

# Genesis 4:2b – 7

## 1. TEXT AND TRANSLATION

**Gen 4:2b - 7** Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. <sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. <sup>4</sup> But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup> but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? <sup>7</sup> If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." (NIV)

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The book of Genesis must be read as part of the Pentateuch, however the author, the recipients of the final work, and their location and are disputed.<sup>1</sup> The primary authorship of Moses and an early date for the Pentateuch will be assumed here. As such, the recipients would be the Israelites late in the career of Joshua (12 century BC). At this time, the Israelites have entered the promised land, and are in the process of subduing it.

The immediate literary context of Gen 4:2b–7 is that of the fall, and the rapid spread of sin. Genesis 3 details the circumstances of the fall, and the resulting judgement. The comparison of Cain and Abel's offerings (Gen 4:2b-7) is immediately followed by Cain's fratricide (Gen 4:8-16). Sin is then seen to increase out of control (Gen 6:5), and results in God's judgment in the form of the flood (Gen 6-9). Yet, as sin

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<sup>1</sup> Wenham summarises four key possibilities. (1) 12<sup>th</sup> C; (2) 10<sup>th</sup> C; (3) 7<sup>th</sup> C; (4) 5<sup>th</sup> C. Each of these options impacts the Pentateuch's authorship, intended purpose, and its actual function in the Israelite community. See the discussion there for the various interpretations. G. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament* Vol. 1; *The Pentateuch* (London: SPCK, 2003), 187-195.

continues beyond the flood, God's grace continues all the more. The larger literary context is the primeval history (Gen 1–11) which functions as a key preparation for the patriarchal narratives which dominate the rest of Genesis (chapters 12–50).<sup>2</sup>

Genesis 4:2b-7 has the genre of proto-history, and uses a repetitive structure which develops and contrasts the circumstances of Abel's and Cain's offerings to God, and then expands on Cain's reaction. Verse 2b contrasts their *vocations*, Abel first followed by Cain. Verses 3-4a reverse the order contrasting their *offerings*. Verses 4b-5a reverse the order again, showing God's *assessment* of Abel's offering first, followed by Cain's. Verses 5b-7 then focus on Cain's reaction, and the resultant divine warning.

### 3. VERSE ANALYSIS

**2b-4a** Following the introductions of the vocations of Abel and Cain, the narrative describes the first instance of worship by contrasting the respective offerings brought by each. The term 'offering' (*minchah*) is used in ancient secular texts to refer to a gift brought to win the favour of powerful figures.<sup>3</sup> It is used here in the broad sense of a grain offering or animal sacrifice. The key difference between the offerings is not that Abel offered an animal sacrifice (containing blood), since both gave an offering corresponding to their vocation.<sup>4</sup> Leviticus later shows that an offering from the land is quite acceptable, if it is the choicest flour (Lev 2:1) or first fruits of the grain (Lev 2:14). Therefore, the key difference in the comparison drawn by these verses seems to be that Abel offered 'fat portions' and the 'firstborn'

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<sup>2</sup> The theme of chapters 1-11 emerges to show that while humanity undermines God's creation by their sin, their sinful behaviour is met by God's grace, showing that his grace and commitment to creation will triumph over sin. D. J. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Sheffield: JSOT, 1997), 76. The theme of chapters 12 – 50, as well as that of the Pentateuch as a whole, builds on from these preparatory chapters to outline the partial fulfilment of the promises to the patriarchs.

<sup>3</sup> G. Wenham, *Genesis 1 – 15* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 103.

<sup>4</sup> Each offering was a product of their vocation; Cain who worked the land gave an offering from the land. Likewise, Able who kept flocks gave an offering from his flock.

whereas Cain didn't. In this way, the text suggests that Abel offered the *best* of his flock.<sup>5</sup>

**4b-5a** Given the comparison of the two offerings, God looks favourably on Abel, and withholds his favour from Cain.<sup>6</sup> The key question that emerges is: Why did God look with favour on Abel's offering and not Cain's? Wenham summarises the scope of proposed answers to this question.<sup>7</sup> These include (1) a preference of shepherds over gardeners, (2) a preference of animal sacrifice over land produce, (3) no reason – represents the mystery of God's divine election, (4) Abel's attitude of faith (see Heb 11:4), and (5) the quality of their gifts. Given that vv3-4 provide a clear comparison between the two offerings (as discussed above) it would seem that option (5) is the best. This option could also incorporate option (4) since it follows logically that the *contents* of the offering reflect the *attitude* of the one giving it. Surprisingly, Hamilton suggests that Genesis 4 is silent as to why God chose Abel's offering over Cain's,<sup>8</sup> however he seems to miss God's explanation in verse 7. As such, a final conclusion to this question must be postponed until then.

**5b** As a result of God withholding his favour, Cain responded in anger. Unlike God's response to Abel's offering (lit. "a lifting up of the divine countenance"), Cain's countenance is a "fall".<sup>9</sup> Beyond his initial offering that was displeasing, Cain now responds to God's disfavour like a petulant child. If it was complacency that led to Cain's average offering, rather than repenting Cain is now actively negative towards God.

**6-7** Cain's negative response attracts a dialogue between God and Cain. Beyond the material difference between the two offerings as discussed above, in

<sup>5</sup> So, Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 103; Kidner, *Genesis*, 75; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 223.

<sup>6</sup> The offerings presented yield divine approval or disapproval on not only the offering itself but also the one who offers it.

<sup>7</sup> Wenham, *Genesis*, 104.

<sup>8</sup> V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1 – 17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 223.

<sup>9</sup> S. McKnight, 'Cain', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T.D. Alexander & D.W. Baker; Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 108.

verse 6 God questions Cain's *response* to God's disapproval. Perhaps this is a rhetorical question where God is suggesting that Cain should not be surprised at his disapproval. Yet at the same time, God shows genuine pastoral concern for the sinner.

Verse 7 becomes more explicit, presenting a causal clause: If one 'does what is right', the result is 'being accepted'.<sup>10</sup> However, the question remains, what does "do what is right" actually mean? As a starting point it can be assumed that Abel did "do what is right", whereas Cain didn't. Abel offered the fat portions and the firstborn (v4a). Therefore, doing what is right is: *acting in a way which God finds favourable*. Yet it remains unclear whether this favour is due to *attitude* or the *contents* of the offering. Heb 11:4 affirms that there is a difference in attitudes. With this passage in view, McKnight is persuaded that God's disapproval of Cain's offering is on account of his *attitude* over and above the *contents* of his offering.<sup>11</sup> However, Genesis 4 is silent on the initial attitudes, while explicitly contrasting the contents of the offerings. It is suggested here that the *contents* of the offerings (which are explicit) flow from the internal *attitudes* (which are hidden). It is on the basis of his heart-attitude – as evidenced by the contents of his offering – that Cain was not favoured.<sup>12</sup> The content of Cain's offering is the symptom of his disease – sin. The metaphor of sin crouching at the door alludes to the danger of a wild beast.<sup>13</sup> The metaphor is continued in a warning to Cain that if he doesn't master his sinful attitude, it will have him.<sup>14</sup> This danger is picked up in the NT especially by Paul (Rom 6:15-17; 7:8ff), who sees new life in Christ as the only escape from the trap of sin (Rom 6:18; 23).

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<sup>10</sup> 'accepted', could also be 'forgiven', or 'lifted up'.

<sup>11</sup> McKnight, *Cain*, 108.

<sup>12</sup> This position is also held by C. F. Keil, and F. Delitzsch *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (10 vols, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, Vol. 1), 10.

<sup>13</sup> D. Kidner, *Genesis: An introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1967), 75. The personification of sin is also reminiscent of the serpent in chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton suggests that the emphasis is on Cain's choice – he may choose whether or not to do take control of his sin. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 228.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

After the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden, this passage begins to develop the 'spread of sin' aspect of the *spread of sin – spread of grace* theme of Genesis 1–12. It shows both the nature of sin, as well as the consequences of sin. The nature of sin is *withholding one's best from God* – which flows from a heart attitude – and the consequences of this withholding are divine disfavour, as well as entering into a cycle that ends in being mastered by sin itself. To avoid being mastered by sin, rather than offering the 'leftovers' one must offer to God that which he deserves: the best. On this sort of offering, and on those who offer it, God looks with favour.

## 5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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