Brown; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979) 3.437f.; Aaron Rothkoff, "Sacrifice," in *EncJud* 15.605f.

¹⁴ Jacob Milgrom, *Cult and Conscience: The Asham and the Priestly Doctrine of Repentance* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976). Other involuntary presentations include the substitute animal for the first born (Exod 34:19-20), the ritual for cleansing from leprosy (Leviticus 14), and defilement by contact with a carcass (Numbers 19).

¹⁵ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965).

The voluntary offerings included the "burnt offering" (*'ola*), "meal offering" (*minha*), and "fellowship offering" (*selem*), including "acknowledgement offering" (*toda*), "votive offering" (*neder*), and "free-will offering" (*nedaba*). These dedicatory offerings could be either animal, as in the case of the burnt-offering (Leviticus 1), or grain, as in the case of the "meal offering" (Leviticus 2). The fellowship offering could be either (Leviticus 3). A libation offering (*neseq*) accompanied burnt and fellowship offerings. The priest's portion of the fellowship offering was symbolically "waved" before the LORD as his portion and called the "wave offering" (*Tenupa*). Certain portions of it (namely, one of the cakes and the right thigh) were given as a "contribution" from the offerer to the priests, the so-called "heave offering" (*teruma*).

The term "sacrifice" (*zebah*) may be a generic term for presentations on the altar (*mizbeah*) or a more technical term for representing rituals in making a covenant. The slaughtering of an animal in the latter case symbolized a self-curse (that is, the one making covenant would say words to the effect, "may it happen to me as it is happening to this animal I am killing") and effected a sacrifice.¹⁶ We need not pursue the word further because it is not used in Genesis 4.

Our narrator designates three times (vv 3, 4, 5) the brothers' offerings by *minha*, a grain offering, it will be recalled, in the so-called "P document." The unusual element in the story from a lexical viewpoint is not that Cain's offering is bloodless but that Abel's is bloody! In any case, by using *minha*, Moses virtually excludes the possibility that God did not look on Cain's offering because it was bloodless. Rothkoff said:

The terminology used with regard to the patriarchal age is that of the Torah as a whole; it is unlikely that the same words in Genesis mean something different in the other Books of Moses. Thus, Cain and Abel each brought a "gift" (*minhah*; Gen. 4:4f.), which was usually of a cereal nature as brought by Cain (Lev. 2, et al.) but could also refer to an animal offering (I Sam. 2:17; 26:19). Noah offered up a burnt offering (*'olah*; Gen. 8:20ff.) and the pleasing odor of the sacrifice is stressed.¹⁷

He could have added that Noah in conformity with the later priestly and deuteronomistic legislation distinguished between "clean and

¹⁶ M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90 (1970) 197f.

¹⁷ Rothkoff, "Sacrifice," 605.

unclean" animals (Gen 7:2, the so-called "J document"! cf. Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14).

2. *The Meaning of minha outside the Pentateuch*

Most scholars trace *minha* back to an Arabic root meaning "to lend someone something" for a period of time so that the borrower can have free use of the loan. In Hebrew, however, the idea of loaning is lost, and it comes to mean "gift," "tribute."

In nontheological texts it designates a "gift" from an inferior to a superior person, particularly from a subject to a king, to convey the idea of homage. The Israelites, for example, who despised Saul "brought him no present" (*minha*) (1 Sam 10:27), that is, as Carr explained: "did not acknowledge the new king."¹⁸ The kings submissive to Solomon brought "tribute" (*minha*) (1 Kgs 4:21 [Heb. 5:1]; cf. Jdg 3:15-18; 2 Sam 8:2, 6). "Gifts" to Solomon included articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules (1 Kgs 10:25).

A person brought a gift appropriate to his social standing and vocation (cf. Gen 32:13ff. [Heb. vv 14ff]). Appropriately, Abel, a shepherd, brought some of his flock (that is, from the fruit of the womb of sheep and/or goats), and Cain, a farmer, brought from the fruit of the ground. Furthermore, would God reject the eldest son's tribute because it came from the ground that he himself had commanded Adam to work? If *minha* were translated by either "gift" or "tribute" in Gen 4:3-5, it would be clearer that the absence of blood from Cain's presentation on his altar did not disqualify him (cf. Deut 26:1-11).

The theological uses of *minha* comport with its nontheological uses (cf. Num 16:15; Jdg 6:18; 1 Sam 2:17; Ps 96:8; Zeph 3:10). Snaith said that *minha* could loosely be used in the sense of "gift" or "tribute" even in specific cultic contexts. Carr likewise observed: "Of particular interest in this connection is the distinction between *zebah* and *minha* in 1 Sam 2:29; 3:14; and Isa 19:21; between *'ola* and *minha* in Jer 14:12 and Ps 20:3 [H 4]; and between *shelem* and *minha* in Amos 5:22."¹⁹

Our lexical study for the term designating Cain's offering gives no basis for thinking it was rejected because it was bloodless. In fact,

¹⁸ Carr, "*mnh*," 514.

¹⁹ Ibid.

of the many expressions for presentations to God which were available to Moses, he could not have used a more misleading term if this were his intended meaning.

3. *Descriptions of the Offerings within the Text*

The storyteller intends to contrast Abel's offering with Cain's by paralleling "Cain brought some" with "Abel brought some," by adding with Abel, "even he" (*gam hu'*) (v 4), and by juxtaposing in a chiasmic construction the LORD's acceptance of Abel and his gift with his rejection of Cain and his gift (vv 4b-5a).

He characterizes Abel's offerings from the flocks as "from the firstborn" and "from their fat." By offering the firstborn Abel signified that he recognized God as the Author and Owner of Life. In common with the rest of the ancient Near East, the Hebrews believed that the deity, as lord of the manor, was entitled to the *first share* of all produce. The *firstfruits* of plant and the *firstborn* of animals and man were his. The LORD demonstrated that he gave Egypt its life and owned it by taking its firstborn. Israel's gifts from the animals involved those that open the womb (Exod 13:2, 12; 34:19) and gifts from the ground had to be the "firstfruits" (*bikkurim*) (Deut 26:1-11).²⁰

Abel's offering conformed with this theology; Cain's did not. In such a laconic story the interpreter may not ignore that whereas Abel's gift is qualified by "firstborn," the parallel "firstfruits" does not modify Cain's. Skinner cavalierly rewrote the story and misinterpreted the data thus: "Cain's offering is thus analogous to the first-fruits (*bikkurim* Ex 23:16, 19; 34:22, 26; Nu 13:20 etc.) of Heb ritual; and it is arbitrary to suppose that his fault lay in not selecting the best of what he had for God."²¹

Abel also offered the "fat," which in the so-called "P" material belonged to the LORD and was burned symbolically by the priests. This tastiest and best burning part of the offering represented the best. Abel's sacrifice, the interlocutor aims to say, passed that test with flying colors. Cain's sacrifice, however, lacks a parallel to "fat."

²⁰ Sometimes the principle of redemption by substitution came into play here. In the case of children, the LORD provided a substitute animal (cf. Gen 22:1-19; Exod 13:1-13; Dent 15:19), and the Levitical family was consecrated to God in place of the firstborn (Num 3:1-4; cf. Num 18:15-16).

²¹ Skinner, *Genesis*, 104; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 42 held the same view.

In this light Plaut's comment, "God's rejection of Cain's offering is inexplicable in human terms,"²² appears obtuse.

Finally, is it not strange that if the narrator intended that Cain's sacrifice was disqualified for lack of blood that he does not mention blood with Abel's gift. Admittedly it is a negative clue, but when combined with the two positive clues, the mention of "firstborn" and "fat," it shouts out against Von Rad's baseless claim: "The only clue one can find in the narrative is that the sacrifice of blood was more pleasing to Yahweh."²³

Rabbinic exegesis also picked up these clues ("two expressions to emphasize that the oblation was the best of its kind ..." ²⁴ without mentioning "blood") and then exaggerated them, maintaining that Cain brought produce of the poorest quality. We cannot agree with Westermann who negates these clues and draws the conclusion instead that the text merely speaks of God's immutability. He said:

Gott hat das Opfer des einen angesehen, das des anderen nicht. Das Gott das Opfer Kains nicht ansah, ist also weder auf seine Gesinnung noch auf ein falsches Opfer noch auf eine falsche Art des Opfern zurückzuführen. Es ist vielmehr das Unabänderliche damit ausgesagt, dass so etwas geschieht.²⁵

Westermann's view represents God as capricious. Rather, Abel's sacrifice represents acceptable, heartfelt worship; Cain's represents unacceptable tokenism.

4. *Witness of the NT*

The writer of Hebrews says that by faith Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain did (Heb 11:4), a statement that tends to support the rabbinic interpretation. No text in the NT faults Cain for a bloodless sacrifice. To be sure Hebrews mentions "the blood of Abel," but he has in mind Abel's blood, not that of his sacrifice (Heb 12:24). Jesus' cleansing blood, he says, is better than Abel's blood because Abel's cried for vengeance, whereas the blood of Christ,

²² W Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974) 1.46.

²⁹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972) 104.

²⁴ Cassuto, *Genesis* 1.205.

²⁵ Westermann, *Genesis*, 403.

typified in God's sacrifice to clothe the nakedness of Adam and Eve (Gen 3:21), cried out for forgiveness and provided salvation.

III. *The Characterization of Cain*

1. *The Character of the Priest in the Pentateuch*

The unity of the Pentateuch also enables us to discover, interpret, and validate clues regarding the brothers as priests. Leviticus 8-9, 26 teaches that the priest's character qualified him or disqualified him from the altar. An encroacher, be he Israelite or non-Israelite, must be put to death.²⁶ In this light, the statement in vv 4-5 that the LORD accepted one priest, Abel, and rejected the other, Cain, takes on new significance. Whereas the text explicitly characterizes Abel's offering, and more or less infers Cain's, it dwells on Cain's character, and more or less infers Abel's.

2. *Cain's Characterization in the Text*

Robert Alter²⁷ refined our interpretation of narrative by analyzing and classifying the following techniques used by a story-teller for communicating his meaning: statements by the narrator himself, by God, by heroes or heroines; by verbal clues; by juxtaposition of material; by characterization; and by consequences of actions. We employed the techniques of verbal clues and juxtaposition of material to discover the blemish in Cain's gift. The other techniques expose the deformity in his character.

The LORD said he is unacceptable: "If you [Cain] do what is right, will you not be accepted?" (v 7). To this he added: "Sin is crouching at your door." After sin so dominated Cain that he killed Abel, the LORD cursed Cain even as he had earlier cursed his spiritual father, the Serpent: "You are under a curse" (v. 11; cf. 3:14).

Note too how the narrator characterizes the sulking Cain as a sinner unworthy to worship. Cain's visible behavior confirms the LORD's privileged assessment of his heart. Cain's anger against God is written

²⁶ J. Milgrom, *Studies in Levitical Terminology*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

²⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 14.

large on his face (vv 5-6; contrast Hab 2:4), and he progresses in sin from deficient worship to fratricide (v 8).

Cain's speech, disclosing his unregenerate heart, condemns him. His sarcastic question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" betrays both his callousness against God and his hate of his brother made in God's image (v 9). He calls into question God's wisdom, justice, and love and attempts to justify himself, claiming: "My punishment is more that I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence" (vv 13-14). Even after God mitigates his sentence (v 15), he fails to respond to God's grace (v 16).

As a *consequence* of his action Cain became a man without a place, an outcast from God's presence, from the ground, and from his fellow-man (vv 14-16).

3. *Witness of the NT*

The NT validates our conclusions drawn from the text. Jesus characterized Abel as righteous (Matt 23:35), and Hebrews added that Abel, in contrast to Cain, offered his gift in faith: "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings" (Heb 11:4). According to John, Cain belonged to the evil one and was himself evil: "Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous" (1 John 3:12). According to Jude, Cain spoke abusively and thought like an unreasoning animal: "Yet these men speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; ... like unreasoning animals ... woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain" (Jude 11f.).

Conclusion

Although the narrative by repeating the preposition *'el* with both the proper names, Abel and Cain, and with *minha* syntactically distinguishes the brothers and their offerings, yet theologically, as suggested above, the two are inseparable. Elsewhere Yahweh rejected the gifts of Korah (Num 16:15), Saul's men (1 Sam 26:19), and apostate Israel (Isa 1:13), not because of some blemish in their offering, but because of their deformed characters. Cain's flawed character led to his feigned worship. Had his mind been enlightened

to understand his dependence upon the Creator, who fructified the ground, and the Redeemer, who atoned man's sin through Christ's blood, providing a basis for man's reconciliation to God, he would have offered not a token gift, but one from the heart, and along with Abel both he and his gift would have been pleasing to God.

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