

Cain & Abel

By Dave Burke

The story of Cain and Abel plays an important role in the foundation of Old Testament theology. While the narrative itself is simple, the themes are deep, and the message deceptively sophisticated.

Just as their parents are the archetypal first human beings and sinners, the brothers represent an archetypal sibling rivalry fuelled by humanity's predilection for conflict. Their story is traditionally examined from the standpoint of 'what happened to Abel, and why?', but a greater lesson emerges when we take the standpoint of 'what happened afterwards?'

Cain and Abel are introduced in Genesis 4:1-2.¹ There has been much speculation about the meaning of their names, but the narrative makes nothing of them, and commentators' attempts to find special significance here have been strained at best.

Cain is a farmer and Abel is a herdsman, but they are both local to each other, which tells us that Abel's lifestyle was not nomadic. Thus, the brothers live in an established agrarian community (a point that becomes noteworthy in the latter part of the story).

At a certain time, sacrifices are due to God.² The purpose of these sacrifices is not explicitly stated, but they do not appear to have salvic connotations:

'The sacrifices of Cain and Abel are not depicted as addressing sin or seeking atonement. The word used designates them very generally as "gifts"—a word that is most closely associated with the grain offering later in Leviticus 2. They appear to be intended to express gratitude to God for his bounty.

Therefore, it is appropriate that Cain should bring an offering from the produce that he grew, for blood would not be mandatory in such an offering. It should be noted that Genesis does not preserve any record of God requesting such offerings, though he approved of it as a means of expressing

¹ 'Now the man had marital relations with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. Then she said, "I have created a man just as the LORD did!" Then she gave birth to his brother Abel. Abel took care of the flocks, while Cain cultivated the ground.'

² 'Heb "And it happened at the end of days." The clause indicates the passing of a set period of time leading up to offering sacrifices.' NET Bible footnote.

thanks. Gratitude is not expressed, however, when the gift is grudgingly given, as is likely the case with Cain.³

Cain brings ‘some of the fruit of the ground’ (verse 3) while Abel brings ‘some of the firstborn of his flock—even the fattest of them’ (verse 4). The differentiation implied is that Cain has taken little care over his offering, while Abel has presented the very best:

‘The reason for the rejection of Cain’s sacrifice is not immediately obvious. The contrast between Cain’s *some of the fruits* and Abel’s *fat portions ... of the firstborn of his flocks* probably gives the clue. Perhaps Abel brought the best parts of his flocks and Cain was not so particular. But sacrifice is only acceptable to God if it is perfect and costly (Lv. 22:20–22; 2 Sa. 24:24); he will not be satisfied with second best (Mal. 1:6–14; Rom. 12:1).⁴

When Cain’s sacrifice is rejected, he becomes enraged. In a gesture that foreshadows His later act of mercy, God does not respond in kind, but instead attempts to reason with him:

‘Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why is your expression downcast? Is it not true that if you do what is right, you will be fine? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. It desires to dominate you, but you must subdue it.”⁵

This is powerful imagery. It subtly invokes Adam’s superiority over the animal kingdom, implying that Cain will lose this status if he succumbs to sin:

‘Sin is portrayed with animal imagery here as a beast crouching and ready to pounce (a figure of speech known as zoomorphism). An Akkadian cognate refers to a type of demon; in this case perhaps one could translate, “Sin is the demon at the door” (see E. A. Speiser, *Genesis [AB]*, 29, 32–33).⁶

Cain has a choice: control his emotions and retain his human nobility, or allow passion to consume him, and become no better than the animals. He chooses the latter, and thus God’s rejection of his sacrifice becomes the catalyst for Abel’s murder.

³ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ge 4:1–7.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (ed. D. A. Carson et al.; 4th ed.; Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 64.

⁵ Genesis 4:6-7.

⁶ NET Bible footnote.

Cain's anger is actually directed at God, but Abel is a convenient proxy.⁷ By killing Abel, he hopes to reassert his status and prove God wrong: he is still a man, capable of conscious, autonomous decisions, for better or worse. He is not like the animals, with their interior intelligence, pre-programmed instincts and lack of moral comprehension. He can *knowingly, deliberately* make bad choices; he can *knowingly, deliberately* defy God.

Cain wants to prove that sin does not debase him, as it did his father. He needs to convince himself that he has not relinquished the divine gift of rulership.⁸ Yet his choice has the opposite effect: by succumbing to the beast at the door, Cain becomes the slave of sin.

The murder of Abel (verse 8) is described in a single sentence, devoid of emotion and detail. This spartan re-telling reflects the callous nature of Cain's crime: cold, clinical, and utterly devoid of conscience. It is intended to show us just how little Cain cared or thought about what he had done.⁹

God knows of Cain's sin, but still gives him the opportunity to confess. Yet when challenged by God, Cain is defiant:

'Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he replied, "I don't know! Am I my brother's guardian?"',¹⁰

⁷ 'Notice that he is angry at God but he will take his anger out on his brother. The context here is anger amidst worship. Possibly he was upset because he brought his offering first, but Abel's was accepted and his was not.' Robert James Utley, *How It All Began: Genesis 1–11* (vol. Vol. 1A; Study Guide Commentary Series; Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 2001), 73.

⁸ 'These early chapters of Genesis offer a degenerative play on the theme of "rule." In Gen. 1:28, the human pair is to have dominion over plants and creation, even as the great lights are to govern (1:16–18). In the disordered, oppressive world of 3:16, it was the man ruling the woman. Now, it is this pitifully rejected man taking responsibility for himself. He has the capacity to tame the beast at the door.' Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 58.

⁹ 'It is over and done and nothing need be said. Waiting sin has had its dangerous way. Cain has not ruled but has been ruled, overcome by the lust that lies in ambush.' Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 60.

¹⁰ Genesis 4:9.

Here Cain continues to maintain the fiction that he is in control. To what extent he still believed this, is open to debate. What we do know is that he felt sufficiently confident to stand his ground under God's cross-examination:

"Am I my brother's keeper?" The great problem with Cain was his unrepentant heart. The term "keeper" can mean "shepherd" (BDB 1036, KB 1581, Qal ACTIVE PARTICIPLE), which may be a play on the occupation of Abel (cf. v. 2).¹¹

'The narrative has close parallels to the lawsuit of Gen. 3:9ff. as the drama moves through investigation (vv. 9-10), sentence (vv. 11-12) and, finally, to banishment (v.16). In the initial exchange, Cain's angry counterquestion (v. 9) is very like the rhetorical questions of Jacob (30:2) and Joseph (50:19). Their questions mean to dismiss the point raised and limit the scope of responsibility. Here, Cain refuses brotherly responsibility. He wants release from the empowerment of verse 7. (In 28:15, it is God and no human agent who is a "keeper.") (See pp. 245–246.)¹²

As prosecutor, God presents the evidence against Cain:

'But the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"¹³

A corresponding footnote in the NET Bible makes this explicit:

'The word "voice" is a personification; the evidence of Abel's shed blood condemns Cain, just as a human eyewitness would testify in court.'

As judge, God now convicts Cain and hands down His sentence:

'So now, you are banished from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

When you try to cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its best for you. You will be a homeless wanderer on the earth."¹⁴

Here we have another bitter reversal that echoes the fate of Cain's father. Adam's charge was to care for the garden, but he lost this commission when God expelled him from Eden.

¹¹ Robert James Utley, *How It All Began: Genesis 1–11* (vol. Vol. 1A; Study Guide Commentary Series; Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 2001), 74.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 60.

¹³ Genesis 4:10.

¹⁴ Genesis 4:11-12.

Similarly, Cain was a farmer, but now God causes the earth to resist him, and forces him away from his land.

The severity of this punishment in an Ancient Near East context cannot be underestimated, and it shocks Cain into an emotional outburst that is characteristic of his selfish nature:

‘Then Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is too great to endure!

Look! You are driving me off the land today, and I must hide from your presence. I will be a homeless wanderer on the earth; whoever finds me will kill me.”’¹⁵

Cain’s appeal is another act of defiance, which has nothing to do with any sense of fair play (even though he tries to pretend that it does¹⁶). Despite this, God offers a concession:

‘But the LORD said to him, “All right then, if anyone kills Cain, Cain will be avenged seven times as much.” Then the LORD put a special mark on Cain so that no one who found him would strike him down.’¹⁷

Notice that Cain’s original sentence still stands; it has not been repealed, commuted, or reduced. He will forever be known as a sinner. Yet vigilantism has been outlawed: God reaffirms that He alone has the power of life and death, and thus Cain is marked to show that he is God’s property.¹⁸ The vengeance that will result from his unlawful killing is not for

¹⁵ Genesis 4:13-14.

¹⁶ ““My punishment is too great to bear!” Cain is not sorry for his act but he is sorry for its consequences.’

Robert James Utley, *How It All Began: Genesis 1–11* (vol. Vol. 1A; Study Guide Commentary Series; Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 2001), 75.

¹⁷ Genesis 4:15.

¹⁸ ‘The killer now fears to be killed (vv. 13–14). The killer has no resources of his own but must cast himself upon the mercy of the life-giver. And such a mercy: a mark asserting both guilt and grace. ...That function is two-edged. On the one hand, it announces the guilt of Cain. On the other, it marks Cain as safe in God’s protection. In such a simple way, the narrative articulates the two-sidedness of human life, in jeopardy for disobedience and yet kept safe. The acknowledgment of *guilt* and the reality of *grace* come together in this presentation.’ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 60.

Cain's sake, but for God's. Even in this act of grace, Yahweh proves that justice is at the heart of everything He does.¹⁹

We are told that when Cain left the presence of God, he lived in 'the land of Nod, east of Eden.'²⁰ The land of Nod has never been unambiguously identified, but the NET Bible notes that 'Nod' means 'wandering', which suggests that this is actually a play on words: Cain leaves the presence of God, and enters the land of wanderers.²¹ The spiritual implication is that human life is futile and aimless in the absence of a relationship with our Creator.

True to form, Cain refuses to accept the fate of a nomad. In verse 17 he fathers a son and begins to build a city. This signifies a desperate need to regain the familial and economic stability that was lost as a result of his sin. Sadly, Cain never once considers rekindling his relationship with God, which would have borne far greater fruit.

The tragedy of Cain and Abel is a microcosm of human strife: brother against brother, tribe against tribe, nation against nation, and endless wars amongst believers and unbelievers alike. Coming so soon after the story of the Fall, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that this story is intended to drive home the inescapable consequences of Adam and Eve's sin. Indeed, there is a grim predictability about the whole affair; we get the sense that Abel's death is inevitable.

There is also a strong indication that the effects of sin are compounded with every new generation. Cain's sin—and subsequent response to exposure—is very different to his father's:

'Ch. 3 showed how sin disrupts relations between God and human beings and between man and wife.

Ch. 4 shows it destroying the bonds of brotherhood. Indeed, Cain is portrayed as a more hardened sinner than Adam. Killing one's brother is more wicked than eating a protected fruit. Adam had to be

¹⁹ 'The story turns neither on the murder by Cain nor on the punishment by Yahweh but upon the pathos of Cain (v. 14) and the movement of Yahweh in response to that pathos (v. 15). Guilt has been met with judgment. But even the guilty one is met with surprising grace.' Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 60.

²⁰ Genesis 4:16.

²¹ 'Rather than indicating a geographical location, the "land of Nod" most likely symbolically indicates Cain's status as a fugitive and wanderer.' J. Chase Franklin, "Cain, Son of Adam," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

persuaded to sin; Cain could not be dissuaded from sinning, even by God himself (6–7). Sin is personified as an animal waiting to pounce (7; cf. 1 Pet. 5:8).

When questioned by God about his sin, Adam, though rather petulant, at least told the truth; Cain lied and then made a joke about it (3:9–11 cf. 4:9). Adam accepted God’s judgment in silence, but Cain protested fiercely (13–14) and was despatched even further from Eden (16).²²

The final message of Cain and Abel’s story is found in its parallel to Christ’s redeeming work:

- sin brings death
- redemption requires forgiveness
- forgiveness is impossible without reconciliation

As Brueggemann puts it:

‘The miracle of new life, the wonder of resurrection, is linked to brotherly reconciliation. That is what passing from death to life is about (1 John 3:14). But life with the brother is so ominous because of the “waiting one.”

Most days, we would choose death (cf. Deut. 30:19) rather than to face the brother. But the gospel is uncompromising. The promises are linked to the brother and will be had no other way. It is a mystery that the gift of new life is so close at hand, present in the neighbour. So close at hand but so resisted.

We do not readily embrace such a mystery. Perhaps that is the reason sin waits so eagerly.²³

Our challenge is to resist the beast at the door, and seek reconciliation with our brother in the hope that we might all be reconciled to God.

²² Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (ed. D. A. Carson et al.; 4th ed.; Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 63–64.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 64.