



The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Following the journey of the memes of the Bible from their original cultural & historical origins to their influence in our world today.

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Religion, Anger & Murder

By Jim Myers

Do you think Adam and Eve ever told their sons about the "good old days in the garden"? According to the account in Genesis there were only four people alive at that time – Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel. So, what did they talk about? It doesn't seem like Adam and Eve would have had a large variety of prior experiences to draw upon, even if they did live hundreds of years back then. By the way, how large would their vocabularies have been anyway?

I wonder if Adam and Eve ever had any arguments or quarrels after leaving the garden. Do you think the boys ever heard dad say to their mom, "If you just hadn't eaten that fruit!" Or did their mom say, "Why did you just stand there and keep your mouth shut! Were you afraid of a snake?" Surely, after living in the Garden of God, where all of their needs were met without having to work, those days would weigh heavily upon their minds.

The sons never saw that glorious place; instead, *they had lived in a world that required at least six days of hard work every week.* They watched their parents toil very hard just to survive. The fields had thorns and thistles growing in them and they had to be continually pushed back so the grain could grow and be harvested. In addition to raising food crops, they had to maintain a place to live, a dry and safe place, plus keep the fires going. Animals had to either be raised or hunted so they could make their garments and footwear. In a world in which almost every waking hour was invested in survival activities, hearing about a garden where everything was luxurious, and in abundance, probably sounded like "heaven" does to people today. Interestingly, their best days appeared to be in the past, while people today look forward to them in the future.

Speaking of religion, what had God been doing since He had "driven them out" of His garden? Based on the word "driven," and I don't mean as their chauffer, it doesn't appear they really wanted to leave "the good life." It also doesn't look like God wanted them to return for a visit because he posted a guard, with a flaming sword, at the entrance to His garden. After they left, the biblical text is

silent about what He had been doing. However, it does reveal that the couple learned how to do something new after leaving paradise -- "making babies." But, after Eve had the two boys, even that seems to have slowed down because nothing more is said about any other kids coming along until much later.

I wonder what kind of parents two people who had never experienced childhood themselves would have made? They apparently entered life as full grown adults. Everything they experienced as parents would have been completely new to them. What went through their heads when they watched the "little beings" scream and cry? The biblical text leaves out so much interesting information. Of course, providing a diary of events wasn't the purpose of the ancient author. The text jumps from the birth of the two boys to their lives as grown men. Cain followed in the footsteps of his dad and became a farmer, while Abel became the first shepherd in the Bible. It is at this point in the story that we hear about the first religious ritual in the Bible.

At the end of days Cain brought a gift to YAHWEH of the fruit of the ground. And Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions.¹

The phrase "at the end of days" simply means "at an appointed time," indicating that this was not a spur of the moment decision.² It was something that was done on a regular schedule at the appointed time. It appears that this was a very early harvest ritual in which a portion of the harvest was given to God as a gift. I find it very interesting that the text says nothing about their father or mother bringing gifts to God. By the way, the Hebrew word translated "gift" here may also be translated as "offering." This was clearly a religious act.

And God gazed toward Abel and toward for his gift; but toward Cain and toward his gift He did not gaze.³

Put yourself in Cain's shoes at that very awkward moment. How would you feel as you stood before there offering God your gift -- *and He ignored you!* Think of all the work you had done to produce that gift -- *cleared the ground, tilled it, fought the thorns and thistles, planted the crops, worked the fields, and finally harvested the crops.* Then, after all of that work, you brought your gift to God -- *and He not only ignored your gift; He ignored you!* No reasons are explicitly given as to why Cain and his gift were ignored. Nothing is said about whether anyone else noticed the predicament Cain was in as he stood there. As a matter of fact, nothing was said about how Cain became aware of God's response.⁴

And Cain burned exceedingly and his face fell. And God said to Cain, "Why are you burning? And why has your face fallen?"⁵

Cain became so angry that it could be seen on his face. God may have ignored him and his gift, but He did not ignore Cain's anger. *Do you think this Cain's reaction surprised God?* I was always been taught that God is "no respecter of persons," so the way He treats Cain isn't what I expected. Of course, if God only acts truthfully and something about Abel and his gift was more favorable to Him, surely we couldn't expect Him to act any other way. But, wouldn't Cain's reaction have been very different if God had simply acknowledged his presence and his gift?

If Cain had ever heard the story of his parent's confrontation with the serpent in God's garden, what God does next should have caught his attention. It placed Cain in the very same position as his father stood when God commanded him not to eat the forbidden fruit. Pay close attention to what He said to Cain:

Surely, if you do well, you shall be upstanding; but if you do not do well, sin will be a **ROBLES** at your door; **its desire shall be for you**, but **you will be able** to master it.⁶

This is one of the most difficult sections in the Hebrew Bible to translate. Check your Bible and see how it was translated. Are there are any footnotes to explain the difficult translation issues involved. Below are two popular English translations. Compare them to your Bible and to the translation above.

Translation 1: And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? **If thou doest well**, shalt thou not be **accepted**? and if **thou doest not well**, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee **shall be his desire**, and thou shalt rule over him.⁷

Translation 2: Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? **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 rule over it."⁸

Is there a difference between "doing well" and "doing what is right" in your mind? What pictures come to mind when you read that "sin lieth at the door" and "sin is crouching at your door?" Do they mean the same thing or are they different? Professor U. Cassuto, a noted scholar of Hebrew, provides the following insights, which are very enlightening:

This is one of the most difficult and obscure Biblical sentences. In ancient times the Rabbis counted it among the indeterminate verses (B. Yoma, 52a-b, and parallel passages) . . . In modern times the expositors have found the text so hard to elucidate that some, like

Gunkel and Jacob, have actually abandoned all hope of understanding it, and have left part of it untranslated.⁹

It took Professor Cassuto five pages to work through the two verses word by word. It was his translation that we used above. The key to unlocking the meaning and its core message is the translation of the Hebrew word **ROBLES**. Cassuto provides this information about it.¹⁰

- (1) It will long for you.
- (2) Its desire will be for you.
- (3) It will long to bring you low.

ROBLES brings to mind the image of a wild animal as it crouches and waits to attack its victim. God warns Cain that the ROBLES he faces is sin, which in this context is anger. It is like a wild animal, crouching and waiting to attack him. His father faced the *Tree of Good and Evil* and his commandment was not to eat its fruit. Cain faces anger and God's commandment is to do **YTV**. ***His father had been told what he must not to do, while Cain is told what he must do***. In order to understand exactly what God told him to do to overcome anger we must also accurately understand the meaning of the Hebrew word **YTV**. It is the word that was translated "do well" and "do right" above.¹¹

The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament states that "**YTV** is an alternative form of **TOV**,"¹² and **TOV** is a word that appeared **seven times** in the first chapter of Genesis. By the way, if you're reading any section of the Hebrew Bible and notice a word that comes up a lot, count the number of times. The sevenfold or the tenfold repetition of a word is called a *leitwort* -- a recurring word that becomes thematic.¹³ *Such words provide important clues that reveal the purpose behind the message.* **TOV** is important in the first account because the text makes it very clear that **TOV** is the standard that God uses to measure His own acts.

The Hebrew word **TOV** is usually translated "good," which is one of those English words with a wide range of meanings -- *morally excellent; virtuous; righteous; well-behaved; fertile*.¹⁴ I was visiting with an Israeli professor of the Hebrew language many years ago and asked her about what it meant and she provided a number of valuable insights. The first thing she said was, "**TOV** is something that can be seen." It is **visible and concrete**, not an intangible abstraction. **TOV** is something "*good to the sight; beautiful and pleasant to the eyes.*" Dr. John Walton added an additional insight -- "*it (TOV) indicates that something is functionally complete.*"¹⁵ When we view **TOV** in the context of the first account, it is clear that **TOV** is also *an act that protects, preserves and enhances the quality of life*. Now let's incorporate the above information about the meaning of **TOV** in God's commandment to Cain:

Anger is the sin that is crouching and waiting to attack you. You have the power to overcome it by doing acts like God did when He created the Heavens and the Earth. *Do acts that are beautiful and pleasing to the eyes; acts that are functionally complete; acts that protect, preserve and enhance the quality of life and you will master your anger!*

But who is supposed to be the object of those acts of TOV? Who was Cain angry with? Based on the fact that God ignored Cain it would appear that He is the one that Cain is most likely to be upset with. But, I am sure you know that Cain will murder Abel, so it must have been something Abel had done that Cain viewed as the reason that God ignored him. What had Abel done? The biblical text doesn't explicitly state the reason, but it does provide important clues.

“. . . and Cain brought from the fruit of the ground.”¹⁶
“and Abel brought from the first-born of the flock, and their fat.”¹⁷

Abel selected his gift from **the best** of his flocks, but Cain did not. Abel gave from his heart and out of his respect for God. Cain brought only what was required and God recognized the difference between the two – *and apparently so did Cain*. It appears that in Cain's mind it was Abel's fault. If his brother hadn't picked out the best gifts, then God would have paid attention to him and his gift. Cain's noble purpose was sullied by the intrusion of the self.¹⁸

God recognized the danger Cain's anger placed Abel in. *If Cain had obeyed God's commandment and done acts that were beautiful and pleasing to the eyes; acts that were functionally complete; acts that protected, preserved and enhanced the quality of life – he would have never harmed Abel*. Instead of choosing "good" he chose "evil" and did the opposite of **TOV**. Later, after Cain murdered Abel, God held him accountable for the act, which indicates that **TOV** reflected the existence of a moral law to which Cain could be held accountable.¹⁹ Cain had violated it and was judged guilty.

The "appointed time" at which Cain and Abel appeared before God is the very first recorded act of religious ritual in the Jewish Scriptures. It established two basic concepts that characterize the religion of Israel.²⁰ The first is that the individual is the ultimate religious unit. In his relationship to God, a man is a conscious personality who retains his distinctiveness within the community.²¹ The second concept is the necessity of relating worship to piety. Piety means "acting in one's personal life primarily in accord with religious principles and values".²² The story of Cain and Abel presents one of the most profound, if saddest, truths in the history of religions. **It reveals how what was originally intended to be an act of divine worship became a cause of violence**. In this case, the appointed time for bringing gifts to God resulted in the first murder in the biblical text.²³ One man's anger toward his brother was ignited, because God favored his

brother's piety over his. The point that God made clear is a lesson that members of every religion should understand -- **if you do TOV, you shall be upstanding**. In other words:

*God placed a much higher value on a person's acts that are beautiful and pleasing to the eyes; acts that are functionally complete; acts that protect, preserve and enhance the quality of life – than He does on religious ritual. God will not ignore acts that threaten, destroy and decrease the quality of life; acts which are not beautiful and pleasing to the eyes. **How one treats his fellow man is more important!***

The story of Cain and Abel makes it very clear that *an evil act against man is also a sin against God*. In addition, Cain murdered an individual, but his crime was also against society. His act must have had a profound effect on the lives of his mother and father. The word **TOV** appeared seven times in the first account and the word "brother" appears seven times in this account. The moral principle established emphatically in this account is that **man is indeed his brother's keeper and that all homicide is at the same time fratricide**,²⁴ which is defined as "one that murders or kills his or her own brother or sister or an individual (as a countryman) having a relationship like that of a brother or sister."²⁵

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¹ Genesis 4:3-4a

² A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One From Adam to Noah by Umberto Cassuto; p. 205.

³ Genesis 4:4b-5a

⁴ Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel; p. 28.

⁵ Genesis 4:5b

⁶ Genesis 4:6-7

⁷ King James Version

⁸ New International Version

⁹ A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One From Adam to Noah by Umberto Cassuto; p. 208.

¹⁰ A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One From Adam to Noah by Umberto Cassuto; p. 210-212.

¹¹ Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew Lexicon (#03944)

¹² <http://www.nnqs.org/sollamo.html>

¹³ <http://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/introduction-to-the-old-testament-hebrew-bible/content/class-sessions/transcripts/transcript03.html>

¹⁴ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/good>

¹⁵ The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origin Debate by Dr. John Walton; InterVarsity Press © 2009; p. 20.

¹⁶ Genesis 4:3

¹⁷ Genesis 4:4

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel; p. 30.

²⁰ Ibid; p. 29.

²¹ Ibid.

²² http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781577180593_chunk_g978157718059312

²³ Ibid; p. 30.

²⁴ Ibid; p. 31.

²⁵ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fratricide>

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*May we help to bring closer to
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*May their memories deepen our
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faith, love, peace and devotion
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will
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wings in complete
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