

PARASHAH THREE

Genesis 4:1–26; Jeremiah 1:1–19; Romans 3:1–24

Notes by Tim Hegg

Acceptable Worship

Our *parashah* this Shabbat is remarkable for its opening theme. Immediately following the account of Adam and Eve’s disobedience and subsequent banishment from *Gan Eden*, we are given the account of the conception and birth of Cain and Abel. God has kept His promise—the woman would indeed be blessed with bearing children, in spite of the pain such a blessing would bring. But what is particularly interesting in our *parashah* is that the theme is not merely the continuation of the race through procreation, but the relationship of Adam’s offspring with their Creator. In other words, the question that hangs in the balance at this point is whether or not people would still be able to worship their Creator now that Adam and Chavah had been banished from the garden. The crucial issue is this: what relationship will sinful man have with God?

The text points out the various occupations the sons of Adam had chosen: Cain, a tiller of the ground, and Abel, a shepherd. The one would deal with the curse which God had placed upon the ground, while the other would care for living and breathing animals. Cain’s tendency, in the viewpoint of the rabbis, would be to find a way to overcome the toil connected with the ground by enslaving others to do his work, while Abel, tending the flocks, would have ample time to meditate and contemplate the God he served.

The offerings which each of the sons brings is the center of focus at the beginning of our section. The text merely notes that Cain brought an offering (מִנְחָה, *minchah*) of the ground, while emphasizing on the other hand that Abel brought “of the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest.” Though subtle, the narrative marks a clear distinction between the two sacrifices. The fact that only Abel’s sacrifice is noted to be “of the firstlings” and “best” means that Cain’s was not of the “firstfruits” nor was it the “best.” This suggests that each had a different motivation in bringing a sacrifice. It may well be that Cain brought his sacrifice as something which was “expected” of him, while Abel brought his out of a true sense of gratitude and worship. One fulfilled a duty, the other was truly grateful.

The response of HaShem is most instructive: “God gave regard to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering He did not give regard.” The verb used is שָׁעָה, *sha’ah*, which means “to turn and look,” and is used here in an idiomatic sense of “pay attention to,” “take heed to something.” God received Abel’s offering but did not receive Cain’s. Why? Both were apparently spontaneous and not in response to any divinely ordained commandment. We know that God is not arbitrary—He does not deal with people in a capricious way.

We receive a hint at Cain’s motivation for bringing the offering in the first place, by assessing his response to God: “Cain became very angry and his countenance fell” (v. 5). Actually the Hebrew might indicate that he became “depressed,” “saddened,” or “disappointed” (לָ + חָרָה) rather than “angry” (עַל + חָרָה), and to have one’s “countenance fall” describes a “frown” as opposed to the expression “to lift one’s countenance” (cf. Num 6:26) which means “to smile.” In such despondency, Cain considered himself to be right rather than submitting to God as the judge. Instead of assessing his true motivations in worship, he blamed God for being less than righteous, less than loving. He

had entered into the same sin into which his parents had fallen who were deceived into thinking that God might be less than good—that He was not making a proper assessment of the situation.

In vv. 6–7, however, we see the mercy of God. Rather than rejecting Cain outright, God comes to Him, and calls him to change, to turn. His first question to Cain is all important: “Cain, why are you angry (disappointed)? Why are you sad?” He calls Cain to assess his true, heart motivations. Only when we are willing to admit our own failings (rather than blame-shifting) are we able, with God’s help, to correct them. Then God tells Cain what needs to change: “If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?” Cain must change his ways, he must admit his failings, submit to God and do what is right. By this we may suppose that Cain knew what he was to do—he understood what God required. Then God describes what would happen if he did not change, if he did not do *teshuvah* (repentance): “And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” Describing “sin” in the metaphor of a lion informs a verse like 1Pet 5:8, which describes Satan as a “roaring lion” who prowls about seeking to devour people. The true lion, however, is the Lion of Judah (cf. Gen 49:9), the Messiah Who brings salvation rather than destruction. From the very beginning Satan has sought to counterfeit God and His way of salvation. Just as he had deceived Chavah, so he was intent upon Cain’s destruction. But Cain is called to resist “sin,” to be sin’s master rather than to be the slave of sin. Here, in a simple sentence, is mankind’s great dilemma: the need to overcome sin rather than be enslaved to it. And it is clear that the only way to overcome sin is to submit to God and His way of salvation. Thus, this appeal to Cain functions in the narrative as an *inclusio*, a kind of “book end” with the promise of the Lion of Judah at the end of the story (49:9–10) being it corresponding “book end.” Salvation therefore is summed up in whether mankind will submit to God and His revelation, or go his own way and become sin’s slave. Already, the promise in Gen 3:15 has made it clear that the solution to mankind’s dilemma is the “seed of the woman.”

In our *parashah*, this picture of salvation is cast in terms of what God will accept as genuine worship, as true fellowship between Himself and those created in His image. Our text makes it clear that there are only two choices: to worship God *as He has prescribed or invent our own modes of worship*. Given these two options, why would anyone choose the second?

The terrible reality which our text also emphasizes, however, is that the sin of Adam and Chava had infected their sons as well. The human nature had been tainted with rebellion, the need to replace God, to throw off all sense of being “shackled” by His commands and rather to be autonomous and independent of God. If Cain’s self-made worship was not acceptable, he would prove himself to be “in charge” by taking the life of one of God’s creatures. Here we have, in stark relief, man vs. God, a picture of full rebellion against the Creator. Such rebellion proceeds from a very wrong view of God and His sovereignty. Did Cain really think that he could hide the murder of Abel from God? Did Cain really believe that by taking Abel’s life he could prove his power to be greater than or equal to the Creator Whose image he had defaced by killing his brother? Had Cain believed Satan’s lie, that he could be god if he would just take things into his own hands? It would appear so. In one generation mankind had gone from communion with God in *Gan Eden* to becoming a murderer, attempting to eradicate the very image of God in which mankind had been created.

But before we point the finger at Cain, let us examine our own hearts. Even more insidious is the sinful thinking that we could actually please God with our self-made worship. Cain at least was aware enough to recognize that God had rejected his offering. How utterly arrogant it is for us to construct our own modes of worship along the lines of “I like it, so I’m sure God will too” and then

go our merry way all the while neglecting what God has prescribed for true worship and fellowship with Him.

If we were to investigate the Scriptures we would find that when it comes to a “worship service,” there is very little there to tell us exactly what we are to do. We are commanded to gather together, to put away our own pleasures and set our attention upon God’s ways, to do things decently and in order; to be prepared to minister to each other in Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; etc. What is more, we can see some patterns or examples of worship in the Scriptures which are not actually commanded: reading of the Scriptures and discussion of them, corporate prayer, bearing each other’s burdens, and so forth. Yet in the details there is little if any direct comment in the Scriptures as to exactly how we are to conduct our times of meeting together. The reason why seems obvious to me—the Scriptures never consider a “meeting” as the sum or whole of worship! The idea that it is, has been developed by religious professionals, not God. This is not to diminish the value and necessity of corporate meetings for worship and study of the Scriptures. But what seems clear is that congregational meetings are only one important part of the life of worship. In reality, worship of God consists primarily in the living out of His commandments. Almost anyone can “fake” the stuff that makes up liturgical prayer and attendance at a scheduled “meeting.” It is the consistent life of faith, seen in steady obedience to God, that marks true worship. This is why the biblical terminology uses the metaphor of “walking” (from which we get the concept of *halachah*). “Walking” implies life as it is lived out over the course of life’s journey, and this is the theater of true worship: how I treat my neighbor, how I forgive those who sin against me, how I care for the needy, how I love God’s instruction (evidenced by a careful guarding of His *mitzvot* to do them)—these constitute the real “stuff” of worship.

So our story gives the way forward for Cain, a pattern that is all important. First, he must submit to God and His way of true worship. Then he must resist and master the sin that “crouches” at his door. James (4:7) says it plainly: “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Submitting to God means admitting that what He has said is true and receiving His truth for one’s own life. In such submission, God grants the strength to resist the power of sin, to live righteously, and to fulfill the very purpose for which we have been created: to glorify God and to enjoy fellowship with Him. And it is in this life of submission to God that we are enabled to enjoy life to it fullest, to have an enduring sense of purpose and significance as the bearers of God’s image.

The remainder of the chapter gives us historical references to individuals who moulded the pre-diluvian society as it spread throughout the inhabited world. The overarching notice is that mankind had no regard for God or His ways. Marriage is turned into an institution to satisfy human desires rather than as sacred to the Creator, and the disregard for life (first seen in Cain) is now taken to the extreme. Such narrative sets the scene for the coming of the Torah, God’s instructions in righteousness, in which issues of marriage (and family life) as well as the high value of human life is dealt with directly.

But even in our text the merciful hand of God is seen, for although sinful mankind was moving further and further away from God, the narrative gives notice that God would not neglect mankind, but would continue to make His presence known and to bring mankind back to Himself. The chapter ends with the notice of the birth of Seth, and of his son, Enosh. It was at this time that “they began to call upon the name of the יהוה.” God would not leave His creation to fall away from Him. His redemptive plan was already in place—the way back, *teshuvah*, was already available to wayward man.