**Podcast notes**

**Cain and Abel’s Offering: Genesis 34:2-7**

**Farmers *vs. Shepherds, the City vs. the Wilderness***

Cain and Abel are first introduced in terms of their economic and cultural domains: Cain is a farmer who works the ground, and Abel is a shepherd who works among migrating flocks. These two vocations have important associations throughout the biblical narrative:

* *Farming and cities:* organized agriculture in the Ancient Near East was associated with the world’s first empires (Babylon and Egypt), where slave labor and infrastructure provided the groundwork for mass farming. It’s no accident that Cain will become associated with the first cities of the Bible (Gen 4:17) and the advent of technology and civilization (Gen 4:20-22).
* *Shepherding and the desert:* shepherds who migrated with their grazing animals were nomads that lived on the borders of urban society. They tended to be viewed as a lower class (though they could produce great wealth) and outside the value systems of the great cities and empires (shepherds were viewed as despicable by urban Egyptians (Gen 43:32; 46:34).

Yahweh identifies himself as the shepherd underdog throughout the Bible and consistently reveals himself to people in the desert, to shepherds outside the imperial systems of organized human power and prestige.

* Abraham the shepherd is called out of the cities of Babylon (= “Ur of the Chaldeans”) and Haran in Syria (Gen 11:31-12:4).
* Isaac and Jacob and his many sons are all shepherds living on the edge of urban centers in the land of Canaan.
* Moses meets Yahweh in the desert of Sinai while shepherding his flock (Exod 3).
* Yahweh “creates” the people of Israel by leading them out of Egypt (where they farm and build cities) and constituting them as his covenant people in the desert of Sinai.
* Israel’s first true king, David, was a shepherd (1 Sam 16:11), while their illegitimate king Saul was a farmer of the field (1 Sam 11:5).
* Yahweh himself is portrayed as Israel’s shepherd (Psalm 23) and dwells in a tent (2 Sam 7:6).

This contrast is sustained throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible and is introduced in the Cain and Abel story to prepare us for what happens next. It should strike us as no surprise that God favors the shepherd and that the “city boy” (a.k.a. “farmer boy”) is the negative character.

***Yahweh’s Favor for Abel but Not for Cain***

The narrative is very spare, but it’s precise in directing the reader’s attention to what is supposed to be noticed. The nature of the offerings:

* Cain brings “the fruit of the ground.”
* Cain is, like Adam his father, a tiller of the ground, which has been cursed.
* Cain’s offering, while legitimate, is an undifferentiated vegetable and grain bundle.

Abel’s offering is “from the firstborn of the flock, and from the fat portions.”

* Notice the extra detail devoted to the description, which highlights two layers of value: (1) the firstborn of the flock (of greatest symbolic value), and (2) the fat portions, the tastiest and most nutritious portions. The narrative directly contrasts Cain’s bundled veggies and Abel’s carefully selected and valuable animal offering.
* “By giving the first-born and the best of the animal (i.e., the fat), Abel would be understood as having given everything to God.” — Richard Hess, “Abel” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 9-10.

***Conclusion***: While both offerings are legitimate (cereal and animal offerings are both described in the sacrificial rules of Leviticus 1-7), the lavish value ascribed to Abel’s offering makes Cain’s gift pale in comparison. But the fault isn’t simply in the ingredients of the offering but what they indicated about the character of the one offering.

***The Character of the Offerers***

When God makes his decision, notice the word order:

*“God gazed upon Abel, and upon his offering, and upon Cain, and upon his offering, he did not gaze.”*

The emphasis is God’s perception of the *people* offering the gift. The “gazing” is, so to speak, the moment of God “reading” the hearts of the two brothers, and upon examination, God’s favor goes to the one who was willing to offer what’s most valuable.

The following narrative bears out the wisdom of God’s assessment: Cain’s character is such that when he does not receive favor, he gets violently angry.

***God Does Not “Reject” Cain***

God’s favorable gaze upon Abel does not constitute a rejection of Cain, though he seems to experience it as such. God immediately reaches out to Cain, continues a long dialogue with him, and *tells* *him that this moment is not permanent.*

God tells Cain the way to favor: “Do what is good.” The implication is that God can discern, somehow, in Cain’s offering that all is not well in his heart and mind, and character. So, he works with Cain and invites him to do the right thing and find himself experiencing divine favor.

*“The issue in Genesis 4 is one of ethics, not of sacrificial ingredient… Nonetheless, there exists a possibility that a comparative ethical value is reflected in the quality of the sacrifices offered… With the same ingredients, the human roles could have been reversed…. Cain would have selected the best of what the earth can offer, and Abel would kill an animal picked gingerly from the herd… The emphasis is not on the ingredient of the sacrifices but on the disposition of the one offering.”* — ANDRE LACOQUE,ONSLAUGHT AGAINST INNOCENCE: CAIN, ABEL, AND THE YAHWIST, 20-22.

***The Firstborn Rivalry and Yahweh***

Cain’s birth story draws attention to him as the firstborn. His mother boasts of her ability to “create” a man, and this man goes on to take the place of Adam as a “worker of the ground.”

Cain is also the first to bring an offering, as the patriarch or firstborn male always does as their prerogative. The firstborn was to be acknowledged as the one who received the greater share of the inheritance (Deut. 21:17) as the father’s representative (Gen 49:3). In Genesis, the male head of the family offers sacrifices (Noah in 8:20; Abraham in 12:4-10) and passes on the blessing and right of the firstborn (Gen. 27).

In Genesis 4:3, we’re told first that Cain brought his offering, and then, all of a sudden, “And Abel, he also brought *from the firstborn of his flocks…*” If Abel’s offering is not an effort at the usurpation of his elder brother (and it may well be), the narrator at the least is showing us that his younger brother is showing up as the firstborn. And to top it all off, Yahweh favors Abel!

This begins a major theme in the book of Genesis: God carries forward his promises in ways that subvert and challenge traditional wisdom in human societies, and he loves to elevate the underdog and the disadvantaged.

***Sacrifices at the Door of the Garden***

Cain and Abel are introduced in a narrative about worship, as they make their offerings before Yahweh. *Where is this story taking place?*

* Genesis 3:22-24 told us that the humans were sent out from the garden of Eden “to the east “and that on that eastern border of Eden, Yahweh stationed cherubim and a sword.
* When Cain is exiled after murdering his brother in Genesis 4:16, we’re told he went “east of Eden.” This means that Genesis 4:1-16 takes place within Eden, near the eastern edge of the garden.
* There are numerous clues in this narrative, and in later design patterns about the Tabernacle and temple, that we are to envision this offering taking place at the “door” of the garden of Eden, which is mentioned in Genesis 4:7.

The “door” of Genesis 4:7 is often taken to metaphorically refer to the door of Cain’s heart or mind, where the sinful urge is urging itself upon him. But this is not what the Hebrew text says.

* Genesis 4:7 consists of three words in Hebrew: “At the door (לפתח), sin (חטאת) is a croucher”. (רבץ)”.
* The metaphorical “door of the heart” is used nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, whereas the narrative context provides us with a perfectly plausible explanation.

Cain and Abel are depicted as offering their sacrifices at the door of the Garden of Eden, in front of the cherubim, and the entrance into the holy place of God’s heavenly presence on Earth. The sinful, animal-like temptation to fail God has exited the garden with them and is “at the door” alongside them.

In this reading, the later tabernacle and temple mirror this precise scene, as the altar was placed directly east in front of the “door” (פתח) to the sacred space, where offerings were made before the priests could enter sacred space.

On all this, see J. Azevedo, “At the Door of Paradise: A Contextual Interpretation of Genesis 4:7,” in *Biblische*, *Notizen,* vol. 100 (1999), p. 45-59.