

THE CAIN AND ABEL NARRATIVE: ITS PROBLEMS AND LESSONS

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The narrative about Cain and Abel is one of the most widely known stories. Its fame derives from its being the first murder and fratricide in history. The story captured the imagination of man in light of God's "punishment," or should it be said "protection," of Cain. The narrative itself is terse, sketchy and lacks detail, so it is puzzling and thus subject to man's taste for fancy speculation.

Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain became a tiller of the soil. In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the Lord from the soil; and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock . . . (Gen. 4:2-4).

Even at the beginning of the narrative, several questions arise. Why was Abel mentioned first even though Cain was older and therefore should be mentioned first? Is it because the narrator wanted to show that the offering of the sheep was consistent with the later practice in the Temple, and thus the preference of God? Yet the narrator has Cain the first to offer a sacrifice to God, with Abel following his lead.

The puzzle continues with the description of the offerings. The sheep was the *choicest of the firstlings of his flock*, while Cain's offering was merely *the fruit of the soil*. Was it a deliberate distinction by the narrator to show that Abel cared about the quality of his offering and that it was part of his own possessions, while Cain did not meet these criteria? However, the most important point is that each of the brothers brought a product of the occupation in which he was engaged. They could not do otherwise. On this basis, one could reason that Cain's offering was much more important in that it was the fruit of his hard labor, since God had cursed the ground when He punished Adam. Abel's tending the sheep required no such hard labor. One might then

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expect that God would prefer Cain's offering, especially since Cain first had the idea of sacrifice to God, without the incentive of a promise by God as was the case with Abraham. This indicates the natural expression of Cain's innate spiritual quality.

The readers know of God's choice because the narrator tells us: *The Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering. But to Cain and his offering He paid no heed . . .* (vv. 4-5). But how did Cain know? This constitutes the prelude to the central theme: *Cain was much distressed and his face fell* [depression]. *And the Lord said to Cain: 'Why are you distressed / And why is your face fallen? / Surely **if you do right** [emphasis added] / There is uplift . . .'* (vv. 5-6).

No mention of sacrifices is made, indicating that sacrifices are not important (as also stated by the prophets), but what is important is that one "do right," in which there is merit and a feeling of satisfaction: *But if you do not do right, / Sin crouches at the door; / Its urge is towards you. / Yet you can be its master* (v. 7). This represents a challenge to man to become the master of his choices as exemplified repeatedly in the Torah: *'I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life if you and your offspring would live'* (Deut. 30:19).

Cain said to his brother Abel . . . and when they were in the field, Cain set upon brother Abel and killed him. The Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' And he answered, 'I do not know. . .' (Gen. 4:8-9).

Cain, in his state of mind, refused to follow God's advice. However, the murder was not premeditated, nor did he know the consequences of his act. What he was responsible for was his lie to God, *'I do not know.'* This was a grievous act for which he was punished, but not one deserving death. Furthermore, Cain answered God's question with *'Am I my brother's keeper?'* (v. 9), perhaps meaning, "Am I the only one to be my brother's keeper? You, God, are just as responsible. Why did you not stop me from killing your creation?" Cain did not understand God's last words of advice that he can be the master of his choice, or perhaps he did not care to listen to God because Cain considered God's preference as very unfair – for reasons suggested above. Also, Cain did not understand that one human being should not harm another, because both are creations of God.

In conclusion, as God's statement testifies, the central theme of the story is that of choice. It is also couched in the language of covenant relationships. (If you do/and if you do not). Our free will demands that choices be available. Living in a binary world, it cannot be otherwise. Men cannot be free unless they understand the meaning of freedom and choice and the part these play in their journey of self-discovery. The story of Cain and Abel, as well as the Adam narrative, are showing us the way.

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