

CAIN, ABEL AND THE VIOLENCE IN OT

The Old Testament Today

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Gn 4:1-17 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." (קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת־יְהוָה) ² And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. ³ In the course of time (וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ יָמִים) Cain brought to the LORD an offering (מִנְחָה) of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn (מִבְּכֹרוֹת) of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard (וַיִּשַׁע) for Abel and his offering (מִנְחָתוֹ), ⁵ but for Cain and his offering (מִנְחָתוֹ) he had no regard (שָׁעָה). So Cain was very angry (וַיִּחַר), and his face fell. ⁶ The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted (שָׂאָה)? And if you do not do well, sin (חַטָּאת) is crouching (רֹבֵץ) at the door. Its desire (תְּשׁוּקָתָהּ) is for you, but you must rule over it (וַיִּשְׁלֹטָהּ)." ⁸ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" ¹⁰ And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. ¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." ¹³ Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. ¹⁴ Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. ¹⁶ Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. ¹⁷ Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch.

Heb 11:4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

1John 3:12 We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous

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0. INTRODUCTION

- religion (sacrifice) ↔ psychology of temptation ↔ social relations

0.1. HISTORICAL MEANING

- [CASSUTTO *Genesis* p. 179] "...any one seeking to trace the details, characteristics and intentions of the pre-Torah tradition regarding Cain and Abel necessarily leaves the terra firma of fact and ventures on the high seas of conjecture."
- Gn 4:1 [von Rad] "Every word of this little sentence is difficult ...'et never means 'with the help of'."
- Gn 4:3-4 [Hubert & Mauss] "...the *sacrificium* is the basic rite in ancient (and primitive) religion..." a gift made by the primitive to supernatural beings with whom he-needed to ingratiate himself...

[BRUEGGEMANN *Genesis* p. 56] The trouble comes not from Cain, but from Yahweh, the strange God of Israel. Inexplicably, Yahweh chooses/accepts and rejects. Conventional interpretation is too hard on Cain and too easy on Yahweh. It is Yahweh who transforms a normal report into a life/death story for us and about us. Essential to the plot is the capricious freedom of Yahweh. Like the narrator, we must resist every effort to explain it.

0.2. SYMBOLIC MEANING

Our civilisation is based on the foundation of murder - the first civilisation was founded by Cain; and civilised life is a vast, complicated, more or less gilded-over system of murder. This does not mean that civilisation can never be just and right. The Bible speaks of a "holy city," a "new earth," and reveals that it is to be brought about by the man who lives his life based on God in all his relationships and does not worry about what he is going to do later. (CHAMBERS, O. *Shade of His Hand*)

1. A VICTIM AS SUBSTITUTION

- **Gn 3:21** And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them
(וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כִּתְנוֹת עוֹר וַיַּלְבֹּשֵׂם)

1.1. ORIGINS OF SACRIFICES

- unexplained → WHY? (1) it was clear to the original readers, (2) it is deeper than language can explain, (3) the text "is reading us" → what is your response???
- *do ut des?* → barter with divinity

1.2. ACCEPTABLE SACRIFICES

- v.3 Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground (→ WHY not accepted? v.5)
 - **Lev 23:37** ...presenting to the LORD food offerings, burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day (עֲלֹה וּמִנְחָה זֶבַח וְנִסְכִּים) אֲשֶׁה לַיהוָה
- v.4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions
- **Ps 51:16-17** For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

- **Heb 9:22** ...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (χωρίς αίματεκχυσίας οὐ γίνεται ἄφεσις)

1.3. THE CROSS

- **1Pt 1:18-19** you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (εἰδότες ὅτι οὐ φθαρτοῖς, ἀργυρίῳ ἢ χρυσίῳ, ἐλυτρώθητε ἐκ τῆς ματαιίας ὑμῶν ἀναστροφῆς πατροπαράδοτου ¹⁹ ἀλλὰ τιμίῳ αἵματι ὡς ἄμνου ἁμώμου καὶ ἀσπίλου Χριστοῦ).

2. A VICTIM OF THE POWERS OF WRATH

- **James 4:1-2** What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel... (Πόθεν πόλεμοι καὶ πόθεν μάχαι ἐν ὑμῖν; οὐκ ἐντεῦθεν, ἐκ τῶν ἡδονῶν ὑμῶν τῶν στρατευομένων ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ὑμῶν; ² ἐπιθυμεῖτε καὶ οὐκ ἔχετε, φονεύετε καὶ ζηλοῦτε καὶ οὐ δύνασθε ἐπιτυχεῖν, μάχεσθε καὶ πολεμεῖτε...)

2.1. ANGRY HUMANS

- v.5 ... Cain was very angry, and his face fell (וַיְהִי כִּי יָרַד מִצַּחַת אָדָם וַיְהִי אֵין עָלָיו וַיִּחַר אֶת-פָּנָיו)
- v.8 ...And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him (וַיִּקַּח אֱבֶתֶד וַיִּשְׁרֹף אֶת-אָבֶל בְּרֵיחַ אֵשׁ)
- **Eph 2:3** ...we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath..., (καὶ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἀνεστράφημέν ποτε ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῆς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν ποιῶντες τὰ θελήματα τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ τῶν διανοιῶν, καὶ ἡμεθα τέκνα φύσει ὀργῆς)
- **Mark 7:21-22** from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness
- **John 8:44** You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning
 - [CHAMBERS, O. *He shall Glorify me*] The spirit of Cain is jealousy, spite and envy. There is no **hatred** on earth like the hatred of a middling good man for the good man.

2.2. ANGRY GOD

- v.7 If you do well, will you not be accepted (הֲלֹא אִם-תַּעֲשֶׂה יָשָׁר אָקֻּץ)? And if you do not do well, sin (חַטָּאת) is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it (וְיָבִיב עִלְיָיְכֶם חַטָּאת)."
- [MSJ 27/1 (Spring 2016) 45-55] The noun חַטָּאת occurs 271 times in the Hebrew OT, 109 times meaning "sin offering"...
- **Rom 1:18** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πάσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων)
- v.12 When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth

Adam and Eve acknowledged their sin although they never confessed it. Cain evades acknowledgement; first, he lies to God, then he becomes scornful of God—"And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? CHAMBERS, O. *Our Portrait in Genesis*

- **Hab 1:13-17** You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? ¹⁴ You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling

things that have no ruler. ¹⁵ He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad. ¹⁶ Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. ¹⁷ Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever? (13 Tvoje oči sú príliš čisté, aby sa dívali na zlo. Ty sa nemôžeš pozerať na trápenie! Prečo hľadáš na neverných a mlčíš, keď bezbožný pohlcuje spravodlivejšieho od neho? 14 Ľudí si urobil podobných morským rybám a plazom, ktoré nemajú vládcu. 15 Všetky ich chytá na udicu, vlečie vo svojej sieti a zhromažďuje do svojho čereňa; raduje sa z toho a jasá. 16 Preto obetuje svojej sieti a svojmu čereňu páli kadidlo, lebo má z nich tučný podiel a výdatný pokrm. 17 Vari bude neustále vyprázdňovať sieť a neľútostne vraždiť národy?)

3. A VICTIM OF PASSION

- **1Pt 2:11** Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul (Ἀγαπητοί, παρακαλῶ ὡς παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμους ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν σαρκικῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἵτινες στρατεύονται κατὰ τῆς ψυχῆς·)
- how temptation works
 - v.7 If you do well, will you not be accepted (תָּקַב)? And if you do not do well, sin (חַטָּאת) is crouching (רָבַח) at the door. Its desire (תַּהוֹמָתָהּ) is for you, but you must rule over it. → process of temptation
 - **James 1:14-15** But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (ἐκαστος δὲ πειράζεται ὑπὸ τῆς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας ἐξεκκόμενος καὶ δελεαζόμενος· ¹⁵εἶτα ἡ ἐπιθυμία συλλαβοῦσα τίκτει ἁμαρτίαν, ἡ δὲ ἁμαρτία ἀποτελεσθεῖσα ἀποκύει θάνατον)

3.1. REJECTION

- v.3 ... the fruit of the ground → **Col 2:23** ...promoting self-made religion... (ἐθελοθησκίαι)
- Cain: (1) ignorance?, (2) rebellion? → Rejected people may behave aggressively, for example, because they believe doing so may make them feel better.¹
- [PHILO *On the Birth of Abel*] The charges brought against Cain in v. 3 are (a) that he offered only "after some day" (b) that he offered of the fruits, but not of the first-fruits
- **vv.4:4-5** ...the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

[VON RAD *Genesis* p. 104] Writers have looked diligently for the basis of this preference, but it lies neither in the ritual nor in Cain's attitude. Nothing of that kind is indicated. The only clue one can find in the narrative is that the sacrifice of blood was more pleasing to Yahweh. Obviously the narrator wants to remove the acceptance of the sacrifice from man and place it completely within God's free will.

- criticism interpreted as total rejection

3.2. SELF-PITY

- v.13 My punishment is greater than I can bear (וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל-יְהוָה גְּדוֹל עוֹנִי מִנְשָׂא)
- ROUSSEAU → self-pity

[*Reveries Firts Walk*] SO now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbour or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest. With all the ingenuity of hate they have sought out the cruellest torture for my sensitive soul, and have violently broken all the threads that bound me to them. I would have loved my fellow-men in spite of themselves. It was only by ceasing to be human that they could forfeit my affection.

¹ <https://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~schaller/308Readings/DeWall2011.pdf>

3.3. SEPARATION

- v.16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod

3.4. GOD AND SOCIETY

- Cain: (1) double expulsion (2) double curse
- God did not allow Cain to be killed! (**Gn 9:6** "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image;) nevertheless: → Rom 13

4. TO REMEMBER

- This world is a battleground. No peace is possible without the victory of Christ.
- We have to submit either to God or to sin. There is no other option.
- Submitting to passions leads to ever-increasing violence despite our efforts to keep peace and happiness without God.
- The New Testament way of peace is to identify with the Lamb of God - not with Abel.