

Genesis 4a Cain and Abel

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Overview

Gen 2-5 is all “the generations of the heavens and the earth,” the first of the *toledot* sections into which Genesis is divided.

Gen 2-3 focuses on Adam and Eve; Gen 4, on their offspring. Gen 4 shows that the promise of children, the punishment of labor, the priesthood of worship, and the perversity of sin seen in 2-3 all continue. This is the “here we go again” chapter, showing that what transpired in 2-3 has lasting effects on human history.

Gen 4 in turn has three parts, each introduced by similar birth formulae (1-16, 17-24, 25-26)

- 1-16 is strongly similar to ch. 2-3 in vocabulary, theme, and structure. It shows that the basic pattern of sin and punishment established by our first parents persists to their offspring, and takes the form of animosity between people.
- 17-24 shows the persistence of this murderous tendency to the next generation.
- 25-26 shows a glimmer of hope, in the offspring of Seth, who for the first time since Abel call on the name of the Lord.

Review overall structure and correspondences with 2-3 from the grid chart.

1-2a, Birth

and Adam knew Eve.—By putting the subject before the verb, the writer topicalizes it, and wishes to call our attention to it. “Now as for Adam,…” To understand this effect, recall that the previous section, about the Garden of Eden, ended with man excluded from the garden and angels guarding the entrance. At this point the narrative could logically take one of two directions, and the juncture is critical for the theme of the rest of the Bible.

1. Our attention might stay in the garden: now that man has failed, who comes next? This would lead us to a Bible that is preoccupied with visions of unattainable bliss from which we are excluded.
2. In fact, it follows man out of the garden: now that man has left the garden, what becomes of him? This is in fact the burden of the rest of Scripture, to show how God is with us even in our exile, and to lead us back to the glory we once knew with him in Eden.

Know, conceive, bear.—These terms are echoes of ch. 2-3, and remind us (as does the passage’s whole structure) that this story is a continuation of that one.

- “Know”: we see here the limits of the serpent’s promise. There was more for Adam to know than what he learned by eating the fruit. This is the course of learning that God intended for Adam, by continuous experience of God’s gifts.
- “Conceive, bear”: The terms of the judgment are in effect, but also of the promise of offspring.

Eve's statement.—Lit. “I have formed a man with the Lord.” Each term is loaded.

- “I have gotten” may have the archaic and poetic sense of the term, “I have created,” cf. 14:9,10.
- “a man”: “Moreover, she calls a newborn infant a man, because she saw the human race renewed, which both she and her husband had ruined by their own fault” (Calvin).
- “with the Lord,” that is, by his instrumentality (*et* of instrument, cf. Jdg 8:7,16).

The bottom line: she recognizes this event as the fulfillment of the Lord's promise in 3:16 that she would be fruitful. While that promise was a judgment in the pain and suffering that it anticipated, it was also (as Adam recognized in naming her) God's gracious means of preserving the race. (4:1 is the only place in the OT after ch. 3 that the name “Eve” occurs.)

Relation of Cain and Abel.—It has plausibly been suggested that they were twins. Cf. 29:32, 33, 34, 35; usual to repeat the conception. (Note that this rule would make Dinah the twin of Zebulun, 30:19-21.) If this is so, the animosity between them is even more reprehensible, and a prototype of the competition between Jacob and Esau.

Names.—Each has symbolic connections.

- Cain means “smith,” one who forms, and is distantly related to the verb in Eve's statement, “I have formed.”
- Abel means “breath, vanity,” and anticipates the shortness of his life.

2b-5a, Offerings

Here we have the approach of the two brothers to the Lord, analogous to the establishment of Adam in Eden in ch. 2.

The fact of the offerings.—Recall the priestly functions implicit in “serve and guard” 2:15 and the vesting with tunics 3:21. From the outset, man's priestly responsibility is clear, and persists. He is excluded from the true sanctuary by sin, but our representative has entered there for us, Heb 9:11, 12, 24.

The difference in their gifts.—Each labored for his living, according to God's decree, and “in the process of time,” probably at the end of the agricultural year, each brought an offering. But note the difference in how these are described:

- Cain simply brings “some of the fruit of the ground.”
- Abel's offering is more selective: “of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof” (that is, of the firstlings). He brings the very best of the best.

What was God's response?—The verb literally means “pay attention to,” “gaze at.” Abel's offering gets his attention, while he ignores Cain's.

Note also that he regards first the person, and only then the gift. Men think that if they bring a great enough gift, they can bribe God into accepting them. On the contrary, God only accepts gifts from people whom he has already accepted. Isa 1:10-20.

Why the difference?—So what is the difference between their persons? We have two NT comments on their offerings, one on Abel’s and one on Cain’s.

- Heb 11:4 comments on Abel’s offering. Abel offered a “more excellent” offering, namely “the firstlings ... and ... the fat,” a selective and costly sacrifice, and did so by faith, that is, by trust in God. Recall that both labor under the judgment of eating bread by the sweat of the brow, 3:19. Getting adequate food was a struggle, and the choicest produce would be highly prized. Abel could sacrifice the very best that he had, because he recognized it all as a gift from God, and trusted God to provide his needs. Cain does not set aside the very best for God, but simply brings mediocre produce.
- 1 John 3:12 reports of Cain’s offering, “his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.” Cain’s evil works can only be his sacrifice. Thus we learn that carelessness in worship is not simply neutral, but positively wicked, in view of the holiness of the one whom we approach. Cf. Mal 1:13,14; there, such a careless attitude brings a curse upon the worshipper.

Application: True trust in the Lord manifests itself when we obey and honor him even to our own apparent disadvantage. It is not faith to obey God when such obedience is clearly in our own interest. But when our obedience puts us at a disadvantage and we must rely on God to care for us, that is faith. The alternative is not neutrality, but evil. “He who is not for me is against me,” Matt 12:30.

5b, Cain’s Response

Anger and discouragement, implying that the Lord has done something wrong. His attitude reflects that of the serpent, casting blame on the Lord, rather than accepting our place as contingent, created beings.

6-7, The Lord Interrogates and Instructs Cain

The Lord’s speech to Cain follows a pattern that we see repeatedly in Scripture when his people face discouragement: with Moses at the Red Sea, with Joshua at AI, and with Samuel after Saul’s sin with Agag (see Table). Five components:

Disappointing event.—In some cases, the person to whom God is speaking is facing the opposition of unbelievers (the attack of Pharaoh against Israel in Moses’ case) or the disobedience of others (Achan in the case of Joshua; Saul in the case of Samuel). In this case, Cain himself is to blame. So our example may be the most discouraging and depressing scenario one can imagine. Yet even here the Lord offers patient and tender counsel.

Human Reaction.—Disappointment is natural in such circumstances. The fact that God detects it with Moses, even when the text does not describe it, shows how widespread it is.

Divine Rebuke.—The Lord’s question in each case is rhetorical. Unlike the questions in 3:9-13, the Lord neither expects nor waits for an answer. The point of his question is to arouse his people from their discouragement. He does this by focusing their attention on two things: an *explanation* for the disappointment they have suffered, and a *command* on what to do next.

Application: Here is a template for us as we seek to encourage and exhort one another. We should try to get God’s perspective on what *has* happened and what we *should* do next.

Explanation.—Sometimes (as here and in Jos 7) this comes before the command. In other cases it may follow. The explanation that God offers Cain has two parts.

1. God will recognize a right sacrifice. Cain’s rejection is not due to God’s inattentiveness, but to his own shortcoming.
2. This shortcoming is the result of what Heb 12 describes as “besetting sin,” here described graphically as a wild beast that has made its lair at his door, ready to attack him in the course of his daily activities. His casual, inattentive sacrifice assumed that by default he was right with God. In fact, as a child of Adam and Eve, he inherited their propensity to sin. He must recognize that holiness never comes naturally; that we are pilgrims in a strange land, warriors in a hostile territory.

Application: Many people do not recognize the presence of sin in their lives, and so cannot deal with it appropriately. Here is the importance of repentance, which must come before effective faith.

Command.—We saw when studied 3:16 that this last clause must be understood as describing Cain’s duty. He is responsible to subdue and rule over sin.

Additional questions

What is the robec?—4:7, robec “croucher”—image of lion crouching down to spring. But when this verb is applied to lions, it is at rest, not in attack:

- *Gen 49:9, compared with the repose of an old lion, whom none can rouse.*
- *Ps 104:22, the activity of lions in their dens during the day, after the night’s hunt.*

In addition, the root is often applied to the peaceful repose of sheep and other peaceful animals:

- *Gen 29:2*
- *Deut 22:6 bird sitting on young*
- *Ps 23:2*
- *Cant 1:7 resting at noon*

But see the dragon lying in wait in Ezek 29:3.

The sense with a lion is not “crouch, about to spring,” but “makes its lair.” This is just as appropriate here.

What is the xa+at?—An added compliciton here is whether xa+at is “sin” or “sin offering.”

Xa+at means “sin offering” only in cultic contexts. A search for 02403 + “offering” returns 111 hits for “sin offering,” allocated thus:

3	<i>Exodus 29, 30 (priestly function in tabernacle)</i>
55	<i>Leviticus</i>
34	<i>Numbers</i>

3	2 Chr 29 (Hezekiah's revival; not in Kings; note sacerdotal emphasis of Chron.)
1	Ezra
1	Neh
14	Ezek 40-46

Thus the sacrificial meaning must be triggered by some sort of sacerdotal context, which is absent in Gen 4 (unless it might conceivably be supplied by the report of the sacrifice?)

8, Cain Slays Abel

From this point on, Abel is always “Abel thy brother.” Moses emphasizes the closeness of their relation to highlight the heinousness of the crime.

We are not told what Cain said to Abel. Commentators have long speculated that Cain said something like, “Let’s go into the field.” The emphasis on speaking to Abel *his brother* suggests a friendly talk. Perhaps he pretends to seek Abel’s help in selecting the next round of sacrifices. His real purpose, though, is deceitful and malicious, to get Abel away from their dwelling, into the field where no one could come to his aid. The crime, like that of Eve and Adam, is not the result of a sudden burst of passion, but something planned and arranged for in advance.

Note the slow-motion of the text at the climax: repetition of the subject, and insertion of “and it came to pass, when they were in the field.”

1 John 3:12 gives an illuminating comment on this event, analyzing the reason for the slaying at two levels.

1. The deep reason for the slaying: “Cain ... was of that wicked one,” that is, Satan. “Of” is a statement of descent (cf. our Lord’s genealogy in Luke 3:23ff). So this verse directly identifies Cain with the seed of the serpent promised in 3:15. Thus in the very first generation we see exemplified the strife that the Lord foretold in 3:15. Abel, by implication, is associated with the seed of the woman. Here, Cain crushes his heel, but in the sequel we see that Abel is vindicated.
2. The immediate motive for the slaying: “Wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.” We have already observed that this refers to Cain’s carelessness in the sacrifice. He was jealous of Abel’s righteous deeds, probably because they received God’s approbation.

9-15, Dialog between the Lord and Cain

Compare here the interrogation and sentencing of the man and his wife in the garden.

9a, Lord: Question

As the Lord asks Adam, “Where art thou?”, so he asks Cain, “Where is Abel thy brother?” In both cases his purpose is not to gain information, but to lead the guilty to confession and repentance (Rom 2:4).

9b, Cain: Evasion

Cain’s response differs strikingly from Adam’s.

- Adam answers the Lord’s questions, evasively at first, but eventually confesses: “I did eat,” 3:12. He never questions the appropriateness of the question or the right of the Lord to ask it.
- Cain rejects the question out of hand. “It is inappropriate for you to ask me that question.” He thinks he can hide his deed from the Lord.

10-12, Lord: Judgment and Sentence

The question.—“What hast thou done?” Compare 3:13, to the woman, “What is this that thou hast done?” The Lord already had an accusation from Adam about her deed, but Cain has not yet confessed (and in fact never does).

The evidence.—The Lord calls the fertile field to testify against Cain. Note the parallels between 10b and 11:

10b, Accusation	11, Sentence
the voice of thy brother's blood	
crieth unto me	And now [art] thou cursed
from the ground.	from the earth [Heb ground],
	which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;

Just as the voice of Abel cries to God “from the ground,” so “from the ground” comes the curse upon Cain. Notice four things:

- The ground has “opened its mouth,” a figure later used to describe the judgment on Korah and Dathan (Num 16:30ff). Perhaps Cain has buried Abel to hide the evidence of his deed. We shall see later that he labors under the peculiar delusion that he can hide things from the Lord.
- The crying voice: a common expression to indicate that the Lord knows the sufferings of his people, however bleak the circumstances may seem. Cf. Rev 6:9,10 (blood of the tribulation martyrs); Ps 9:12. This is why the seed of the woman will conquer the seed of the serpent: not because in themselves they are stronger, but because their redeemer is mighty and will not keep silence. Luke 18:7,8 “And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily.” Calvin: “This consolation affords us most abundant reason for patience when we learn that we shall lose nothing of our right, if we bear injuries with moderation and equanimity; and that God will be so much the more ready to vindicate us, the more modestly we submit ourselves to endure all things; because the placid silence of the soul raises effectual cries, which fill heaven and earth.”
- The role of the earth; not just passive, but offended by the crime that has been done, and actively participating in the judgment on Cain. Cf. Rom. 8:19-22; the whole creation suffers and groans under the load of our sin. This is the ultimate explanation for tragedies like earthquakes, floods, and storms. Cf. Numbers 35:33; murder in particular defiles the land. Here is the heart of a truly Christian environmentalism The unsaved move in two directions,

equally unsound: conventional environmentalists care for the earth out of self-interest or worship it as a god(dess) in itself, while some industrialists exploit it and trash it. The believer can take neither position. He sees the earth as a sacred trust from God, something beautiful, to be managed for him, and protected from the influence of our sin.

- Heb 12:24, compare blood of Abel with blood of Christ. Abel's blood cries out for vengeance, but our Saviour's blood speaks redemption and forgiveness for us.

The sentence.—Two aspects: an intensified curse on the ground, and banishment.

- *When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength.*—This is an intensification of the curse resulting from Adam's sin.
 - Eden: food with no work
 - Adam after the fall: food, but only with hard labor. Cain experienced this prior to his offering.
 - Cain: No productivity, even with labor.
- *a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.*—Compare the judgment on the manslayer, being banished from family and home. It is agriculture that causes people to settle down. Herdsmen, hunter-gatherers, and modern business people must always be on the move, never setting down roots. Adam goes from having a garden to being a gardener; Cain now is a step further removed and must depend on others to produce the food that he will eat.

Why is Cain's blood not shed, per Gen 9:6?

- Not enough people were yet alive to make this an effective lesson. Cain would be more of an example if allowed to live until the earth were more populous.
- Deut 17:6; Num 35:30, require two witnesses to execute someone for murder. (This needs to temper our own laws about capital punishment. The Bible would never let it be applied on circumstantial evidence.)

13-14, Cain: Protest

Cain's protest begins with a complaint, and continues with an explanation.

The Complaint

The marginal reading introduces a very different sense than the text.

- In the text, Cain is petulantly complaining over his punishment.
- In the margin, he is driven to deep remorse as he realizes the depth of his sin.

What's going on, and which is correct?

The Hebrew text is literally, "to lift up iniquity." Sometimes it is translated "bear guilt, punishment," and sometimes, "forgive sin," which leads to the ambiguity here. Two indications, one based on lexicography, the other on context, support the main AV rendering.

1. Lexically, at root, the two meanings are the same. There are four subjects of this idiom: God, the priest, the sinner, and the sacrifice. When the subject is sinner or sacrifice, the natural meaning is, “bear punishment.” When God or the priest is the subject, the convention is to translate, “forgive iniquity.” How can these two be reconciled?

In fact God forgives sin by bearing it himself, as he has demonstrated in the Lord Jesus. The priest “forgives” sin by acting as God’s agent in this sin-bearing. Thus the common underlying meaning of “bear” is to experience the consequences of, and “forgiveness” is only the side effect when a substitute takes up our sin burden for us. In Cain’s case, if the focus were to be on forgiveness, we would expect a passive verb, “my iniquity is too great to be borne,” that is, by a substitute who would thus relieve me.” The use of an active verb (the Qal inf.) leads most naturally to the conclusion that the one doing the bearing is Cain, and thus to the AV translation.

2. In context, Cain amplifies this statement not by describing how heinous his crime was, but by repeating and amplifying the terms of the punishment.

Application: There are two ways in which one can respond to God’s judgments: we can either complain against them (as Cain does), or beg for his mercy (which Cain does not).

The Explanation

The initial particle in v.14, translated in our version “behold,” is often used as an introduction to a conditional statement, “if” or “since.” Here in the condition, Cain restates the terms of his punishment, and in the conclusion, indicates extreme consequences he fears may result.

Protasis: Restatement of the Sentence

Cain repeats or paraphrases each of the sentences that the Lord proclaimed in v.12. In each case he goes beyond what the Lord has said, making his case that the punishment is too severe.

Resistant earth.—God had said that the earth would be unfruitful to him. Cain describes this as being “driven out from the face of the earth [lit. ground].” He takes the word “ground” from 4:12a; the AV’s change to “earth” is misleading. The only previous use of this verb “drive out” was in 3:24, describing how God excluded Adam from the fruitful garden. Cain sees the curse of fruitlessness as a repetition of his father’s experience. By making the earth resistant, God is driving him away from it.

Fugitive and vagabond.—The next two clauses are grammatically joined. Cain is spelling out his understanding of the consequences of the resistant earth. His train of thought:

- You are making the earth unfruitful to me.
- Thus you are driving me away from it, just as you drove my father out of the garden.
- Because you are driving me away, I must seek to hide myself from you.
- That is why you have decreed that I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth.

Just as he extended the first sentence with the words, “drive out,” he extends the second with the paraphrase, “from thy face shall I be hid” (probably, “I must hide myself”). He takes God’s

judgment as a declaration of enmity, and the sentence of wandering as a warning, “You’d better get running, because if I ever catch you, I’ll make things even worse for you.”

His whole train of thought is different from Adam’s. We are exhorted to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt us in due time (1 Pet 5:6). Like a loving parent, God seeks to comfort his children after the necessary spanking.

- Adam demonstrated this reaction, rejoicing in the hope of Eve’s motherhood and teaching his sons the responsibility of sacrifice.
- Cain sees God’s actions as hateful and vindictive, the harbinger of worse things to come.

He concludes that he must seek to hide from God’s face. What a futile task!

- God may sometimes hide his face from his people: Deut 31:17,18; 32:20.
- But it is futile for them to seek to hide themselves from him: Cf. Isa 40:27, where Israel is rebuked for speaking in this way. Jer 16:17; 23:24. If God’s purpose were to destroy him, it would be to no avail to try to hide: Amos 9:1-3. Cain thought he could escape the eye of God when he took his brother out into the field to kill him, and still has not learned that there is nowhere to hide from God (Ps 139).

Application: In Cain we see the “root of bitterness” against which we are warned in times of chastening in Heb 12:15. We must learn rather to take the attitude inculcated in the rest of that chapter and accept God’s chastisement as evidence of his love and care toward us, designed to draw us closer to him, not thrust us farther away from him.

Apodosis: Further Feared Result

Because he must take himself (as he vainly thinks) out of God’s presence, there will be no protection for him from the hand of his brethren, the other children of Adam. He fears that they will seek to avenge Abel’s death by slaying him. As we know from the later institution of the avenger of blood, this is in itself not a vain fear. The error in Cain’s thought is the presumption that he will be hidden from God’s face.

15, Lord: Mercy

In fact, Cain’s exile is the precursor of the city of refuge, Num 35:10-35. The Lord promises to protect him from such vengeance. This protection has two aspects: the decree, and the sign.

The Decree.—If anyone touches Cain, Cain shall be perfectly avenged. “Sevenfold” has the sense “completely, perfectly.”

The Sign.—There are two questions about this promise.

1. To whom is it addressed: Cain or those around him? The Hebrew preposition *l-* suggests that it is a sign given to Cain (cf. Leupold), while the conjunction *lblty* indicates that it will prevent others from taking vengeance and thus suggests that its primary audience is those around Cain. Probably, both are intended; the sign is graciously given for Cain’s encouragement, and will serve to deter vengeance against him.

2. What is the sign? There has been much fruitless speculation. The text does not say, unless we are intended to understand the decree itself, and the promised vengeance, as the mark. Note that the decree is addressed not to Cain (“whosoever slayeth you...”), but to humanity at large (“whosoever slayeth Cain...”). Compare Isa 7:14, where the sign is embedded in a prediction. In this case, we should translate the verse along these lines: “The Lord said, ‘Whoever slays Cain, Cain shall be perfectly avenged.’ Thus the Lord established a mark for Cain, ...”

Application: There are two lessons in this verse for our comfort.

1. Once again, we see the Lord’s mercy and grace on Cain. Cain does not merit such care for his well-being, but the Lord deals patiently with him.
2. The idea of the Lord’s promises being a sign for our encouragement is very important. There is great comfort for us not just in *what* God has promised, but in the promises themselves: cf. Heb 6:17-19.

16, Cain Alienated from the Lord

Cain went out from the presence of the Lord.—The phraseology is telling. Nowhere in this episode does the Lord threaten to cast Cain out of his presence. Cain voluntarily withdraws from the Lord. The Lord does sometimes threaten to cast people out of his presence (2 Kings 24:20; Jer 23:39; 52:3), but the godly pray that this may not happen (Ps 51:11), and God sometimes graciously withholds it even when it is due (2 Kings 13:23). Even Adam and Eve are said only to be expelled from the Garden, not from God’s presence. Here he has not cast Cain away. It is Cain who introduces the notion of hiding from God (v. 13), showing his link to Satan, who is the only one in Scripture said to voluntarily withdraw from God’s presence (Job 1:12; 2:7).

Land of Nod.—The name is taken from the Hebrew word for “vagabond” in v.12, *nad*. The wanderer lives in the land of wandering.

He dwelt.—Lit., “he settled in the land of Nod,” confirmed by his attempt to build a city in v.17. Is he trying to escape from the curse of wandering by establishing a settled residence?

East of Eden.—Like his parents before him, he dwells before the garden’s front door. Though he is alienated from God by sin, yet the sanctuary is never far away.

Summary

The theme of this section is the repetition of the experience of Adam and Eve. There are strong similarities, but also striking differences.

- Like his parents, Cain draws near to God, and in spite of a warning, falls into sin, resulting in his expulsion. From this we learn that temptation is pervasive, and sin “easily besets us,” Heb. 12. We must never become overconfident: “Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall,” 1 Cor 10:12.
- Unlike them, he does not take the opportunity of confession and repentance open to him, but voluntarily withdraws from the Lord’s presence. We may not be able to escape the attack of sin, but we do have a choice in our response to the Lord’s chastising. We may be hardened

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by it, as Cain was, or humbly submit ourselves to it and continue to enjoy the Lord's presence, as did his parents.