

**SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY**  
**Week 4: Cain and Abel | Genesis 4-5**

**Watch the Video** from The Bible Project: Royal Priests of Eden

**Genesis 4:1 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the LORD."

**ADAM אָדָם** – translated as "the man" in verse 1. Adam means "man" or "humanity". אָדָם is the masculine form of the noun. The feminine form is אֶדְמָה which means "ground" or "earth." Notice the footnote in Genesis 3:20; this may be the first verse where "Adam" appears as his name (if not there, then in Genesis 5). There is another word for "man" in Hebrew, the word אִישׁ, which we also find in the first verse. אִישׁ is normally translated as "man" or "husband". The feminine form of this noun is אִשָּׁה which is normally translated as "woman" or "wife".

**EVE חַוָּה** – The name Eve means "living" or "life". Adam named his wife "Eve" in Genesis 3:20 because "she was the mother of all living."

**CAIN קַיִן** – In Hebrew, his name means "Metalworker," although Genesis 4:1 connects it to the verb meaning "to acquire," "to create," or "to produce." Eve's comment at the birth of Cain (see footnote in the verse) is a wordplay on Cain's name: "I have produced קַיִן אִישׁ a man with the help of the Lord."

**LORD יְהוָה** – Whenever you see the word "Lord" written using small caps, it is where God's name YHWH is found in the Hebrew text. Whenever the text is read aloud in Hebrew, the name is replaced by the word Lord out of respect for God's name. English speaking Jews will say "Lord" instead of Yahweh.

**Genesis 4:2**

<sup>2</sup> Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.

**ABEL אֶבֶן** – In Hebrew, his name could mean "breath," "vanity," "idols." The meaning of his name suggests the fragile quality of his life and his premature death. His life was but "a breath". In the Hebrew Bible, Abel is not mentioned outside of the Genesis narrative. In the NT, however, there is continuing interest in Abel's innocent blood (Matt. 23:35; Luke 11:51; Heb. 12:24; cf. Gen. 4:9–10), and Abel is listed as an exemplar of faith (Heb. 11:4). The name may also be related to Sumerian and Akkadian words meaning "son" and perhaps was thus used as a generic term for the human race.

In the New Testament, Abel is regarded as the first martyr (see Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:51) and a prototype of Christ (see Hebrews 12:24 where Abel represents the first example of the righteous who are put to death for their faithfulness).

**SHEPHERD** – Abel's occupation was that of a shepherd; an extremely important profession in the bible. Notable shepherds of the Old Testament include: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's sons, Moses, David, and the prophet Amos.

**FARMER** – Notice the occupation of Cain; "tiller of the ground." Remember the curse spoken to Adam as a consequence of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: Adam would need to work hard to get produce or fruit from the ground. See Genesis 4:22 for the description of Cain's descendant named Tubal-Cain who is described as a maker of all kinds of bronze and iron tools.

**Genesis 4:3-5 (NRSV)**

<sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, <sup>4</sup> and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

## The Difference Between the Offerings

Abel is a shepherd who offers an acceptable sacrifice to God and is thereafter murdered by his jealous farmer of a brother, Cain. The difference between the offerings is that Abel offers the “firstborn” of his flock, their fat portions, whereas Cain simply makes an offering of his produce. Whether it is meat or grain is not the important difference. Abel brought the first fruits; Cain brought an offering, some.

### First fruits

Remember what the Israelites were later commanded to bring to the sacrifice: “the firstfruits of their labor” (see Exodus 23:19; Leviticus 23:10; Numbers 15:20-21, 18:12-13; Deuteronomy 18:4, 26:1-11; Ezekiel 44:30). First fruits are always to be given to God; there is a promise attached (see Proverbs 3:9-10).

### Theme Introduction: Sibling Rivalry

We are going to see sibling rivalry throughout the Book of Genesis: Noah’s Sons (9:20-27); Abraham and Lot (13:1-18; though uncle and nephew); Isaac and Ishmael (21:8-21); Jacob and Esau (25-36); Joseph and his brothers (37-50). Usually, the conflict results when a younger son is favored over an older son. And throughout Israelite history, God seems to favor younger sons. In this story, the conflict results in bloodshed.

#### Genesis 4:6–7 (NRSV)

<sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? <sup>7</sup> If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

### SIN תַּאֲוָה

This is the first time the word “sin” appears in the Bible. Notice that sin is depicted as a powerful, animal-like entity that is luring Cain to let his jealous anger turn into violence against his brother. It’s not just that Cain committed a sin, but that he gives himself over to the power of sin that does not value the life of his brother. In Cain’s story, sin is a power that leads to a distorted view of ourselves and others. This distortion spreads to his family and community, illustrated in the story of his violent descendant Lamech who we will soon meet.

**Watch the Video** from The Bible Project: Sin.

#### Genesis 4:8 (NRSV)

<sup>8</sup> Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

The first murder; brother against brother.

#### Genesis 4:9–12 (NRSV)

<sup>9</sup> Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” <sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! <sup>11</sup> And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. <sup>12</sup> When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

Notice that God already knows what Cain has done because Abel’s blood is crying out to God from the ground. And yet, God asks, “Where is your brother?” Cain’s response is a deflection; an attempt to avoid having to tell the truth.

God doesn’t let him off the hook. God gets right to the point; there are consequences for what he has done. Now Cain will be cursed from the ground. Notice the anthropomorphic view of the ground “it opened its mouth”. From now on, when Cain tills the ground, the earth will no longer yield its strength. He will no longer be a successful farmer and will become a wanderer, a fugitive.

#### Genesis 4:13–16 (NRSV)

<sup>13</sup> Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! <sup>14</sup> Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.” <sup>15</sup> Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.” And the LORD put a

mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. <sup>16</sup> Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Cain can't handle the consequences. He has lost his occupation, his purpose. Although God punishes Cain, God also vows to protect Cain, saying whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance. And God puts a visible mark on Cain.

**The Land of Nod (Wandering)** East of Eden. The Hebrew etymology suggests a “homeless” or “aimless” place.

#### Genesis 4:17–22 (NRSV)

<sup>17</sup> Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch. <sup>18</sup> To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech. <sup>19</sup> Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. <sup>20</sup> Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock. <sup>21</sup> His brother's name was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe. <sup>22</sup> Zillah bore Tubal-cain, who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.

**Reality Check:** If Adam and Eve are the first humans, and Cain and Abel are their first children, where did Cain's wife come from? Hmm...

And if Cain and his wife gave birth to Enoch, and they are the only people around, why is there need to build a city? Wouldn't a home be enough?

The answer to these questions we need to move beyond the literalistic view of the bible. The assumption among the biblical writers is that Adam and Eve aren't the only people on earth.

**ENOCH** **הֶנֶךְ** – The first son of Cain. See Genesis 5:18-24 for more information on Enoch. He lived 365 years, walked with God, and God took him. The latter reference has often been interpreted as meaning that Enoch was taken into God's realm without experiencing death. For this reason, he became viewed as one who might be able to disclose secrets of the divine realm. In the Hellenistic age (300 BCE–300 CE) a corpus of apocalyptic writings was attributed to Enoch (1 Enoch, 2 Enoch; cf. Jude 1:14, which alludes to 1 Enoch 1:9). Enoch is also referred to in the New Testament, as an ancestor of Jesus (Luke 3:37) and as a model of faith (Heb. 11:5; cf. Sir. 44:16; 49:14).

**LAMECH** **לִמְךְ** – A descendant of Cain and Enoch who took two wives. Notice the professions of Lamech's children (two from Adah and one from Zillah): Jabal, a nomadic herdsman; Jubal, a musician; and Tubal-cain, a tool maker.

#### Genesis 4:23–24 (NRSV)

<sup>23</sup> Lamech said to his wives: “Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. <sup>24</sup> If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.”

**The Song of Lamech** is composed of three couplets.

In the first Lamech exhorts his wives to attend to his words;

in the second he vaunts his prowess in having slain a man/boy for merely wounding/bruising him; and

in the third he boasts: “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.”

Lamech thus expresses disdain for the law of retaliation, according to which a wound may be avenged with a wound or a bruise with a bruise, but nothing more (Exod. 21:25). He boasts that he has instead exacted the penalty of death for minor hurt done to him.

#### Seven

Seven is a number with symbolic meaning in the Bible. Seven probably represented completeness and perfection, as seen in the seven days of creation and the corresponding seven-day week, climaxing with the sabbath (Gen. 1:1–2:4). Even the land was to have a sabbath, lying fallow in the seventh year (Lev. 25:2–7). In Pharaoh's dream, there were seven good years followed by seven years of famine (Gen. 41:1–36). Jacob worked seven years for Rachel; then, when

he was given Leah instead, he worked an additional seven (Gen. 29:15–30). The finest-quality silver was described as having been refined seven times (Ps. 12:6).

A similar use of the number seven can be seen in the NT. There are seven churches mentioned in Rev. 2–3 and seven deacons in Acts 6:1–6. To Peter’s question concerning forgiveness, Jesus responds that he is to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven (Matt. 18:21–22, likely reversing Lamech’s taunt of vengeance uttered in Gen. 4:23–24).

Multiples of seven were also important. After forty-nine years came a jubilee year, when all Jewish bond servants were released and land that had been sold reverted to its former owner (Lev. 25:8–55). Exodus speaks of seventy elders (24:1, 9), and Jesus appointed seventy disciples to go before him, wherever he intended to go (Luke 10:1–17). Seventy years was to be the length of the exile according to some sources (Jer. 25:12; 29:10; Dan. 9:2). A period of seventy weeks of years was to culminate in the coming of the messianic kingdom (Dan. 9:24).

#### Genesis 4:25–26 (NRSV)

<sup>25</sup> Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.” <sup>26</sup> To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD.

**SETH שֵׁט** – Meaning to “set, stand, place, cause to happen”. The name Seth sounds like the Hebrew verb for “appoint,” “give” which Eve mentions in the quote above. Third son of Adam, born when Adam was 130 years old (Genesis 5:3–8). At 105 years of age, Seth sired Enosh, and subsequently lived to the age of 930. Eve explained the name of her son as the divine “establishing” of a replacement for the murdered Abel (Genesis 4:25). Seth establishes the line of righteous prediluvian people culminating with Noah in Genesis 5 and continuing to Jesus according to the New Testament (Luke 3:38).

#### Why is Cain’s story so important? Who is a descendant of Cain and how did this descendant learn about God?

It’s from this name that we get the group of people called the Kenites (Cainite, or community/clan of Cain), a pastoral community south and east of Israel between Judah and Edom north of the Gulf of Aqaba, who appear throughout the Old Testament. We’ll see them in Genesis 15:19; Exodus 2:16–22; 18:7–12; Numbers 10:29–32; 24:21–22; Joshua 15:22; 1 Samuel 15:6; 30:26–30; Judges 1:16; 4:11.

Moses’ father-in-law, who bears three names in the Bible—Jethro, Hobab, and Reuel—was referred to as both a Midianite and a Kenite priest and in Exodus 2:16–22 we learn that Moses was welcomed into the family of “the priest of Midian”. It’s in this land, the land of the Kenites, that Moses receives his call to lead God’s people out of bondage. Deuteronomy 33:2 says, “Yahweh came from Sinai, and he dawned upon them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran.” All three locations—Sinai, Seir, and Mount Paran—are in Kenite land. It is supposed that Moses learned about Yahweh from his father-in-law, Jethro. Remember, Cain is given the “mark of Yahweh.”

It is also interesting that the tribe of the Kenites and the tribe of the Levites we both considered to be landless because of murder; the Kenites because of Cain (Genesis 4:12) and the Levites because of Levi’s murder of Shechem (Genesis 34:25–31; 49:5–7; Leviticus 25:34; Deuteronomy 18:1).

**Not Canaan** – Cain and the Kenites are not to be confused with Canaan (the son of Ham and the grandson of Noah who we will see in Genesis 9:18–27) and the Canaanites. In Genesis, Noah becomes drunk, lies uncovered in a tent, and his son Ham sees him naked. In retribution for this impropriety, Noah curses Ham’s son Canaan. Canaan is to be a slave. (See Judges 1:28). In Genesis 12:6, Abram passes through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh, and Canaanites were in the land. The land of the Canaanites included parts of Israel and Lebanon. Genesis 10:19 describes the boundaries of the land of the Canaanites. In Deuteronomy 20:16–18, they are mentioned as part of the people that need to be eradicated from the land so that they wouldn’t teach the Israelites to do all the abhorrent things they do for their gods.

In Matthew 15:21–28 (Mark 7:24–30) Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman who refers to him as the “Son of David” and begs him to heal her daughter. Jesus praises the woman for her great faith and her daughter is healed.

#### SOURCES:

The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (Revised and Updated), ed. Mark Allan Powell (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).