

THE MESSAGES OF CHAPTER 4 OF GENESIS

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On viewing the initial stories in the Torah, it is proper to conclude that one of their main points is to address some of man's basic existential questions. Man is naturally agitated by the fact that, unlike animals, he must toil to earn his bread, a woman must give birth in pain, and death is decreed for him. These and other problems, fundamental to man's existence, the Torah seeks to address.

The purpose of Genesis 3, the story of the Garden of Eden, is clear. No such enlightenment emerges from the encounter of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. The issue that the Torah is addressing there is very unclear. It is hardly adequate to say that the Torah wishes to condemn murder. For that purpose, explicit condemnation would have been sufficient, without the elaborate description of the two brothers' respective occupations and motivations.

The story also holds a surprise. It turns out that culture and civilization, the pride and glory of mankind, are due to the ingenuity of Cain and his descendants. Cain, the first murderer, is portrayed as the first builder of a city, and his offspring as the inventors of tools and instruments and discoverers of arts and crafts:

. And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch, and he built a city . . . and his brother's name was Jubal, he was the father of all such as handle the harp and pipe . . . she also bore Tubalcain, the forger of every cutting instrument of brass and iron (4:17ff).

Civilization, which distinguishes man from beast, is the fruit of the ingenuity of the first homicide. Cain's descendants are presented as farmers, builders, artisans and artists. Do we assume that a bias against civilization is manifested here? Is it implied that since civilization has its roots in envy and violence, it is to be shunned, and that even farming is tarnished? How is this to be reconciled

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with the primary command to man to rule and control his environment? *And God said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it and have dominion'* (1:28). Here the Bible obviously sanctions the dominion of man's spirit over physical and animal creation.

It is also noteworthy that even a cursory reading of the text shows Cain as the main character upon whom the story focuses. Everything revolves around him and his descendants: the rejection of his sacrifice, God's stern admonition to him, the slaying of his brother Abel, his brazen retort to God, his punishment and remorse, the building of the first city, the details of his offspring's inventions and the murder apparently committed by his grandson Lemech. Everything deals with Cain and his family. This devotion to Cain and his fate illustrates the crucial role he and his occupation play in the development of mankind. What is the reason why the text puts so much emphasis on Cain's strengths and shortcomings?

It is significant that the Bible appears to show that the fate of the two brothers was not by any means pre-ordained or accidental, but that the choice of their occupations had a direct bearing on it. Victimizer and victim played out their specific roles. The victimizer was compelled and the victim submitted. As shepherd, Abel was likely a tranquil and peaceful man, passive and embracing the environment as it was, with no special incentive to impose his will and skill on the earth, but accepting it as a given. He left the condition of the soil largely untouched, drawing from it only what it yielded on its own. His flock, however, he attended to solicitously, and cared for it with tenderness. Relieved of physical toil, he had the time and will to meditate upon the greatness of God, to Whom he brought his choicest sheep for an offering. In harmony with God and nature, he was emulated, at least in their maturing years, by Jacob, Moses and David.

In striking contrast was Cain's character. As farmer, he was of necessity active and intrusive and non-accepting of the natural given state of the earth. He deliberately imposed his will and strength upon a reluctant soil, cultivating and nurturing it to give more. He challenged the land to yield its potential, so that he could eat his bread in comfort, variety and abundance. In the process, he learned which land is arable, which crop plantable and in which season to sow and reap. He would note the weather patterns and their effect on the soil, and so acquired the rudimentary principles of meteorology. Bent

under back-breaking labor, he or his successors would come to invent tools and instruments to ease their work, and thus initiate the progress of civilization. Of greatest impact on his psychological makeup is the image he had of himself. Bringing forth new and varied crops and forms, he saw himself as creator and producer, vying with God Himself. The risk, however, is that in this mood he would become arrogant and intolerant, expressing his insolence to God and murdering his brother, committing thereby the two cardinal sins.

Viewed in this light, it is readily explained why God was displeased with Cain's offering, a reaction with which the commentators struggle. It was not the offering per se which was not commendable but, rather the offerer, who did not come with pure heart and clean hands, but with arrogance and disrespect. And it is to this that God's admonition pertains, warning him to be mindful of the sin of overbearing that always crouches nearby, which, if he wills it, Cain can master.

What has angered God is the untamed drive, because it is liable to push Cain beyond the good and proper. But even after his punishment of having to live as a nomad, wandering on the face of the earth, Cain's ambition remained intact, and he concentrated on becoming a builder of a city. His energy inspired his offspring to imitate him, and they become inventors of arts and crafts, producing tools and devices, partaking of God's very creative quality. Unfortunately, however, it induced in them pride and overbearance.

In a perfect world, Abel's character, moulded by his occupation as shepherd, is ideal. It is peaceful, gentle and non-competitive. It affords the right opportunity for worshipping God, congeniality with man, and harmony with nature. It suffers from one fatal flaw, however. A tranquil Abel cannot stand up against an aggressive Cain the cultivator. An Abel will exist only at the sufferance of a Cain. In a confrontation he must give way.

Nor, in the shepherd's vision, will the earth ever be developed, and thus its potential will remain unawakened. Nature's capacity will remain hidden and the Divine order to "work it and guard it" will be unfulfilled. The hope of history lies with Cain. Yet, he too is handicapped. His raw, uncurbed ambition opens him up to the risk of violence and pride, and so disqualifies him from the task imposed upon man. Another type must be found who will be able to combine within himself the energy of Cain and the thoughtfulness of Abel. It is for this reason that the chapter concludes with the birth of a third

son of Adam and Eve. He is named Seth, the "Foundation Stone," for with him mankind has been given another starting base to develop. (The Ha'emek Davar comments that the word Seth is related to *Even Ha'shtiya*, the foundation stone, and he rejects the normal translation of "replacement.") This offspring was successful, for in the days of Enos son of Seth, mankind again *began to call upon the Name of the Lord*. Thus, Seth, through his descendents who call upon the Name of the Lord, can develop the potential of a creative Cain, however curbed by a Divine code of conduct.

Though they too eventually became corrupt and were washed away in the Flood, the message of Chapter 4 is clear. Left to his own devices, man is capable of making great inventions, but is without effective means to rein in his defiant and violent tendencies. The need was essential to devise means and laws to restrain those violent tendencies, and to lay the ground and justification for the Torah's later legislation. Only a code of conduct to which man must adhere can educate him to curb his impulses. The Bible itself gives testimony to this passion of man's will: *Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* (6:5). Man is given the opportunity to develop the earth for his benefit, but unaided by a corpus of law and guidance, he is bound to fail. Cain's failed career serves as the model for man's profound weakness and demonstrates the need for later biblical legislation to enlighten him. The rabbis express it in their own way, when they note: "I created the evil inclination, and I created the Torah with which to temper it" (Kiddushin 30).

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