

### **Cain and Abel**

Exile - for the first hearers of the word of God (our Jewish brothers and sisters) this word summed up their entire experience at various times throughout their history. Beginning with their captivity in Egypt and stretching into the twentieth century, Jewish readers of Sacred Scripture can see in the many stories of exile their own story. In the Old Testament, especially in the Book of Genesis, sin inevitably leads to banishment (being driven from God's presence), i.e. - exile.

The theme of exile will drive the story of the Book of Genesis from here on out. All of our favorite characters, from Noah to Abraham to Joseph, will spend time away from their homeland. Many times this exile comes as a result of sin, either of the main character or of others involved with that character. We have already seen how the theme of exile played so heavily into the punishment of Adam and Eve. Now we shall see the bitter fruits of this sin and its similar punishment played out in their offspring.

There are two fundamental questions that arise when one reads the story of Cain and Abel. The first question regards the reason as to why the Lord looked favorably upon one offering and unfavorably upon the other. The second question arises as you examine the actions of God when confronted with the first murder. In order to begin to answer both of these questions a little background material concerning Israelite history is in order.

To the best of our knowledge (and it is an educated guess as archaeological remains from the period of the Book of Genesis are non-existent in Palestine) the first settlers of Canaan were in all probability nomads who would take their flocks from one grazing land to the next.

Even when the land began to be more or less settled into villages and towns in the 1300's B.C., shepherding was still a very important occupation for the ancient Israelites, which they would always look back upon fondly remembering that they essentially got their start as a nomadic people. On the other side of the equation were those who settled into cities and moved away from their nomadic roots. People who settled in one place or in cities, especially in the Book of Genesis (Babel, Sodom, Gomorrah), were always looked at somewhat suspiciously. We see this reflected ever so subtly in the story of Cain and Abel.

There is really no good reason that we can come up with as to why the Lord looked favorably upon the sacrifice of the first herdsman (Abel the nomad) and unfavorably upon the offerings of the first farmer (Cain). Sacred Scripture certainly does not enlighten us - the Lord is characteristically quiet as to His motivations in regard to the two brothers. Perhaps this was yet another of the Lord's tests to see how His creation would respond to the gift of free will.

We have already seen that when confronted with the choice of obeying a law or disobeying it, Adam and Eve went in the wrong direction. In that instance we were dealing with an **expressed law**, i.e., not to eat of the tree of good and evil. Here in the story of Cain and Abel it could be that the Lord wants to see, or perhaps wants his creation to see, how they will respond when confronted with making a choice in regard to the **inner law**. When Cain's sacrifice is not looked upon favorably, he must make a choice - either grow envious (and later murderously angry) or remain steadfast in his love for his brother and move on. It may be that God is giving Cain the choice of obeying the law that is written on his heart (the natural law) or disobeying it. Whatever the reason for God's actions, and we can only speculate, the reason behind Cain's actions is unfortunately all too clear:

*"The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering but on Cain and his offering he did not. Cain greatly resented this and was crestfallen. So the Lord said to Cain: 'Why are you so resentful and crestfallen? If you do well, you can hold up your head; but if not, sin is a demon lurking at the door: his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master.'" [Genesis 4:4-7](#)*

Envy, resentment and hate - all these come to the surface in the person of Cain. Cain sought the approval given to his younger brother; he wanted his piece of Divine favor. This favor, however, was given to another. Cain was not treated in the way he felt he deserved to be treated. What I have always found interesting in this story is that Cain's anger is not directed at either God or at himself - the two logical, reasonable objects of his feelings. If he had chosen to bring the matter up with the Lord or perhaps questioned his own feelings on the matter, we probably would have had a different outcome. Instead, Cain directed his anger at the one person in the story who was innocent of wronging him, his younger brother Abel.

The first murder ensues, the first human blood is shed and it is done by another human being. The Lord knows what Cain has done; the Lord knows where the body of Abel lies. God still asks Cain a question which can only be for Cain's benefit, the famous line: *"Where is your brother Abel?"* to which Cain responds, *"I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"* [Genesis 4:9](#) It is as if the Lord wanted to give Cain another chance, a chance to admit his guilt or seek forgiveness. Yet we see this idea of the tendency to sin (this tendency towards self-assertion and the misguided belief in self-importance), which is a direct result of that first sin of Adam and Eve, and we see it anew in Cain.

Cain's response has nothing to do with Abel. It has nothing to do with his sin but everything to do with Cain. On top of it all, it is also a lie and is a statement contrary to reason, namely, we are indeed our brother's keeper.

#### **The Church Fathers and Genesis, St. Ephrem the Syrian**

*But Cain was filled with wrath instead of compunction. To him who knows all, who asked him about his brother in order to win him back, Cain retorted angrily and said, "I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?"... What then would you say Cain? Should Justice take vengeance for the blood that cried out to it? Or not? Did Justice not distance itself from its own knowledge and ask you as if it did not know, so that you might confess? What it said to you did not please you, so you came to that sin which it had warned you beforehand not to come. Commentary on Genesis 3.6.1; 3.7.1*

#### **The Punishment**

As punishment for the first murder the Lord banishes Cain from the soil and curses it so that he can no longer follow his previous trade. In addition (in keeping with the theme of expulsion that began in the previous chapter of the Book of Genesis) Cain is condemned to be a restless wanderer upon the earth (Genesis 4:12). In response to this, Cain, fearing that he will be treated the way he treated Abel, complains that the Lord is being a bit too harsh in his punishment. It is here that we see yet again that the Lord's ways are most definitely not our ways for the Lord protects Cain with a mark. This mark was put on Cain precisely so that those who encountered him would know that he was under the Lord's protection and that repaying a murder with another murder was not acceptable. Whatever punishment was meted out to Cain (and being forced to wander away from everything he knew was indeed a great punishment), it was only the Lord's to mete out.

#### **The Magisterium and Genesis**

*And yet God, who is always merciful even when he punishes, "put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him" (GN 4, 15). He thus gave him a distinctive sign, not to condemn him to the hatred of others, but to protect and defend him from those wishing to kill him, even out of a desire to avenge Abel's death. Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this. And it is precisely here that the paradoxical mystery of the merciful justice of God is shown forth. John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae, No. 9*

With Cain's expulsion to live in the land of Nod, east of Eden, our story will pick up the pace substantially. The stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel will quickly give way to the listing of generations leading up to Noah and the Flood (our next main story in the Book of Genesis). The Creation accounts that conclude here, however, are not the last creation stories you will receive in the Book of Genesis. A new Creation, the created order in which we all live, is just around the corner.