

## What did Cain say to Abel?

*by Admiel Kosman*

The biblical story of the first murder in human history is very short on detail. All we are told is this: “In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the Lord from the fruit of the soil; and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell. And the Lord said to Cain, Why are you distressed, and why is your face fallen? Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, Sin is the demon at the door, whose urge is toward you, yet you can be his master. And Cain said to his brother Abel...and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him” (Genesis 4:3-8).

The bible tells us that the chief motive for the murder of Abel the shepherd by Cain the farmer was jealousy. Cain was jealous that his brother’s sacrifice was accepted by God while his was rejected. The bible says nothing about why God preferred one over the other. In what way was Abel’s sacrifice better? In retelling the biblical narrative, Philo of Alexandria points out that a sacrificial offering is supposed to be of the finest quality. Cain should have chosen the “first fruit” but he kept it for himself, whereas Abel sacrificed the “choicest of the firstlings of his flock”.<sup>1</sup>

The rest of the story is equally cryptic. The bible only hints at the chain of events that followed the sacrifices: “And Cain said to his brother Abel...and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him” (Genesis 4:8). The first half of the verse ends in mid-air. We do not know what Cain said to Abel when they were in the field and what they were arguing about at that fateful hour.

The rabbis of the Aggadah fill the void by drawing associations with the next part of verse: “and when they were in the field.” The first rabbi is of the opinion that the dispute preceding the murder was over real estate: “What was the argument about? They said: Let us divide the world. One takes the land and the other takes moveable property. This one said: The land you are standing on is mine. That one said: What you are wearing is mine. One said: Strip! The other said: Get lost! In

1 See Philo, *The Sacrifice of Abel and Cain*, 52; *Philo with English translation*, vol. 2, by F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, Heinemann and Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1952, p. 132-133.

consequence, Cain set upon Abel etc.<sup>2</sup> What an ironic comment on the moral profile of the human race! How much bitter truth is contained in this description of two brothers, given the whole world as a gift, who cannot divide it up without fighting!

Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin, following his teacher, Rabbi Levy, takes a different view: “Both of them possessed land and moveable property. So what was the dispute about? This one said: The Temple will be built on my land. That one said: No, on my land.” Where is the allusion to this in the bible? In the verse “and when they were in the field.” The “field” is the Holy Temple. As it is written: “Zion shall be plowed as a field” (Micha 3:12). Rabbi Levy feels it is illogical that two brothers with the whole world at their disposal would fight over the division of land. He thus explains it as a religious dispute. The question (even back then!) was who would own the mount upon which the future Temple would be built.

Here, again, the irony is caustic (and all too relevant to our own day). Everyone knows that the object of a holy place is to bring materialistic man closer to that which is spiritual, to help him be a better person and live with his fellow man in love and brotherhood. And on this very spot, the first war is fought, ending in the murder of a human being! Are the pointed barbs of the rabbi not aimed here at all the religions which, over the course of history, have fought to the death for this patch of land or that idea, mouthing words of “holiness,” when only death and defilement could possibly come of such violence?

The third opinion in the Midrash is that of Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi, who believes the background of the dispute was sexual. “The argument was over the first Eve,” says Rabbi Yehuda, which is to say, sexual mastery over their mother! If only Freud had known about this Midrash, he might have named his famous complex the “Cain and Abel complex” and left Oedipus alone.

Rabbi Ivo counters that “the first Eve had returned to dust,” i.e. died. So what were they arguing about? Rabbi Huna says: “Abel had a twin sister. This one said: I take her; and that one said: I take her. This one says: I take her because I am the firstborn. That one says: I take her because she was born together with me.” This opinion is based on the fact that the word “field” commonly referred to a woman in the ancient world.

Rabbinic lore contains a Cain and Abel story in reverse. Though it appears only in

2 Bereshit Rabba 22:8, Theodor-Albeck edition, Jerusalem 1996, p. 213.

the later sources,<sup>3</sup> the parallels between this Aggadah and the biblical narrative are quite striking. A “mirror image” story might be a good name for it. It is fascinating how such mirror narratives evolve, even when the chronological and geographical distances are vast.

According to this well-known Aggadah, which first appears in Israel Costa’s anthology, God chooses the site of the future Temple in the wake of an incident involving two farmer brothers said to have taken place on this very spot. One brother was rich and had a wife and children; the other was poor and single. At harvest time, the brothers worked in the field together and divided the crop equally between two granaries. That night, the poor brother started thinking: “I have no wife and children, so why should I receive the same portion as my brother? He should have more than me!” The poor brother picked up some sheaves of wheat and decided to deposit them, under cover of darkness, in his brother’s granary. In that moment, the rich brother had the same thought: “It’s not fair that my poor brother should receive the same portion as me, a rich man.” He too picked up some sheaves of wheat and headed for his brother’s granary. In the darkness, goes the Aggadah, their paths converged. The brothers, realizing the goodness and purity of their sibling’s intentions, fell into each other’s arms and burst into tears. Tears of love. “God desired this place, where two brothers thought fine thoughts and performed good deeds. Thus it has been blessed by the people of the world and chosen by the children of Israel to be the home of God,” the Aggadah ends.<sup>4</sup>

Let us look at how this Aggadah mirrors the biblical story: In both, the protagonists are adult brothers. But while the brothers in the Aggadah are both farmers, the biblical brothers have gone their separate ways. One is a farmer and the other, a shepherd (as if they couldn’t make a living from working the land together!). In the ancient narrative, a dispute breaks out over the land, whereas the other set of brothers till the soil in idyllic harmony. In the bible, the brothers fight over a woman. In the Aggadah, again we find an idyllic situation: One brother has a wife and children, but the other one is not jealous. On the contrary, he wants the best for his brother. And most importantly, in the first story, an argument erupts over control of the Temple Mount while the brothers in the second story do not fight at all. Each sees in his mind’s eye the troubles of the other and is more concerned about his sibling’s welfare than his own – which is precisely what turns this god-forsaken and insignificant mountain into the dwelling place of God. In the bible,

3 Cf. Israel Costa: *Mikve Israel*. Livorno 1851, section 59, pp. 30a-30b [Hebrew].

4 Costa, *ibid.*, 30b.

everything is reversed. Cain and Abel somehow know that the Temple is slated to be built there, and end up quarreling about it.

What a cosmic difference between the two stories! In the one narrative, holiness is peace, love and the consideration that two brothers show one another. The land sits there quietly and symbolically “absorbs” holiness from man. In the other, the land itself is “holy” but the heart of man is torn and resentful. Just look at the misfortunes that this last approach has brought upon the world!

Now we begin to better understand the question God puts to Cain after the murder: “Where is your brother Abel?” (Genesis, 4:9). This is not an informative question, of course (although Cain tries to act like a wise guy and understand it that way). In our day, it would translate into something like “What’s going on, man? What’ve you done to your brother Abel?” What God is asking is how sacred labels have become attached to inanimate objects, empty of significance, and how, in consequence, man’s heart has been drained of that which is genuinely sacred.