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# Why did God reject Cain's offering?

by [Jonathan Sarfati](#)

Extracted from chapter 14 of the author's *The Genesis Account*, a classic commentary on the Bible's first 11 chapters.

Right at the beginning of the Bible, there is an intriguing incident with the very first people born: God accepting Abel's sacrifice while rejecting Cain's. There are many classic paintings that portray the smoke from Abel's altar going up straight, while the smoke from Cain's altar is crooked or stalled. But this has misled people into thinking that it was a chance weather event, e.g. a wind gust, that ruined the sacrifice for Cain. This distracts from the correct reason, which was the difference in the sacrifices themselves.<sup>1</sup>

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## Cain and Abel: very different

[Genesis 4:2b–5a:](#)

["Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard."](#)

Later, in [Genesis 5:4](#), we see that Adam and Eve had other sons and daughters. Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, right after introducing Cain and Abel, noted that Adam and Eve "had also daughters."<sup>2</sup> A footnote to the Whiston translation of Josephus states, "The number of Adam's children, as says the old tradition, was 33 sons and 23 daughters."<sup>3</sup> But for now, the narrative focuses on the first two children ever born. This passage is also the first of a number of biblical occurrences where God overturns the normal *primogeniture*, or importance of the firstborn son (Hebrew *bʾkôr* בכּוֹר). Here, Abel's occupation is listed first in the narrative, a hint that God will reverse the usual order.<sup>4</sup>

Cain becomes "a worker of the ground". There is nothing wrong with this; he was following in his father's footsteps. But "Abel was a keeper of sheep". Luther argued that his name meaning 'vanity' led to being assigned inferior work, compared to the work of his father and eldest brother.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in later biblical times, the shepherd was a lowly occupation. But nothing in *Genesis* suggests inferiority at *this* very early stage of human history.

The animals Abel kept were the Hebrew kind *tsō'n* (צֹאן), which includes both sheep and goats.<sup>6</sup> In fact, these species, now distinct, can still hybridize to produce a 'geep'. Note that the animals were *not* kept for meat, since [Genesis 1:29](#) was still in force. Even now, the *tsō'n* kind are used for milk, especially goat's milk. Sheep are also valuable for their wool, for warm clothes. They may also have been killed for sheepskins for clothes and insulation.

## Two different sacrifices

Sheep and goats are also both common sacrificial animals. It is likely that Adam and Eve, who saw the first animal sacrifice to make their clothes, taught their children the need for blood sacrifice to cover sin.

So the narrative turns to the sacrifices. The phrase "In the course of time" in Hebrew is *miqqets yāmîm* (מִקֶּצֶן יָמִים), literally meaning 'in the end of days'. Fruchtenbaum says that it means, 'at a specific appointed time'. He explains:

So already, this early in human history, there was a fixed time in which the offerings were to be offered. It was clearly a regularly prescribed time. This being so, it means that this was not the first time sacrifices were offered or even the first time that *Cain* offered a sacrifice. Previously, since Abel was the shepherd and *Cain* was the farmer, in order to have a blood-sacrifice, *Cain* would have had to purchase a sheep or goat from his brother. However, this time, he chose not to do it that way, but *Cain brought the fruit of the ground, an offering*.<sup>7</sup>

Actually, this practice could have been occurring for over a century, as can be inferred from later passages. In 4:25–26, Eve bears Seth and explicitly regards him as a replacement for Abel, and 5:3 reveals that this occurred when Adam and Eve were 130. So Cain and Abel, maybe as elders of the first generation to be born, were both offering the correct animal sacrifices for some time.

But in this passage, we see that Cain was the *patron saint of liberal religious ecumenism*. This is the belief that all ways lead to God; that man can choose his own path. But in reality, man must come to God on *His* terms. Nowadays, this is only through conscious belief in the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus ([John 14:6](#), [Acts 4:12](#), [1 Corinthians 15:1–4](#)). Cain decided that a bloodless offering would be good enough for God—and just some ordinary produce from the ground, not even the ‘first fruits’ or best produce. No wonder [Jude 11](#) denounces practitioners of false religion as having “walked in the way of Cain”.

The contrast between the two brothers is more striking in the Hebrew than in the translation. First, the sentence begins with the subject ‘Abel’, unlike the usual Hebrew order where the verb comes first, so the understanding is ‘Now Abel, on his part ...’. Abel’s sacrifice is very different. Not only does it involve blood, but also of the *very best* animals of the flock—the first-born lambs, and the *very best parts*—the fat portions, which is what ‘fat’ (*cheleb* חֶלֶב) means here.

So this shows that the sacrifice itself was at least part of the issue: “the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering”. This is also supported in the NT, which affirms this event as real history. [Hebrews 11](#) lists Abel as the first in the ‘Faith Hall of Fame’, and affirms that *the right kind of sacrifice* was the important manifestation of the right heart:

By faith Abel offered to God a *more acceptable sacrifice* than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. ([Hebrews 11:4](#), emphasis added)

Fruchtenbaum discusses these passages and further explains why blood *was* the issue:

Although God later did accept grain offerings, even the grain offerings of the Mosaic Law always came into contact with blood. ... The mention of the fat shows that the issue was the



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sacrifice of blood. Popular relational theology tries to claim that the whole thing was an issue of attitude, that Cain had the wrong attitude and Abel had the right attitude. However, there is simply no indication of that in the text, and the thrust of Scripture is that the problem was a lack of blood, as shown

*Cain did not have the proper faith or belief, which manifested itself in the improper offering.*



in Hebrews [*“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins”* (9:22) and, *“By faith Abel offered unto God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain”* (11:4)]. The clear emphasis here is on blood, not merely attitude. Both Cain and Abel were sinners; both were born after the Fall and outside the Garden of Eden; both had the same parents, the same upbringing, and the same knowledge. However, Cain’s offering was not of faith, while Abel’s offering was an act of faith in response to revelation and knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

That is, *Abel’s saving faith was demonstrated outwardly by his bringing the right sort of offering: blood to cover sins*. Conversely, Cain did not have the proper faith or belief, which manifested itself in the improper offering. So God accepted Abel’s sacrifice but not Cain’s plant offering. Leupold explains the Hebrew:

The meaning of the verb *sha’ah* is ‘to gaze’, but when it is used with ‘*el*’ in a connection such as this, it means ‘regard with favour’.<sup>9</sup>

We are not told how this favour was manifested. It could be something similar to Elijah’s sacrifice on Mt. Carmel in his victorious contest with the prophets of Baal:

*“Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice”* (1 Kings 18:38).

Even earlier, God had accepted sacrifices this way (Judges 6:21; 13:19–20).

## Sequel

But whichever way God accepted Abel’s sacrifice and rejected Cain’s, Cain certainly knew it! His resentment led to increasing anger and defiance, then to the world’s first homicide. The New Testament affirms that this premeditated murder was real history, and used it as a warning:

*“We should not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.”* (1 John 3:12)

Jesus Himself affirmed that this was the first martyrdom in history when He pronounced judgment on the unbelievers in His generation:

“And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar” ([Matthew 23:35](#), cf. [Luke 11:50–51](#)).

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## References and notes

1. Kevin May, an Australian electrical engineer, linguist, and former missionary to the Nimboran tribespeople of Indonesia reports that his Nimboran translator Tomas had this wrong impression, and sure enough, it was in his son’s picture Bible. But Tomas was very happy with the correct explanation, which showed the justice of the Gospel. See [Is Genesis myth or reality?](#), *Creation* **17**(3):22–23, 1995; [creation.com/genesis-reality](#). [Return to text](#).
2. Josephus, *Antiquities* **1**(2). [Return to text](#).
3. Whiston, W. (trans.) *Josephus: The Complete Works* (Super Value Series), Thomas, Nashville, TN, p. 36, 2003. [Return to text](#).
4. McKeown, J., *Genesis*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary series, p. 39, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008. [Return to text](#).
5. Luther, *Genesis*, tr. Mueller, J.T., pp. 91ff, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1958. [Return to text](#).
6. Lightner, J.K., [Identification of species within the sheep-goat kind \(Tsoan monobaramin\)](#), *J. Creation* **20**(3):61–65, 2006; [creation.com/sheep-kind](#). [Return to text](#).
7. Fruchtenbaum, A.G., *The Book of Genesis*, p. 117, Ariel’s Bible Commentary, Ariel Ministries, San Antonio, TX, 2009; emphasis in original. [Return to text](#).
8. Fruchtenbaum, Ref. 7, pp. 117–118. [Return to text](#).
9. Leupold, H.C., *Exposition of Genesis* 1:196, 1942. [Return to text](#).