

## Genesis: Caine and Able by Justin Killam

The Biblical Book of Genesis is, appropriately, a book of important beginnings. It records the literal beginning of the world in the creation epic, documents and explains the beginnings of mankind and civilization, but most important it focuses on the beginnings of God's chosen people, the Hebrews, and their unique relationship to him. To gain a better understanding of Genesis it must be interpreted in the important context in which it was written in, not as a historical book of facts, but as a historical narrative. The purpose of the many oral stories was to understand the history of a people and their relation to God, therefore it was more important to make a point in a story than to record a fact or piece of data.

The many oral myths and stories that the Book of Genesis is composed of are important separately as tales or parables illustrating important moral or religious lessons. To understand each story by itself is important, but they are better understood when interpreted in relation to the rest of the book. The story of Cain and Abel are no exception. By itself it is an important parable about the sin of pride, punishment and God's mercy and love for his people. However it becomes more important when interpreted in relation to the rest of Genesis.

When read literally the story of Cain and Abel seems to be a simple story warning of the dangers of self love, pride, taking precedence over one's love for God and the sin of jealousy leading to the first murder. However with further study it becomes clear that there are many more themes and lessons that are being drawn for the reader.

It isn't revealed why God choose Abel's offering of sacrificial animal over Cain's offering of tilled plants. The descriptions of the two brother's offerings may shed some light on this as Abel's offering was of, "the choicest of the firstborn of his flock,"<sup>1</sup> while Cain's is described as simply the, "fruits of the earth."<sup>2</sup> It would seem that Abel was much more charitable, giving up the best he had to his Lord, while Cain simply gave what would appear to be the minimum requirement. This does not mean to say that God simply liked the look of Abel's offering better than Cain's, but that by giving up the best he had to offer, Abel was showing the proper respect and humility towards God, who is the provider of the animals, and everything else, in the first place. It is the intention behind the action that God judges.

Although Cain did participate in the offering to God as a form of worship, it would appear that he did it simply because it was a requirement, not out of any real love for the Lord. The intention of Cain was not to show respect and humility to God, but to simply go through the required motions of worship. However Cain is not punished, but as the story shows it leads to greater problems. Before the offering Cain's only sin was his pride, instead of being humble and thankful to God for the food that grew as a gift from the Lord, he felt only self satisfaction at what his own work had produced.

Cain, his offering unaccepted, is given a chance to think about how he has failed in showing the proper respect. When Cain grows furious God even tells him outright that if he does not gain the proper attitude that further sin will soon follow and it, "will desire you, and you will be mastered by it."<sup>3</sup> In some translations this passage is a little different, Cain is warned that he must, "control it,"<sup>4</sup> instead of becoming mastered by it. Both translations are a clear warning that if Cain continues to allow himself to be proud he will become dominated by his pride and will commit further sins.

Cain sins and is not only given a second chance, but even some guidance towards overcoming his mistake. This shows God's mercy and that God now understands that his people are flawed and will make mistakes, but that he still cares for them and will attempt to help guide them

to the path of redemption. Unfortunately Cain ignores this warning and sins further, killing his brother and committing the first murder. It appears that Cain has become mastered by sin. God then punishes Cain and sends him out to become a wanderer, a fugitive, but Cain cries that his punishment is too much. This might appear to be an attempt to repent, but is not so, Cain is merely asking for mercy, which is then given. Again the mercy of the Lord is demonstrated, as Cain is marked so that he will not be killed. However I don't believe that the mercy that the Lord is showing is given to Cain, for he must now wander as a fugitive until he dies naturally. This only prolongs his punishment. Instead the mercy that God shows is for the rest of humanity. In an attempt to keep the rest of his people from making the same mistake as Cain he marks him so that they will not commit murder themselves.

The last part of the story of Cain and Abel continues with a genealogy of Cain's family, through many generations to Lamech, for no apparent reason. Lamech has a quick speech where he crudely boasts that, "If sevenfold vengeance was to be exacted for Cain, for Lamech it would be seventy-sevenfold,"<sup>5</sup> for no apparent reason. The story then goes back to Adam and Eve who have another son to replace Abel, Seth who goes on to father a separate line of descendants who boast nothing, but do, "begin to invoke the Lord by name."<sup>6</sup> The two genealogies end Genesis by showing the result of Cain's actions, through his bloodline who have inherited his pride and are continuing his sins, and the continuation of Adam's bloodline, through Seth who has replaced Abel. Seth's bloodline may still seek redemption, carrying the burden of the original sin, by worshiping God faithfully. Cain's bloodline may also seek redemption, but are further burdened with the sin of fratricide in addition to the original sin. This seems to point out an important message, that the sins of the father are carried on by the sons and will make it harder for them to find redemption.

Understood by itself as a separate story, the parable of Cain and Abel tells an important tale about the effects of sins not atoned for and the continuous downward spiral into further sin that will result for those who do not repent for their mistakes. It shows examples of the mercy and punishment that can be expected from God and attempts to teach the proper way to respect God and the gifts that he, the provider, bestows upon his people. The story is a strong lesson on how to develop a favorable relationship with God, by learning from the mistakes of Cain and the intentions of Abel.

However there is a lot more to the story of Cain and Abel. When looked at in the context of the book that the tale was placed in, the Book of Genesis, more insights into the story and its relation to the rest of the book become apparent.

In the beginning of Genesis 4, Adam and Eve are just settled outside of Eden, the beginning of their banishment, punishment for the original sin. Yet as they give birth to Cain, their first child, Eve gives credit of the birth to, "the help of the Lord,"<sup>7</sup> showing that although they have fallen and are living in punishment, they have decided to repent for their sins instead of turning away from God. This is an important lesson showing that Adam and Eve have acknowledged their own responsibility for the mistakes they made and are trying to atone for them instead of place the blame on someone else, such as God or each other. It also shows that God, although he has not fully forgiven them, has recognized that they are trying and because of his love for them he still provides for them and therefore gifts them with a son.

The problem of why Cain's offering wasn't favored is still pretty clear, but when looked at in relation to the rest of Genesis an interesting connection becomes apparent. Adam and Eve fell when they ate from the only tree that they were forbidden to eat from. The original sin involved fruit and although the tree's significance is not so much as a piece of fruit, but as a symbol of Godly knowledge forbidden for man to possess, it is interesting that the offering that is not favored is the

one of plants. The story of Cain and Abel may have been just as effective if the two brother's positions had been reversed and the offering that wasn't favored was the one of animals. However this draws a stronger connection between the story of Cain and Abel and the rest of Genesis.

The most famous line, "Am I my brother's keeper,"<sup>8</sup> from Genesis 4 becomes a lesson unto itself. Although God does not answer the question directly with a yes or no, his actions show that mankind is indeed responsible for one another. This builds again on the teachings of the responsibility that people must take for their actions, but also that they must be responsible to each other. Further expansion on this lesson comes at the end of Genesis 4, when it is shown that the descendants of Cain share in his sinful pride and violence and the descendants of Seth continue to be faithful to God. Responsibility to each other becomes immensely important as the sins of one person become shared and passed down. Although God does interact with individuals, he is more concerned with the community or collective group of humanity and its redemption.

The first sin committed was a break in the relationship between God and mankind. Adam and Eve broke the only rule given to them by God in an attempt to gain independence by trying to become like God themselves. The story of Cain and Abel is the second sin, but is different in that it involves the relationship between two humans. It does start with a break between Cain and God, but God attempts to mend it by guiding Cain towards a way to make amends and repair the damage he has caused. Unfortunately Cain sins further and destroys his relationship to his brother, Abel. Jealousy rends their relationship, as loving brothers, apart and then ends it completely in the ultimate break as Cain kills, in the first act of murder, his brother. Later in the story when God has punished Cain, Cain appears to be asking for pity because the punishment is too severe. Yet being cursed to become a fugitive wanderer and not being able to produce anything from the soil does not seem to be too awful. However as part of his punishment it seems that Cain must also, "hide myself from your presence."<sup>9</sup> This may mean that Cain is being banished from the place where God looks at the most, where his faithful people are, but I believe that it is a statement made to reveal the relationship between God and Cain, resulting from the crimes that Cain has committed. As Cain destroyed the relationship between himself and his brother, God has punished Cain by abolishing their relationship as well.

The fall of Adam and Eve results from them eating a piece of forbidden fruit. Taken literally this can be somewhat confusing as eating a piece of fruit isn't seen as a particularly immoral thing to do. Although this can be better understood with interpretation into the motives behind Adam and Eve's disobedience, the story of Cain and Abel does start to move from abstract sins to more understandable ones. Murder is an act that is easily understood as wrong for very straightforward reasons. Many more abstract, but equally important, lessons can be learned with further interpretation, but with a quick glance it is easily seen what Cain did wrong and why he is punished.

One of the most important aspects of the story of Cain and Abel is the attention it draws at the end of the story to the two different lines of ancestry. Cain's line continues to sink further into sin, while Seth's line, Seth replacing the killed Abel, continues to seek redemption through faithful worship of God. The importance of this is that the Book of Genesis is the beginning of a historical narrative about the Hebrew peoples and this story is the first in a number of splits that result in a favored community of people over the collected group of humanity. The purpose of Genesis, other than the moral and religious lessons, is to record the beginnings of the Hebrew people and the events that lead to them being unique from everyone else. Cain and Abel are the beginning of this, the first split towards an emerging unique and favored people.

The story of Cain and Abel is at first glance fairly straight forward as a parable in which the

sin of pride and murder is demonstrated so that the reader may learn from it. However it has been shown that the story actually has an incredibly large number of important lessons that are not as apparent. It explores the issues of sin and salvation, the responsibility that we have to God and to each other, the importance of our relationship to God and to each other, starts to development more concrete and straight forward sins and begins the process of selection which ends with the Hebrews emerging as a unique and favored people by God. All of this can be found in the short, especially compared to the rest of the book, story of two brothers and their attempt to give an offering to God.