

Reading Genesis & Exodus as Christian Scripture for the Church Today
Diocese of Chichester Online Book Group for The Year of the Old Testament 2023
Session 4: Genesis 4:1-16 – Cain and Abel (19/3/23)

Some questions you might like to consider:

What is the big picture / trajectory of Genesis 3-6? How does this passage fit in?

Can you see any echoes of Genesis 3 in this chapter?

What relevance might Genesis 3:14-16 have to how we read this section?

Why do you think the LORD looked (with favour) on Abel's offering and not on Cain's?

Is Cain his brother's keeper? Am I my brother's keeper?

What other Bible passages / themes might be relevant to this passage?

How would you connect this passage to the good news about Jesus?

What are the lessons for today's church from this passage / the applications / implications for us?

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Part of the unit 2:4-4:26, "the history / account / genealogy of the heavens and the earth"

The artistry and economy of this rich story – Cain and Abel, 12 sentences, can be told in less than a minute but deserves serious meditation – what we're told and what we're not told – detail included or omitted - ? deliberate ambiguity to make us think – how will we respond if God seems to neglect us and we can't understand why?

How does it build on the first three chapters of Genesis and what themes are introduced here which will be developed further?

James Jordan (*Trees and Thorns*, p293, or with adjustments, p319-22) sees the seven days of creation echoed here:

Day 1 – 2:4-7; 4:1-2

Day 2 – 2:8; 4:3-5a

Day 3 – 2:9-14; 4:5b-8

Day 4 – 2:15; 4:9-14

Day 5 – 2:16-17; 4:15

Day 6 – 2:18-24; 4:16-24

Day 7 – 2:25-3:24; 4:25-26

Wenham sees five scenes of narrative or dialogue which correspond to similar scenes in chapters 2 and 3 (see p99). In chapter 4, scene two (vv6-7) corresponds to scene four (vv9-15): both open with the LORD asking two questions and close with two divine statements about Cain's fate (p104).

(1) A: vv2b-5	Narrative	Cain and Abel main actors; Yahweh passive
(2) B: vv6-7	Dialogue	Yahweh questions Cain
(3) C: v8	(Dialogue) narrative	Cain and Abel alone
(4) B: vv9-14	Dialogue	Yahweh and Cain
(5) A: vv15-16	Narrative	Yahweh active, Cain passive

Stresses the central decisive event in scene (3): the murder of Abel

4:1-2 and 4:3-5a – repeated chiasmic contrast – Cain – Abel – Abel – Cain (see Jordan, p300)

“Abel” – 7x; “Cain” 15x (or 14x if you discount 4:24) – Cain the main character – a double pre-eminence, a double-portion as firstborn, which he squanders (cf. Esau); “brother” 7x; on the words earth, land, God, LORD and LORD God in the wider unit see Wenham p96

V1ff – the first ever “normal” birth – obviously important – the first fallen human beings to be born in the usual way outside of Eden

“I have gained a man with (the help of) the LORD” – Von Rad says every word of this little sentence is difficult - Unusual to call a baby boy “a man” - God’s on-going grace and mercy – no mention of pain in childbirth despite the curse of chapter 3 - The LORD as midwife when Eve knew nothing of childbearing and had no other mothers to help her - children not merely “naturalistic” but a God-given gift

(Other (miraculous) births in the Bible - Eve / Mary parallel?)

Or does Eve think she has rivalled the LORD – she has become “like the LORD” in bringing a man into existence?

Could this be promised The Serpent Crusher of Genesis 3v15? Cain turns out to be an anti-Messiah, a wolf rather than a shepherd to his younger brother – we need Christ not strong-man Cains! Jesus is the opposite of Cain, a new and better Abel who offers a perfectly pleasing sacrifice as he dies

The first birth and the first murder in the same chapter – life and death

A second generation of sinners – original sin – an inherited sinful nature

The second Adam (Cain) falls. As Adam failed to guard his wife, Cain fails to guard his younger brother. Worse, he kills him.

The broken relationship between human beings develops. Not only are man and woman alienated from one another and from God but brother kills brother, and this will spread out into society / civilisation

Sin escalates – the spreading power of sin – The narrative is building to the judgement of The Flood – God’s verdict 6v5ff

V2 – cf. Esau and Jacob (25:24-27) – Older and younger brothers rivals – birth of sons, naming, their callings

V2 – “Cain” a tiller / servant of the soil / ground – recall that “Adam” is related to the “ground” – cf. Zechariah 13:5 – the prophets deny their office and say they are only tillers of the ground, they seek to evade their responsibility, as Cain did – 4:22, Tubal-“Cain” as a smith / metal worker – ground can

be metal like / worked with metal - pun on "Cain" and "acquired" (cf. "Cain" and "gain") – Cain's name is also echoed in other words in the passage such as "rise up" and "punished sevenfold" – "Cain" suggests strength, which should be used to guard and keep, not to kill

"Abel" = "breath / vapour", as in Ecclesiastes – he has the breath of life extinguished from him; his short life is a mere breath (Abel appears a number of times in the Old Testament as a place name or as part of a place name). The importance of Shepherds (Moses, David)

Two sons – one earthy; one heavenly / spiritual?

V2 – the soil / ground – Leithart: "Adam had been made from the ground (2:7); after he sinned, the ground had been cursed in reference to him (3:17); in death, Adam would return to the ground (3:19). And now, Cain, the son of Adam, is said to be a servant of the ground, who brings an offering of the fruit of the ground (4:3). After Cain kills his brother, Abel's blood cries out from the ground (4:10); God punishes Cain by saying that the ground will no longer yield its strength to him (4:12); and Cain complains that he has been driven from the face of the ground (4:14). Cain is a slave of the ground; he is of the earth, earthy." <https://theopolisinstitute.com/the-servant-of-the-ground/>

V3 – Lit. "at the cutting off of days", after some time, or at the end of the year, at harvest time, in autumn

V3f – religion before the giving of the Law – how did they know how to worship God?

V4f - Lit. God "looks upon" (has regard for / takes notice of / paid attention to / ? seek / recognise) one and not the other (NIV's "with favour" an interpretative addition) – generally has the idea of seeing, approving and taking favourable action – God inspects and judges these two tribute offerings – cf. the evaluation of creation

Cf. The fall in Genesis 3 also food related

Plants and animals in Genesis 2 and 4 – Adam a gardener who named the animals

Salvation by works / merit?! A pagan bribe?

Abel offers a more acceptable animal sacrifice – cf. the animal covering for Adam and Eve, which presumably required a death rather than their death – Leviticus 1:2, a man drawing near to God with an animal as his representative and substitute - but the law didn't only command animal sacrifices but also grain and wine etc.

Abel offers the best / priority part, the fat portions & the first fruits; the second son offers firstlings – a perfect unblemished sacrifice is going to be needed by God who deserves our best

Abel offers the sacrifice in the right spirit, v7, do "good" (the repeated word from Genesis 1, "and it was good") – cf. the choice of Adam and Eve that the forbidden fruit is good (4v6) – by faith – Hebrews 11:4

Abel is elect; Cain isn't?! God's sovereign choice?

God is seeking to teach Cain a lesson, setting him a test (as in Genesis 3) which he fails?

Older and younger brothers – younger brothers preferred: Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau, Ephraim not Manasseh, David, Joseph – since the first Adam (older brother) has failed a second Adam (younger brother) is needed. Cf. Jesus' parable of the older and younger brothers (Prodigal Son).

V5 – How might / should Cain have responded? Will we take the path of bitterness / resentment / anger / murder when things go wrong / we don't understand or like God's ways? Will he examine himself or blame God / his brother? What would it look like to respond with love of God and neighbour, with repentance and faith etc. if God does not regard our sacrifice? Should he even have asked Abel for a sheep to sacrifice?

V6 – more literally, “very hot”, burning, (maybe embarrassed, humiliated) angry, furious – “his face” fell – v7 – (you, your face, will be) lifted up – missing noun - restored to favour, to pre-eminence as the firstborn, made to feel better, raised up in posture?

An invitation to Cain to think, a parent reasoning with a child

Eve had to be persuaded to disregard the Creator's words by the snake. Even the Creator can't dissuade Cain from murder.

V7 – Procksch calls this the most obscure verse in Genesis!

V7 – desire – cf. 3v16

V7 - Sin (missing the mark, going astray) personified as enemy / wild animal / serpent / dragon / ravenous lion (1 Peter 5:8) which can drag you off further away / down (to the level of the snake crawling on his belly, overcome by the animal you were meant to rule over)

In Akkadian, this word for “croucher” is used for demons who attack people at doorways

V8 – Cain's words not included in the Hebrew text. Accident or artistry? Did he say this to Abel secretly / some lie / trick the author chooses not to include?

Zones / places: Garden (Eden / Sanctuary / Temple-like) – Land / Field / Plain – World (untamed wilds, gentile nations) – field / plain less populated

V8 – attacked his brother lit, “stood up” / rose up, as for the role of a king – but not here a righteous judicial execution but a murder, particularly unfitting for the firstborn son

Instead of killing the beastly sin, Cain kills Abel – an ineffectual / reverse / wicked human sacrifice

Sin and Satan were Cain's true enemies but he mistakes his own flesh and blood, his brother, for his enemy (Ephesians 6:12)

Cain as the first murderer – cf. Satan as “a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44) – sin leads to death (Genesis 3) and to killing

Leon Kass: “Concerned with his position as number one, eager to establish himself as lord and master of his domain, Cain (like Romulus, the mythic founder of Rome) commits the paradigmatic crime of the political founder: fratricide. For the aspiration to supremacy and rule entails necessarily the denial and destruction of radical human equality, epitomized in the relationship of brotherhood. To wish to rule, to dominate, to be in command, means – by its very nature – the wish not only to remove all rivals but to destroy the brotherly relation with those under one's dominion. The ruler, as ruler, has no brothers.” (quoted https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/city-of-cain/)

Contrast Christ the Servant King, the firstborn of all creation who lays aside his majesty and gives up his life

Cf. Dr Jordan Peterson (not a traditional Christian) – a mythological psychological reading of Genesis (sometimes a bit swearsy) -

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL22J3VaeABQD_IzS7y60I3IUrrFTzkpat And on Cain and Abel specifically

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44f3mxcsI50&list=PL22J3VaeABQD_IzS7y60I3IUrrFTzkpat&index=5

A righteous man dies unjustly; the wicked live

V9 – why does an omniscient God ask this question? – “Where?” - cf. 3v9

V9 – “Am I my brother’s keeper / guardian?” / Am I the shepherd’s shepherd? – evading responsibility and then blaming God, as Adam did – he overstates his responsibility to deny it completely – cf. “Do I have to do everything around here?” as a way of refusing to do anything – Am I meant to be constantly watching my brother? – What is our responsibility to our family, to others? A socialist text?! This would be a relevant text for a political and social theology, but other texts also stress personal responsibility e.g. Ezekiel 18

V10 – The blood of Abel crying out (screaming, pleading, desperate for help) – the significance of blood – OT law (Leviticus 17:11) – “the blood of righteous Abel”, Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:51 - The blood of Christ – Hebrews 12:24

V10 – lit. voice – as in 3:10

V10ff – The importance of the ground again – Gunkel: “Cain had tilled the land. He had offered the fruit of the land, and given the land his brother’s blood to drink: but from the land the blood cries against him, for which the land refuses him its fruit, so he is banned from the land.”

V11 – The curse – an intensification of the curse on the ground because of Adam – a curse on Cain - not only exiled from Eden but alienated from the ground / work / any permeant place, excluded from the cultivated places, cast out into further wilderness, also expelled from the family? – cf. OT themes of Land, exile, return etc.

V13 – it seems a relatively light punishment! – not a life for a life – Could Cain have been put right with God?

V14 – Cain will be condemned to homelessness even though he builds a city (v17) – a resistance of God’s judgement? - an anti-civilization, not a true home, founded on violence, rebellion, self-will etc. – cf. Babel, Jerusalem etc. The City of God and the City of Man

V14 – Does Cain care about the presence of God? – cf. repentance and regret

V14 – Who are these people who will kill Cain?

V15 – The mark of Cain – the subject of endless speculation – a tattoo? A hairstyle?! A dog? – His name sounds like “shall be punished” – cf. the clothing given to Adam and Eve – Other marks in the Bible e.g. Ezekiel 9:3-6; Revelation. The Lord’s mercy and kindness

V16 – The significance of geography – East of Eden (3v34)

Leithart: “Abel is the first prophet and the first martyr, and the type of all later prophets and martyrs. And he is particularly a type of the One who was stripped of His prophetic garments, Who offered Himself as a bloody sacrifice for sin, Who is the garment that now clothes His people — the One Whose blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” <https://theopolisinstitute.com/the-servant-of-the-ground/>

What kind of civilization / city / culture might flow from angry, downcast, anxious, murderous, envious Cain, alienated from the soil? Cities as collections of restless wanderers looking for safety / permeance?

A warning about the way of Cain – Jude 11; 1 John 3:11-15

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For next time (3/5/23): please read and consider the rest of chapter 4 and all of chapter 5.