

MEANWHILE, SOMETIME LATER

The text provides its first solid chronological marker when it states "in process of time." The exact duration of this period remains unspecified, but it's reasonable to presume that it represents a significant interval. At this stage, Cain, Abel, and their parents, Adam and Eve, are unequivocally situated outside the Garden of Eden, contending with the trials of a cursed world as best they can. The nature of the family dynamics during this period is left to our imagination. Was their familial relationship harmonious? Were there instances of the "blame game"? Was there a prima donna among the brothers, causing friction? The text does not provide answers, leaving us with but a little room for some speculative interpretation.

A NATURAL OFFERING | GENESIS 4:3

In Genesis 4:3, Cain, a farmer, brings "of the fruit of the ground" as an offering to the Lord. This seems like a very natural offering considering his occupation. Some have speculated that Cain's offering was in some way unworthy, however, the text in Genesis does not provide any such indication. It is only in Hebrews 11 that we are told that Abel's offering was "a more excellent sacrifice" (Heb 11.4), but even there we are not told why.

Abel's offering, on the other hand, was from the firstlings of his flock and their fat portions (Genesis 4:4). This clearly suggests a blood sacrifice, which hints at a potential issue with Cain's offering. However, it's important to note that the Torah also makes provisions for grain offerings. All these instructions for offerings were provided much later, and as dispensationalists, we do not hold Cain and Abel accountable for later revelations. Therefore, we can only speculate about their knowledge and understanding at the time.

What we do know from the text is that the Lord had "respect unto Abel and to his offering; But unto Cain and his offering he had not respect" (Genesis 4:4-5). The reason for this differentiation is not explicitly stated in the text. Intriguingly, the term "respect" that is used in this context is translated from the Hebrew word "sha'ah" which means to gaze at, regard, or look upon. However, the text does not elaborate on what specific aspect of Abel's offering God found more appealing or worthy of His regard.

The insight provided in Hebrews 11:4 is noteworthy: it states that Abel, through his offering, "obtained witness that he was righteous." It does not suggest that the offering made Abel righteous, but instead it testifies to his pre-existing righteousness. This perspective argues against the Reformation doctrine of total depravity. Furthermore, it does not necessarily imply that Abel's offering was accepted based on its inherent value or its superiority over Cain's offering. In fact, the emphasis in Hebrews 11:4 is more on praising Abel's faith than his sacrifice.

With respect to the offerings, there is no explicit textual evidence in either Genesis 4 or Hebrews 11 that suggests one offering was inherently superior to the other. It appears, therefore, that our understanding must be grounded in the character and faith of the offerers themselves. Abel is described as righteous and as bringing his offering in faith, while Cain is implicitly contrasted as lacking these qualities. This suggests that the acceptability of their offerings was less about the offerings themselves, and more about the faith and righteousness of the individuals making them.

SO WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CAIN AND ABEL? | GENESIS 4:3-4

From the text, we understand that Cain was "gotten", which is the meaning of his name. His birth was celebrated as "from the Lord" (Genesis 4:1), indicating a moment of joy and gratitude. Cain is also described as "a tiller of the ground" (v. 2), echoing the life of his father, Adam. Genesis 3:23 describes Adam as sent out of the Garden of

Eden "to till the ground from whence he was taken", suggesting a shared occupation and perhaps a similar lifestyle. Were Adam and Cain in the family farming business together?

What we know about Abel is far less, but intriguing. First, we know that his birth is not nearly as celebrated. It is almost an "Oh yeah, Abel also" kind of moment. Furthermore, the name "Abel" (Hebrew "Havel") means "vanity." In fact, it is used in Ecclesiastes 1:2, which states, "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

Let's speculate for a moment. It's possible that Cain, as the eldest son and inheritor of the family trade, may have developed a sense of superiority or entitlement. His status as the celebrated firstborn could have fueled his sense of pride and self-importance. Abel, on the other hand, might have been somewhat overshadowed by his older brother, given his birth was almost treated as an afterthought and his name meaning "vanity." Despite this, Abel might have lived righteously, not seeking validation or the limelight. Interestingly, God respected Abel and his offering, which could suggest that Abel's righteousness and faith were appreciated by God, even if they were overlooked by his family or society. This speculative interpretation offers a fresh perspective on the characters of Cain and Abel. But does it align with the rest of the passage? We shall see!

CAIN'S RESPONSE | GENESIS 4:5-6

The text specifically mentions on two occasions that Cain was "wroth" (v. 5, v. 6). Additionally, his countenance fell (v. 5). This reaction somewhat resembles that of a "spoiled brat" who is unaccustomed to being outshone by his younger brother. The fact that the Lord questioned him, "Why art thou wroth" (v. 5), seems to suggest that his anger lacked a substantial basis.

This interpretation is speculative and is one of many ways to understand the dynamics between Cain and Abel. However, what is not speculative is Cain's response to God's preference for Abel's offering. His "pity party" reaction does not necessarily suggest that he knew he was guilty of bringing the wrong offering. Rather, it seems to reveal someone who was not used to playing second fiddle, and didn't handle well the experience of not being the favored one.

GOD'S INSTRUCTION | GENESIS 4:7

Verse 7 contains a somewhat enigmatic poem from God to Cain. The language and symbolism used in this verse have resulted in varied interpretations among scholars and readers.

Let's break down God's statement to Cain, "If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?" This highlights how Cain's actions directly impact the outcome. The term "accepted" ties back to our previous discussion about Cain's obsession with being top dog. It was all fine and dandy for Abel to be "havel" (useless), but God forbid if it was Cain! He was desperate for approval. Interestingly, the word we see as "accepted" is unique to this context. Even the King James Version translators added a note saying it could also mean "have the excellency." It was this "excellency," this need to be superior, that Cain craved. When he didn't get it, he threw a temper tantrum.

In the next line of the poem, God flips the script from doing well to doing "not well." In this case, "sin lieth at the door." The question is, "what sin" and "what door?" Some have translated sin as "a sin offering," which is at the door of Cain's house. This is a grammatical possibility, but it might be too convenient and tend to show a gospel where one is not. It may suffer from a confirmation bias on the part of Christian interpreters.

Another possibility, given by Rashi, is that it is the sin of not doing well, and it is at the door of Cain's grave. This seems too contrived, though it is grammatically possible.

Another possibility to consider is that the "door" is metaphorical, referring to the door of the mind or heart. In this interpretation, sin is not a physical entity lying in wait at a literal door, but rather a constant, ever-present danger

that seeks to enter Cain's thoughts and feelings. In this context, God's message to Cain could be understood as a warning about the power and persistence of sin, and the importance of maintaining vigilance and control over his actions and attitudes. God's statement that "thou shalt rule over him" underscores the necessity for Cain, and indeed all of us, to master sin, to keep it outside the 'door' of our hearts and minds, preventing it from influencing our decisions and actions.

While this interpretation of "sin lieth at the door" is spiritually relevant and easy to understand, it is important to note that the grammar does not necessarily support this interpretation. The Hebrew word for sin is a feminine noun, which does not match the masculine pronoun "his" in the phrase "his desire." This discrepancy makes this interpretation grammatically difficult, even though it may be spiritually satisfying.

There is a fourth possibility, that the "door" or entrance is the one to the Garden of Eden, and the poetic message is "you can't go back in, the sin that put your family out is prohibiting entry, and God has placed cherubim there to make it final." While this may also seem contrived, we should remember that the Garden of Eden and being cast from there IS the context of the passage, much more so than the other suggested interpretations.

In the final two lines of the poem, the Lord informs Cain, "And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him." This statement is particularly intriguing because of its striking similarity to what the Lord said to Eve in the Garden of Eden during the curse in Genesis 3:16, although the positions are reversed in the conversation with Eve, where God stated, "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

God's words to Cain provide an insightful perspective: when Cain does well, his brother will always look up to him, and he will invariably occupy the dominant "elder brother" position. However, if he fails to do well, there is no "excellency" to be achieved. Cain can't anticipate receiving it solely based on his birth position; he must earn his place. This is a stirring lesson that underscores the importance of merit over entitlement.

THE DEATH OF ABEL | GENESIS 4:7

At first, it appears as if the two brothers managed to talk things over, and all was well (v. 8). However, in the next scene, for which the duration between the two is unknown, the brothers meet in the field, and suddenly, "Cain rose up against Abel his brother." What drove this sudden turn of events? Was Cain trying to assert his dominance and put Abel in a subordinate position? Had Abel perhaps gained a sense of confidence, refusing to submit to Cain, which triggered Cain's anger? Was this a premeditated murder or a spontaneous act in the heat of the moment? We're left with so many questions. Did Cain even understand that his actions would result in Abel's death? What was their comprehension of death at this point in time?

In the end, all we can conclude is that God judged Cain as guilty, and thus we accept that. In the next chapter, we will delve into the judgment that God, the ultimate judge, meted out to Cain. Was it a harsh punishment fitting the crime, or was it a surprisingly lenient sentence? Stay tuned to explore the layers of this intriguing narrative!