

Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 14

Genesis 4-5 – Cain and Abel

1. The Death of Abel

Let's go on to Genesis 4 and 5. 1. on your sheet is: "The death of Abel." A couple of things to note about the death of Abel in Genesis 4. First, the first death is by murder. God had said, "As surely as you eat of the tree you will die," and certainly that happens and that was fulfilled, but we find that the first death, actual death, was not a natural one. It was murder, and not only murder, but it was the killing of a brother. What makes it even worse is that it was occasioned by hatred because Abel's offering was accepted by God and Cain's was not. Because of that, he kills his brother. So the first death is by murder in Genesis chapter four, in the early verses there.

2. Offerings of Cain and Abel

Second thing under the death of Abel is the question of the offerings for sacrifices that were brought, and the question of why God accepted Abel's and did not accept Cain's. I'm not sure that we can answer that fully, but you have the statement in verse 4, "Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock, and the fat thereof, and the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering, but unto Cain and his offering, he had not respect, and Cain was very angry and his countenance fell. And the LORD said unto Cain, 'Why are you angry; why is your countenance fallen?'" Then verse 7, which is the difficult verse, says, "If you do well, shall you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door, and unto you shall be his desire, and you shall rule over him." I think verse 7 implies that attitude is the important thing in the bringing of the offering. "If you do well, shall you not also be accepted?"

If you read in Hebrews 11:4 this is the statement that's often related to this question, why one was accepted and the other rejected, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous." Now, many are of the feeling that the critical thing that distinguished between the two offerings was not that Cain brought the fruit of the ground and Abel brought an animal; it

wasn't a difference in the kind of offering brought, but the difference was in the disposition of the heart, and it was by *faith* that Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice. The other question that is often brought up here is: how much did Abel know about what specific kind of sacrifice was to be brought or even that a sacrifice was to be brought? Prior to this, we have no information in the text that tells us that God gave any instruction in regard to the matter of sacrifice. You remember in the last class, we said in Genesis 3:21, when the coats were made of skin that some feel that at that point the institution of the sacrifice was made, and that there was some instruction given in connection with that. If that's the case, it's not said in the text, so that becomes speculative. There may have been something in there and there may not. If there was something there, then it's possible that Abel followed that instruction and Cain did not, but you see that that whole construction is fairly speculative.

Warfield on Cain's Offering – Piacular versus Gift

In a discussion by B.B. Warfield, which is on your bibliography, next to the last entry on page 9, an article entitled "Christ our Sacrifice"—it's contained in this volume of essays called "Biblical Foundations," pages 167-169. That's not the entire article, but where he discusses this particular text is an interesting discussion of the offering of Cain and Abel. Let me just read a paragraph or so here. In his comments on what was going on here in Genesis 4, he says, "It can scarcely be reading too much between the lines to suppose that the narrative in the fourth chapter of Genesis is intended on the one hand to describe the origin of sacrificial worship and on the other to distinguish between two conceptions of sacrifice and to indicate the preference of Jehovah for the one rather than the other. These two conceptions are briefly those which have come to be known respectively as the piacular theory and the symbolical or gift theory. Piacular theory has to do with the idea of the necessity of atonement for sin or requiring expiation, whereas the gift theory or symbolical is pretty much as its name says: a gift that's given to God. But piacular has to do with the idea that there needs to be satisfaction on God's part of his justice, atonement for sin." And he says that there are probably two conceptions of

sacrifice involved here. He says “In this view we are not to suppose that Cain and Abel simply brought each a gift to the Lord from the increase which had been granted him, to acknowledge thereby the overlordship of Jehovah and to express subjection and obedience to Him: and that it is merely an accident that Cain's offering, as that of a husbandman, was of the fruit of the ground, while Abel's, as that of a shepherd, was of the firstlings of the flock. There is no reason apparent why Jehovah should prefer a lamb to a sheaf of wheat. The difference surely goes deeper, for it was ‘by *faith*’ that Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, which seems to suggest that the supreme excellence of his sacrifice is to be sought not in the mere nature of the thing offered, but in the attitude of the offerer. What seems to be implied is that Cain's offering was an act of mere homage; Abel's embodied a sense of sin, that’s piacular, an act of contrition, a cry for succor, a plea for pardon. In a word,” and here’s the simple statement of Warfield’s position on this question: “In a word, Cain came to the Lord with an offering in his hand, and the homage theory of sacrifice in his mind. Abel with an offering in his hand and the piacular theory of sacrifice in his heart. And it was because of this that Jehovah had respect to Abel’s offering not to Cain’s.”

Now his concluding statement is, “If so, while we may say that sacrifice was invented by man, we must also say that by this act, piacular sacrifice was instituted by God. In other modes of conceiving it, sacrifice may represent the reaching out of man towards God; in its piacular conception it represents the stooping down of God to man. The fundamental difference is that in the one case sacrifice rests upon consciousness of sin and has its reference to the restoration of a guilty human being to the favor of a condemning God. In the other it stands outside of all relation to sin and has its reference only to the expression of the proper attitude of deference that a creature should preserve towards his Maker and Ruler.”

John Murray’s Approach to Gen. 4 “More Excellent Sacrifice”

Now, that becomes a somewhat speculative counter-analysis for what you might say is going on here in Genesis 4. But I think you’re left, because the text doesn’t directly

address the issue, to sort of wrestle with the problem in that way. I think Warfield has a rather insightful suggestion. They both come with sacrifices but with different concepts, and God sanctions the one, but not the other. That's what Warfield is saying, a particular view of the sanctions, which Warfield then would attribute to Abel's offering.

Now, I think I would pretty much accept Warfield's analysis, but let me just give you the other side of it. I've mentioned before John Murray's notes on Biblical theology several times. When he comes to this text he says, "It would appear that the difference of attitude on the part of God was due not only because of the attitude of Cain but also to the type of offering which he brought," and see that's what Warfield says really doesn't make any difference. Warfield says it was the attitude that was the distinguishing feature. Murray says, alright attitude is important, but it is the type of offering. He says, "we have an intimation that God had revealed what was required as to worship, that is both as to the very mold in which the attitude is expressed" You're left with trying to decide why God accepted this and rejected the other and I think we have to say that the text itself doesn't provide an answer. Yes, it was probably the firstlings of the flock, whereas it doesn't say it was the firstlings of the fruit. Well, again, you could speculate on that. The text doesn't really answer it for us.

What Murray would respond when it says "*by faith* he brought a more excellent sacrifice," I have put the stress on the faith up to this point. What Murray does is put it on "the more excellent sacrifice." What he says is "by faith Abel brought a more *excellent* sacrifice" in the sense that it was one that conformed to the previous instructions. So it was a more excellent sacrifice in its own nature. He doesn't say that the attitude was unimportant, but he stresses the character of the offering itself. So, admittedly, with Hebrews 11:4, you could, also, depending on where you put the stress, fit it with either of the views. In short, what Murray says is it would appear that the difference of attitude on the part of God was due not only because of the attitude of Cain but also to the type of offering. So it was attitude and type of offering, and he says in Hebrews 11:4, "by faith he brought a more *excellent* sacrifice," and understands "more excellent" to be the kind of offering. It's in his unpublished lecture notes. "If you do well." In other words, if you

come in the proper way. If you come with the proper attitude, or if you come with the proper sacrifice, I think you could read it either way, won't you be accepted?

Gen. 4:7 "Sin Lies at the Door"

But to go on with verse 7 and to continue our discussion. Cain is told "If you do well won't you be accepted, and if you do not well, sin lies at the door." Now the term in Hebrew there, "sin", can be read either "sin" or "sin offering." It's the same word. Normally it's been taken as "sin lies at the door." The expression, "to lie at the door," is an expression that sort of illustrates like an animal crouching, ready to spring. So it seems that this is the normal way of understanding the text, sin is lying at the door as an animal ready to spring and to devour, to master and to control. If you don't do well, that's what's going to happen. Sin is going to control you. And then that last statement, we looked at in the last class hour, "Unto you shall be his desire," that is, sin. Sin's desire is to master and control you, but you must rule over it, that's your obligation.

Now if you take it in the sense of "sin offering," you would read, "If you do well, shall you be not accepted, and if you do not do well, there's an offering, there's a slain animal lying at the door for your own atonement and reconciliation with God." One commentator; Atkinson, which is on your outline sheet there, in his commentary on Genesis published by Moody Press, says, "God has provided for Cain as much as for Abel a propitiation for sin. Abel had taken advantage of it, so also may Cain. A typical sin offering was a bleeding lamb, which Abel had already brought. The essential and substantial sin offering is 'the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world.'" In other words, Atkinson reads that "sin" as "sin offering lies at the door," for Cain as well as for Abel.

But then you see that requires quite a different understanding of the last phrase. If you understand it as a sin offering at the door—and unto you shall be his desire, and you shall rule over them—what do you do with that? And that's the problem with that understanding of the verse. What Atkinson does with it is this—Unto you shall be his desires—that "his" refers to Abel, he said. If Cain would come to the Lord in faith and

do well, then the relationship between he and his brother would be set right. Abel's desire would be to him. He would gain ascendancy over his brother as the right of the firstborn. "Unto you shall be his desire, Abel's desire, and you shall rule over him." He would gain ascendancy over his brother as the right of the firstborn. The problem with that is the antecedent of "his" seems clearly to be referring back to "sin," which lies at the door, and to insert "Abel" at that point doesn't really flow with the structure of the verse. So I think the normal interpretation that sin lies at the door seeking to master and control, but he must rule over it, is the best understanding of the verse, but it is a difficult verse.

Gen. 4:9 God's Response "Where is Abel Your Brother?"

Alright, also with the death of Abel, you notice God's actions subsequently. In verse 9, the Lord says to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" It's reminiscent after the sin in the garden, where God comes and questions. "Where is Abel your brother?" and instead of an evasion or a shifting of blame as we had previously, you have outright denial. He said, "I know not, am I my brother's keeper?" And he said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground." So he simply denies guilt. He says "I know not, am I my brother's keeper?"

First Curse on a Human – Cain's Curse

Then in verse 11, the first curse on a human where the term "curse" is actually used. In fact that may be a somewhat artificial distinction between curse and punishment. But here it says "now you are cursed from the earth which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground it shall not henceforth yield unto you its strength. A fugitive and vagabond or wanderer shall you be in the earth." The serpent had been cursed. The ground had been cursed, and now Cain is cursed. This curse seems to be an extension and intensification of the curse that came to man or the punishment to man generally with the difficulty of agricultural pursuits. Instead of having difficulty to get the earth to yield the crops, with Cain the harvest will be nothing. It's going to force him to be sort of a scavenger, to wander around to find

what he can to sustain himself. As it says in verse 12, “When you till the land it shall not yield unto you its strength. So a fugitive and a wanderer shall you be all your years.”

Okay, any questions on the death of Abel?

2. Antediluvian Technology

Let’s go on to number 2. which is: “Antediluvian technology.” In other words, pre-flood technology. We also find that in chapter 4, beginning at verse 16, “Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod in the east of Eden. Cain knew his wife; she conceived and bore Enoch. He built a city.” So in verse 17 you have reference to the building of the city. He called the name of it after his son Enoch.

Let’s read verses 14 and 15, “Behold you have driven me out this day from the face of the earth, and from your face I shall be hidden and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer in the earth. It should come to pass that anyone that finds me shall slay me.”

Where did Cain Get His Wife?

And of course the question is often asked in connection with that, “Who would that possibly be if there was only Adam and Eve and Abel otherwise living?” Well I think the natural assumption is that Adam and Eve must have had other children and that those are not mentioned in Scripture. In verse 16 the question is intensified because in 16 and 17 we read, “Cain knew his wife; she conceived and bore Enoch.” Where’d he get his wife? Well, again, it must have been from other descendants of Adam and Eve. Of course, it does say, if you go over to chapter 5, see verse 3, “Adam lived 130 years, begat a son in his own likeness after his own image called Seth.” We do know that at age 130, Seth was born to Adam and Eve, but, see, we get back to the question of how long of a timespan was there between the fall and when Seth was born? It may have been 100 years. And there may have been a lot of other children. You know, in a hundred years, there could be quite a few generations? You could have 5 generations in 100 years. In other words, if Adam and Eve had other sons and daughters, and they in turn intermarried, and they had children, you could in a 100 years easily have 5 generations.

So the potential for multiplication in 100 years with offspring of one couple is enormous. Now of course beyond that we read that Adam lived what was it 800 years? So he lived a total of 930 years. But I think what we're dealing with was this time prior to the birth of Seth, and I think we must assume that there were other children born to Adam and Eve, and those children may have in turn produced other children. There may have been several generations between the birth of Seth and what we're talking about here.

Capital Offense and Capital Punishment

But in Genesis 9 it says that, "If someone takes man's blood, by man, his blood shall be shed"—blood revenge. But there I think God is ordaining the idea of law and government in which it's a capital offense that will be handled judiciously. Prior to that, I think the natural inclination of humankind—all in human nature—is to get revenge. You do it to me; I'm going to do it back to you, and I think that's what Cain was afraid of, and I think the Lord protected him from that, which is hard to answer, because the Scripture does not address it. God waited until Genesis 9 to institute capital punishment, why didn't he do it here? I don't know what the answer to that is. Some have suggested that it wasn't done because he wanted to let the weak and the strong grow together. It's sort of God permitting things to go in the direction of Genesis 6 without any check. But at least in this case he prevents someone from taking revenge on Cain. Cain was fearful of that, and so the Lord says, "Whoever slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." That wouldn't involve any distinguishing mark on his face or some kind of physical thing that set him apart from other people. It wouldn't involve that. What kind of sign that it was the Lord gave, we wouldn't know. But some read it that way that the Lord gave a sign to Cain of some sort so that no one finding him would kill him. In other words, that he wouldn't be killed. His life was going to be preserved. His punishment was that he would be forced to wander, he couldn't cultivate the earth. I think the idea of sevenfold means fullness, the idea of fullness. The Lord will take complete vengeance on whomever would slay Cain. I don't think it would be that somebody slays Cain seven people are going to be killed. I don't think that's the idea. I think it is that the Lord would

take complete vengeance upon someone if he would violate that prohibition.

I see our time's already gone. It went quickly. All right, we'll pick up with 2. At the beginning of next hour.

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