

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 Eve 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. Why are their occupations noted? Most likely to supply the background for the offerings they would bring in the following verses. There really is nothing to support the idea, suggested by some of the Sages, that Cain would attempt 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 point of the narrative, as we shall see, is not that produce offered to God is less acceptable than livestock, but that the heart motivation in giving the offering is the deciding factor.

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.” The silence of the text with regard to the quality of Cain’s gift and the explicit statement regarding Abel and his gift is most telling. Cain was bringing a gift, but it was apparently out of mere duty, while Abel brought a gift of worship which spoke from his heart. He would give to HaShem the best he could because he intended his gift to portray the worship of his heart. It appears that Cain was interested in simply fulfilling the duty.

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 שָׁאַח, *sha’ah*, which means “to turn and look”. One turns to look at what one is interested in. God gave not even an accepting glance to the offering of Cain because it was not acceptable. But what was acceptable? What were the guidelines for an acceptable offering?

This question troubles us because the text is silent about God instructing Adam and Eve, not to mention their sons, about what offering was acceptable and what was not. Yet we know that God is not arbitrary—He does not deal with people in a capricious way. What is more, God’s response to Cain after rejecting His offering seems clearly to indicate that Cain knew what he should have done, and God gives him a chance to make it right: “if you do well”

In a very real sense, the question that is foremost in our text, i.e., “how can sinful man worship

God in an acceptable way,” remains the primary question for all time. If we were created for the purpose of worshiping our Creator, and if we have been estranged through our own willful disobedience, then what is left for us in fulfilling our created purpose?

Our text makes it clear that there are only two choices: *to worship God as He has prescribed and thereby anticipate that it will be received or, invent our own modes of worship and be quite certain such worship will be rejected.* 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 Eve had infected their sons as well. The human nature had been tainted with an unquenchable need to be god, to throw off all sense of being shackled by another’s commands, and be a potentate oneself. If Cain’s self-made worship was not acceptable, he would prove himself to be god by taking the life of Abel, a man created in God’s image. Here we have, in stark relief, man vs. God. From man’s standpoint, it looks like a legitimate fight. But from God’s perspective, it is a lion vs. mouse kind of conflict. Did Cain really think that God would not know that he had taken the life from Abel, the life which God Himself had given? 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? Yes—apparently he believed all these things. In one generation mankind had gone from communion with God in Gan Eden to a complete disregard for the image of God in his fellowman.

But before we point the finger at Cain, let us examine our own hearts. Even more insidious is the sinful thinking that we are actually pleasing God with our man-made worship. Cain at least was aware enough to recognize that God had rejected his offering. How utterly arrogant is it 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 in believing that somehow we have done God a favor by giving him the worship of our own creation *while at the same time neglecting the very worship patterns He himself has prescribed.*

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 discussing of them, corporate prayer, etc. Yet in the details there is little if any direct comment in the Scriptures as to exactly how we are to conduct our corporate gatherings.

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 a part of the life of worship. In reality, worship of God consists primarily in living out 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 *halakah*). “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 commandments (evidenced by a careful guarding of His instruction to do them)—these constitute the real “stuff” of worship. *Bringing offerings (like Cain and Abel) are only external indications of one’s life of worship.*

The remainder of the chapter gives us historical references to individuals who molded 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 a divinely ordained relationship gifted to mankind by their 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 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 bring back those whose hearts He would move to know and love their Creator. 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 יהוה.” God would not leave His creation to fall completely away from Him. His redemptive plan was already in place—the way back, *teshuvah*, was already available to wayward man.