

Genesis 4.1-8: The Death of Abel

Genesis 4 marks the beginning of the dispensation of *conscience*. Sin brought an *experimental* knowledge of good and evil (3.22). *Richard Catchpole* notes, “That knowledge embraced an inner ability to assess and determine the moral value of his (Adam’s) conduct, to decide for himself what is right and wrong. The Bible refers to this knowledge as ‘conscience’, knowledge that imposes upon men a responsibility to do what is right, and refrain from what is wrong.”

Genesis 4 describes the spread of sin from Adam and Eve to their *family* and *society* at large. Not only *marriage* relationships, but *brotherly* and *societal* relationships are affected as sin became more firmly entrenched in humanity. This is exemplified by Cain “who was of that wicked one and slew his brother” (1 John 3.12). There are also points of parallel with Genesis 3. Both chapters describe the *committing* of sin and divine *questioning* of the sinner. The offenders are marked (by skins and a sign) and are *banished* from the presence of God. So, the principle of rejecting the *firstborn* in favour of the *second* finds its commencement with Cain and Abel. Scripture will now develop two distinct family lines – one that is *ungodly* (the seed of the serpent) and the other *godly*, a seed of the woman. The ungodly line is developed in 4.17-24, before introducing the godly line of Seth in 4.25-26.

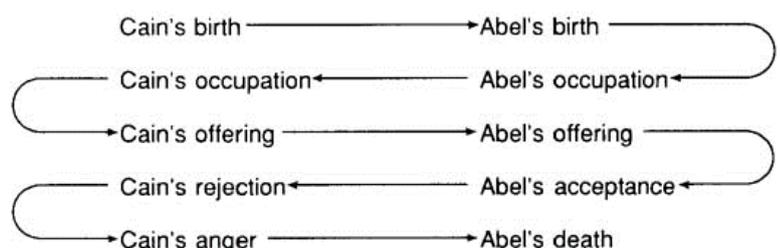
Cain and Abel are *representative* characters, as well as *foreshadows* of individuals to come.

- They represent two great classes of people – those that are lost, and those that are saved. Cain is the father of all those who approach God on the ground of personal merit (pride). Abel is the parent of all who approach Him in faith (obedience) on the ground of the death of another.
- Cain personally foreshadows the “man of sin”. Eve thought she had brought forth the One to crush the serpent’s head, instead Cain was a false messiah. He developed into a *murderer* and *liar* (cp. John 8.44), shed the blood of the righteous and was marked. He is also associated with a city and the origin of false religion and commercialism.
- Cain also foreshadows the Jew (collectively). AW Pink says, “Cain, who hated his brother Abel, foreshadows the Jew, who rejected Christ and delivered Him into the hands of the Gentiles and shed innocent blood. As Cain had blood guiltiness upon himself, the blood of his brother Abel, so there is blood guiltiness upon the Jewish race. ‘His blood be upon us and our children,’ was their demand. Cain’s judgment is typical of the punishment which came upon the Jewish people. Like Cain, they were driven from Him; became wanderers over the face of the earth.”
- Both Abel and his sacrifice are a picture of Christ and His work. Abel was a shepherd, and as a shepherd, presented his offering to God (John 10.11). His brother hated him without a cause and slew him out of envy (John 15.25; Matthew 27.18). Abel brought “the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof” (4.4), speaking of the pre-eminence and excellency of Christ.

The Offspring of Adam and Eve [vv.1-2]

v.1: Adam “knew” Eve his wife, a euphemism for sexual relations. It is often said there are four ways people are brought into the world. Adam came in by *creation*, Eve by *formation*, Cain by *procreation*, and the Lord Jesus by *incarnation*. The word “know” suggests a personal, emotional, and intimate relationship between those engaging in sexual activity. There is the thought of a special relationship (cf. 18.19; Amos 3.2) not merely lust. In due course Eve “bare” (gave birth, cf. 3.16) Cain. He is mentioned **16** times in this chapter, but never again in the OT. He is mentioned **three** times in the NT (Hebrews 11.4; 1 John 3.12; Jude 11). Given Eve’s statement in this verse, His name likely means to ‘acquire’ or ‘possess’ though it is also connected with ancient Aramaic and Arabic words meaning ‘smith’ or ‘worker in metal’, one who plans and fashions with his own hands (cf. 4.22). “I have gotten” uses a verb in Hebrew that reflects the sound of the name of Cain. It primarily means to ‘possess’ or ‘buy’ but can mean ‘produce’ or ‘create’ when used of God. So, she may be exclaiming that she had ‘created’ a man *with the help* of the LORD, or she had ‘acquired’ a man *from* the LORD. It should be noted that the Hebrew literally reads, “I have gotten a man: Jehovah”. It is therefore possible she hoped her son was the promised Messiah to bring deliverance from sin and the serpent (3.15).

v.2: Again, Eve gave birth to “his brother Abel”. The word “brother” occurs *seven* times in the story of Cain and Abel, introducing a theme of brotherly relations that runs through the book. Sibling rivalry will become a problem that plagues the prominent families in Genesis. Whilst Cain’s name reminds us that life comes from God, Abel’s tells us that life is brief. “Abel” means ‘a breath’ or ‘vanity’ – an ominous foreshadowing of Abel’s untimely and premature death. Perhaps, by the time of Abel’s birth, Eve had grown acutely conscious of the curse of the Fall, the brevity of life (cf. Job



7.16; Psalm 144.4), or a sense of vanity as her hope in Cain began to fail. Had she realised Cain was no Messiah? Adam was a “tiller” (2.5, 3.23) and a “keeper” (2.15), now his sons take up the same occupations. Abel was a “keeper of sheep” – presumably raised for milk (goats), wool, skins and for sacrifice. Sheep were not raised as food because humans were not meat eaters until after the flood. There are many shepherds in Scripture which foreshadow the Great Shepherd. One could think of the *righteous* shepherd (Abel), *rejected* shepherd (Joseph), *returning* shepherd (Moses) and *royal* shepherd (David). Cain was a ‘worker’ or ‘servant’ of the ground, emphasising the toil and sweat required in such hard labour. Both animals *and* the ground were under the curse of the Fall (3.14, 17).

The Offerings of Cain and Abel [vv.3-5]

v.3: “In process of time” both Cain and Abel brought “offerings” to the LORD. **When?** The opening phrase literally means ‘at the end of days’. There must have been revelation about a designated (appointed) time at which offerings were to be brought. Perhaps it was *weekly* (the Sabbath) or *yearly* (the time of harvest), but there was a regularly prescribed time for worship to be offered to the LORD. **What?** The word “offering” (*minhâ*) signifies a *gift* (present) or *thanksgiving* (32.13) and is used later in Leviticus of the *grain* (meal) offering (Exodus 29.41; Leviticus 2.1), though animals could be included in a *minhâ* (1 Samuel 2.17; 26.19). Burnt offerings are not recorded until *after* the flood (Genesis 8.20; Job 1.5). In political contexts *minhâ* refers to tribute paid from a vassal or subordinate state to an overlord (2 Kings 17.3-4). When individual persons are involved, the term refers to a gift to give deference or honour (Genesis 32.18). Both Cain and Abel brought an offering appropriate to their occupation. **Where?** The fact they brought these offerings “unto the LORD” suggests there was a prescribed *place*, possibly the entrance to the garden of Eden where God established a mercy seat protected by the cherubim.

How? Though there was nothing intrinsically wrong with Cain’s offering, any approach to God, whether in worship or not, must be accompanied by blood (even at the feast of *Firstfruits*, Leviticus 23.12-13). This must have been clearly communicated to both Cain and Abel as the latter offered “by faith” (Hebrews 11.4). Mark Sweetnam explains, “*The fact that Abel’s offering pleased God while Cain’s displeased Him was not because Abel had made a lucky guess. Nor does it indicate that Abel had brought a greater intelligence to bear upon the task of figuring out what God wanted. Abel offered by faith: he knew his offering would be acceptable for he offered what God had told him to. Cain’s offering was not by faith: he knew that what he brought was not what God required – but he brought it anyway.*” Cain brought of the “fruit of the ground” or ‘some of the fruits’ of his harvest. There is no indication, unlike Abel, that this was the ‘firstfruits’ or *best* of his crop. The Hebrews believed that God, as Lord of the manor, was entitled to the *first share* of all produce. Without blood this was an offering of pride, and self-righteousness, as if he could approach God in his own merit without acknowledgement (in the blood) of his own *guilt* and *unworthiness* before such a holy God. **v.4:** In contrast, Abel brought of the “firstlings of his flock” and the “fat thereof”. This act of obedience and devotion to God rendered Abel the first recorded *worshipper* and *priest* in Scripture. The lamb was the symbol of meekness and submission (Isaiah 53.7). The “firstborn” speaks of the pre-eminence of Christ and the “fat” is symbolic of the *best* and *finest* of the animal. Christ was *devoted* and *zealous* in both His affections and actions. Jehovah “had respect unto Abel (the person) *and* to his offering”. The LORD assessed **both** the man *and* the offering. The nature of the man determined the gift he brought – one that was according to the word of God and therefore acceptable to Him. The sacrifice Abel brought declared his “righteous” character (Hebrews 11.4). “Had respect” means to ‘direct one’s gaze towards’ and therefore, by extension, to accept or react favourably towards. We do not know how this was demonstrated, but it *could* be that fire proceeded forth from the fiery sword of the cherubim to consume the offering.

v.5: The root cause of Cain’s rejection and failure to approach God in the right way was his *unrighteous character* and the *unbelieving condition* of his heart. *Proverbs 15.8: The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: But the prayer of the upright is his delight.* Leviticus teaches that the priest’s character qualified or disqualified him from the altar (Leviticus 8-9). Elsewhere God rejected the gifts of Korah (Numbers 16.15) and Israel (Isaiah 1.13) because of their deformed characters. God inspects the *offerer* (heart) first and then their *offering* (hand). In both respects, Cain failed. The gift he brought, acceptable in itself, was not accompanied by blood. He thereby testified that “his works were evil”. Unsurprisingly, Cain was “very wroth” (burned with anger) and his “countenance fell” – his anger being reflected in a facial expression of displeasure and despondency, likely a downward gaze to the ground.

The Opportunity of Repentance [vv.6-7]

v.6: Jehovah, still desirous of relationship with Cain, questions him for the same reason Adam was questioned in the garden – not in anger or condemnation, but to encourage confession of guilt (cf. 3.9, 11). **v.7:** NLT renders a difficult verse as follows: “*You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.*” The Hebrew of the verse begins in such a way as to suggest Cain knew there was opportunity for repentance, “Is it not true?” (NET). “If thou doest well” and “if thou doest not well” present Cain with a choice. To “do well” is to do what is right, i.e. to offer the divinely

appointed sacrifice, not one of his own devising. Then he would be “accepted”, literally ‘lifted up’ (suggesting a clear conscience and favour with God) alluding to his countenance which had fallen. Alternatively, to do “not well” was to refuse to do the will of God and remain unrepentant. In this case sin was ready to overwhelm, control and dominate Cain. The word “lieth” is used of a resting lion (49.9), ready to come alive and spring on its prey when stirred. The personification of sin as such a vicious, rapacious animal reminds us of the evil inclination and influence of **sin** within that desires to dominate every human being. Hence the need of the power of the indwelling Spirit of God to overcome its lusts (Galatians 5.16). The “desire” of sin (cf. 3.16) describes an urge to control. Sin desires to rule and enslave Cain’s mind and actions. But, instead, Cain’s obligation was to “rule over” or ‘master’ sin itself. Paul makes a similar appeal to every believer in Romans 6.11-12, *“Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.”* When sin makes its appeal, through the lusts and evil desires of the body, I am to reckon (count as true) I have died with Christ and disallow its appeal. I am also to reckon I am “alive to God” and call on His help not to respond, through the power of the Spirit (Romans 8.13).

The Offence of Murder [v.8]

v.8: Sadly, Cain made the wrong choice. “Cain talked with Abel his brother” – one wonders whether the words of the LORD (vv.6-7) were delivered by Abel, the first prophet (Luke 11.51). It is possible the original reading (as per LXX, Vulgate and Syriac) included Cain’s words, “Let’s go out to the field”. He sought to lure Abel away from the public eye. The “field” refers to open, uninhabited country away from settled areas. Under the Law, murder in a field outside the range of public help was proof of premeditation (Deuteronomy 22.25-27). So Cain “rose up” to attack Abel, his brother, and “slew him”. The seed of the serpent has wasted no time in striking quickly at the seed of the woman in order to prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy (3.15). This was the first murder in the interests of religion.

John makes reference to the slaying of Abel in his first epistle. 1 John 3.10, 12: *“In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother... Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous.”* In v.10, John explains that family likeness is manifested in a person’s character. The “children of the devil” (cf. Matthew 13.38) do not practice righteousness, neither love their “brother” – those that belong to the family of God. By implication, then, true believers act as God acts (righteously) and display His nature (love). Cain was “of that wicked (*poneros*) one” and thus imitated his character (John 8.44). *Poneros* is evil that actively opposes good. Cain “slew” (implies a violent death, even to ‘slaughter by cutting the throat’) Abel because his “own works were evil” (*poneros*) betraying the character of his life, and devilish family likeness. It therefore follows that he actively opposed and resented his brother who *lived* righteously (fruit) because he *was* righteous (root). In contrast to Cain, believers should “love one another” – the original apostolic message (v.11). Sacrificial and selfless service for other believers, no matter how much we like or associate with them, should be *habitual* (present tense) and *impartial* (“one another”). This is the manifestation of the character of Christ.