

Rejecting Cain's Offering but Accepting Abel's: Exegetical and Theological Study on Genesis 4:3-5

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Abstract

Received: 5 August 2022
Revised: 11 August 2022
Accepted: 20 August 2022

Two brothers have two different vocations: "Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground" (Gen. 4:2, NKJV). Each of them naturally presented offerings to the true God from that which they had to offer. The issue is that, God *looked* with favor on Abel's *minhah* but not on Cain's. Scholars have given their interpretations to investigate the rationale of God's disapproval of Cain's offering. Most interpretations have suggested that God's approval and disapproval are due to the nature of offering. This presupposition is not supported by the literal context of the story. Through literary study, exegetical, and theological investigations of the text, this study conclude that God distinguishes the offering and the motive of the offerer. That is, there is a causal connection between the motive and the offering of human beings. Cain's motive was explicated through his resentment and annihilation of his brother, Abel. The implication is obvious; the offering stands as a visible representation of the human motive. Hence, the quality of Abel and Cain's offerings were derived from their motives. This capitalizes the basis of God's approval and disapproval of the offering. To sum, the rationale of God's assessment to the offering of Cain and Abel is based on the motive and character of the offerer

Keywords: *Offering; approval; disapproval; motive; faith*

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How to Cite: Abin, B. (2022). Rejecting Cain's Offering but Accepting Abel's: Exegetical and Theological Study on Genesis 4:3-5. *International Journal of Education, Information Technology, and Others*, 5(4), 191-202. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7016009>

INTRODUCTION

Genesis 4:1-5a informs the first explicit practice of worship after the fall. This story was disrupted by Cain's misbehavior and his annihilation of his brother, Abel (Gen. 4:5b-10) due to God's disapproval of his worship/ offering (4:4, 5a). This story ended with the punishment of Cain (Gen. 4:11-16). The literal context indicates that Abel was replaced by Seth, who would become the ancestor of Enosh (4:26). Through Seth and Enosh, the name of God in worship was invoked (4:26). P. B. Overland contended that after the fall, the fellowship of man with God needed to be renewed (P. B. Overland, 2003). As far as worship is concerned, the story in Gen. 4: 1-5 falls into four major scenes. The first scene is, the story of the miraculous birth of the two sons of Adam (vv. 1, 2a). The second, scene describes the two different vocations of Abel and Cain, as "a keeper of flocks" (v. 2a) and "a tiller of the ground" (v. 2b), respectively. The third, scene shows how the two brothers worshiped God through their "offerings" (*minhah*). It can be seen that Cain presents "the fruit of the ground" (v. 3b) and Abel presents the "firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions" (v. 4a)." The last scene is God's assessment of their

worship. Here, the “LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering, but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard” (vv. 4b, 5).

The dialogue between God and Cain in vv. 5-15 was preceded by the negative response of Cain due to God’s disapproval of his offering (v. 5a). The issue of the text is that, God disapproved Cain’s offering and it is unspecified in the text; thus, scholars has disputed on this issue. Some scholars contended that the story reflects a period in Israel’s religion when the blood offering was preferred over the grain (Mathews, 2001). Other scholars suggest that the absence of a rationale for God’s actions shows that divine election is a mystery; therefore, it must be viewed as capricious (from human perspective), as “fated by God to be so.” (Westermann, 1985) These two arguments are conjectures and are not supported by the literal context. This study aims to answer the following questions: (a) What does the text and its literal context say about the offerings and the presenters? (b) Does God’s approval or disapproval depend on the offerings or on the character of human being? The answer to these questions will contribute to the modern church regarding the theology of offering. To answer these questions, this paper is presented in an exegetical-theological study of the indicated text. The paper is divided into seven sections: The introduction of the paper, the study of the text and its structure, the literal context of the text, the quick view on scholars’ interpretation, the proposed interpretation, the theological implication, and the summary and conclusion.

Text and Structure

Genesis 4:3-5 provides three major information. First, the text provides Abel and Cain’s vocations: Abel is “a keeper of flocks” and Cain is “a tiller of the ground” (v. 2b). Second, the worship of Abel and Cain is visualized through their offering *minhah* (vv. 3, 4a). Third, God gives His assessment of Abel and Cain’s worship and offerings (vv. 4b-5). The following chiastic structure indicates the focal point of the above mentioned information.

Table 1. *Chiastic Structure*

Vocation	A	Abel was <i>a keeper of flocks</i> (4:2b) <i>but</i> Cain was <i>a tiller of the ground</i> (4:3a)
Offering		B1
Worship		Cain brought an <i>offering</i> of the fruit of the ground (4:3b)
Offering		B2
		C Abel and Cain come <i>to</i> worship the LORD (4:3c)
		Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock (4:4a)
	A1	Abel and his <i>offering</i> : The LORD had regard (4:4b) <i>but</i> Cain and his <i>offering</i> : The LORD had no regard (4:5a).
Assessment		

As far as thematic focus is concerned, the discourse of vv. 2b, 3a (A) is regarding the sibling's different vocations: Abel, as "a keeper of flocks" (v. 2b) and Cain, as "a tiller of the ground" (v. 3a). It has a connection with God's assessment of the offering of Abel and Cain (A1). The text stated that the Lord had regarded "Abel and his offering" (v. 4b) but He disregarded Cain's (v. 5a). The intriguing idea of this connection is that the presenters and offerings stand as the two different objects of God's assessment (vv. 4b, 5a) instead of the sole object, "offering" (vv. 2b, 3a). This fact is signified by the presence of the direct object marker (אֶל) for two nouns in Hebrew construction, namely אֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ וְאֶל-הֶבְרֵל and אֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ וְאֶל-קִיּוֹן. In sections B1 and B2, the "offering" (מִנְחָה) stands as the object of the sentence while Cain and Abel stand as the subject of the verb בָּרָא, "bring." In section A1, both the offerings and presenters stand as the object of God's assessment. Theologically, the chiasmic structure implies that, the offering is considered as a visible representation of the worshipers' faith. In this case, both Abel and Cain come to worship God with their "offering" (C).

Aside from God's assessment, the narrator indicates syntactical correspondence of two worshipers in section A1 (vv. 4b, 5a) which is connected with their prior act of worship (C): "Abel and his offering" (v. 4b) and "Cain and his offerings" (v. 5a). The narrator fashioned two statements in juxtaposition, suggesting that the focal issue of God's assessment was clearly not based on the offerings per se but on the whole aspect of the worshipers, which was mainly their moral integrity. In connection with God's rejection of "Cain and his offerings," the narrator in v. 5b evinced the negative response of Cain: "Cain was very (מְאֹד) angry." The causal connection of the action of the two subjects (vv. 5a, 5b) is obvious. God's disapproval of "Cain and his offerings" (v. 4b) triggers Cain's anger to God. Cain's response at this point contradicts the initial information about him (vv. 1, 2). The reason of God's rejection is inscrutable since the rationale of His action is absent in the text. However, the negative response of Cain, which is permeated in his dialogue with God in vv. 6, 7, stands as the initial indication of God's reason for His rejection of Cain's offering.

The Literal Context

Genesis 2:8 to 3:24 is a story about the life of Adam and Eve inside the garden. Genesis 4:1-26 is the story of Cain and Abel outside the garden. The rationale why Adam and his descendants existed outside the garden in Gen. 4 is denoted in the story of the fall of man in Gen. 3. The linkage of the story in these two chapters is explicitly indicated in the prologue of Gen. 4, which states, "She [Eve] conceived and bore Cain....Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel" (4:1, 2). By contrast, in the story of the fall of man, God said to the woman, "In pain you shall bring forth children" (3:16). God's intervention after the fall is implied through the words of Eve, "I have acquired a man from the Lord" (3:1b). This expression implies a new life and prosperity for Adam and Eve, despite being cursed by God (3:16-19, 23). This optimism, however, was reversed turned by the depiction of enmity and rivalry between Cain and Abel (4:3-16). Thus, as long as the thematic linkage is concerned, most commentators agree that the story in Gen 4:3-16 thematically and verbally stands as the expansion of the fall account and punishment of Gen 3:1-24. (Gordon J. Wenham , 1998) For instance, God's

punishment to Adam in Gen 3:17-19 is recounted through Cain's punishment in Gen 4:11-12.

Genesis 4:3-5 is the first recorded offering in the Bible. Cain "brought an offering of the fruit" (v. 3a) and Abel "brought of the firstborn of his flock" (v. 4a). In the OT theology, an offering is mostly juxtaposed with worship. Most probably, Adam and his family performed their regular worship through offerings even before the first recorded offering in Gen 4:3-4. According to Mignon R. Jacob and Junker, the nominal phrase *אַחַר מִיָּמַיִם* ("after sometimes") followed by the verb *בָּא* ("come") in *hiphil-imperfect* form suggests that giving offering is customary to Cain and Abel. (Herion, 1995) Moreover, they argue that the introductory phrase *אַחַר מִיָּמַיִם* in the OT is mostly followed by a precise period of time (cf. Gen 8:6; Exod 12:41). (Herion, 1995)

God's rejection of Cain's offering (4:5a) is the rationale of his negative response to God, "Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell" (4:5b). (Huffman, 1985) This expression underscores the consequences of God's punishment in Gen 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman." It means that the core idea in the dialogue between God and Cain in Gen 4:6-12 stands as the explication of *enmity* in the social level of God's people, as indicated in the following phrases: "sin lies at the door" (v. 7), and "Cain killed him" (v. 8). The enmity of Cain and the assassination of Abel stands as the foreshadow of the controversy between the faithful and the unfaithful people in the biblical prophecy. Theologically, the dialogue between God and Cain in Gen 4:6-12 indicates how "the relationship between Cain and brother Abel impacts the relationship Cain has with God." (Wolde, 1991) Contextually, the story of God's rejection of Cain's offering and His acceptance of Abel's offering (vv. 4-5) is sandwiched between the two recounting of the fall of man and his/her unfaithfulness to God (3:1-24; 4:6-16).

The three main stories of Gen 4 are indicated as follows. The first story opens with a phrase, "Adam knew Eve his wife" (v. 1a). It is followed by the story of Cain and Abel (vv. 1-16). Similarly, the second story opens with same phrase, "Cain know his wife" (v. 17) and it is followed by the information of the descendants of Cain (vv. 17-24). The third story opens with the same phrase, "Adam knew his wife" (v. 25) and it is followed by the story of Seth's family (v. 26). These three parallel formulas, according to Gordon J. Wenham, signify the genealogy of the Cainites (vv. 17-24) and it stands as the continuation of the story in Gen 4:1-16. The story of Adam's descendants in this section opens with three intriguing aspects: The birth of Adam's two sons, the vocations of Cain and Abel, and God's assessment of their worship/ offerings (vv. 1-5). In the said section, the rejection of Cain's offering and the acceptance of Abel's offering laid the central issue.

The Interpretation of Scholars

God's disapproval of Cain's offering has been discussed by scholars. Most of their arguments focus on the nature of the offering in connection with the vocation. Some scholars such as G. A. Anderson and G. A. Herion (1992), argued that since Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd, the point of the story is that God favors shepherds over farmers. Others suggest that God in general prefers animal offerings over vegetable offerings (Klauck, 1992). These two arguments are grounded on the fact that God has cursed the ground since the fall. As indicated by

F. Spina and G. A. Herion (nd), the implication of this interpretation is that the offerings from the ground are rejected. This argument is supported by the importance of blood in the Israelites' sacrificial system (Lev. 17:11) by God's slaughtering of animals for their skins in Gen 3:21 as an example to those would worship Him (einfeld, 1983).

There are three points of rejection to the above mentioned arguments. First, the text indicates that God does not give instruction to Cain and Abel concerning offerings, this point strengthens the above mentioned presupposition. (Lewis, 1994). The sacrificial instruction was given later in the Torah (Lev. 1-7). In the book of Leviticus the *minha* consisting of grains harvested from the ground is prescribed, not proscribed. Thus, there is no ground to argue that God prefers animal offerings to vegetable offerings.

Second, the term "offering" is used by the author; it is a Hebrew word מִנְחָה deriving from stem מָנַח which means "to give." (Anderson, 1987) Instead of using other Hebrew words, the term "offering" is selected by the author as the major kinds of sacrificial category in the Tabernacle, such as *ola* ("burn offering"), *hattat* ("sin offering") or *asam* ("guilt offering"). (Averbeck, 2003) The word *minha* in the book of Leviticus, according to P. B. Overland, is "restricted to grain offerings, absent of blood." (Overland, *Abel*, nd) On the basis of that definition, *minha* was designed specifically to obtain favor, not expiation. This is the reason for not including the animal sacrifice. Thus, the *minha* of Cain in Gen. 4:3 is not referring to blood offerings as the basis of God's approval.

Third, God's cursing of Cain away from the ground (4:11) was not a punishment for offering the produce of the ground, instead, it was a punishment for killing his brother so that his blood cried out to the Lord "from the ground" (4:10). In addition, Lev. 2 and the other passages in the Pentateuch clearly show that grain and vegetable offerings could please the Lord as much as animal offerings, especially if they were first fruits of the harvest (Lev 23:9-14; Num 15:17-21; Deut 26: 1-11) (Averbeck, 1997).

Considering the other angle of interpretation, E. van Wolde, J. Krasovec and J. D. Heck (1991), are right when they discern the reason of God's disapproval from Cain's unbridled anger. Nevertheless, their arguments are not convincing enough to explicate the pivotal aspect of Cain's integrity from the literal context. In the line with that presupposition, other Bible commentators propose more pessimistic nuance concerning the reason for God's rejection of Cain's offering. For instance, Claus Westermann (1984), argued that God's response to Cain's offering is inscrutable and immutable. For Westermann, man is not able to comprehend the reason for God's rejection of Cain's offering. To affirm that point, he specifically indicates that "divine preference is simply inexplicable" (rueggemann, 1982) This argument is digressive to the biblical theological tenor, since most of the premises and presuppositions did not built on the convincing ground.

The Proposed Interpretation

The proposed interpretation is based on the text's construction and grammatical form. Specifically, the text that connected to the worship through

offering (vv. 3b-4a), God’s assessment to the offering (vv. 4b-5a), and the response of Cain to God’s assessment (vv. 5-7).

Worship Through Offering (Verses 3b, 4a)

The story stated that both Cain and Abel brought their offerings to the Lord: “Cain brought an offering to the Lord” (v. 3b) and “Abel brought of the first born” (v. 4a). Even though the prepositional phrase לַיהוָה (“to the Lord”) and the phrase מִנְחָה (“offering”) are absent in the second statement, it can be seen in v. 4b and v. 5a that God calls their presentation with the same term מִנְחָה. The verb form of these two statements (vv. 3b, 4a) occurs in *hiphil* form.(Christo, et all, 2003) This formation generally indicates that the subject of the verb causes the object to participate in the event denoted by the verbal root (Waltke, and. O’Connor, 1990). Since the object of the verbs is a noun (מִנְחָה) and not a person, the *hiphil* form of two verbs (vv. 3b, 4a) designates the entry into a states or continuation in the state.(Arnold and Choi , nd) That is, the offerings presented by Abel and Cain signify their state of beliefs or character.

However, there is a difference between the two offerings in terms of the verb form. The statement for Cain’s offering occurs in *hiphil imperfect* form (וַיָּבֵא וְאָבֶל) while the statement for Abel’s offering occurs in *hiphil perfect* form (וְהִקְדִּיל הֶבְיִיא). The *hiphil perfect* verb form may semantically refers to a completed action of Abel’s offering, either in the past, present, or future. Since the verb in v. 4b is a fientive verb, it denotes Abel’s state of mind or character as a presenter. Theologically, it emphasizes the faithfulness of the presenters. In contrast, the *hiphil imperfect* verb form generally refers to the process of accomplishment which is just taking place. In the case of Cain, this grammatical form more precisely denotes the customary or regularity of action. That is, it refers to the iterative offering presentation of Cain in the past (Bruce K. Waltke, and M. O’Connor, nd). In other words, the grammatical form of vv. 3b and 4a denotes that the presenting of offering to God has become a customary to Cain and Abel. However, Cain’s action in presenting offering to God focuses on the repetition of action (quantitative focus), while Abel’s presentation focuses on his state of faith to God (qualitative focus). Table 2 indicates the offerings of Abel and Cain which relate to their respective vocations.

Table 2. Vocation and Offering

Presenter	Vocation	Type of offering	Name of offering
Abel	רֹעֵה צֹאן (a keeper of flocks)	מִבְּכֹרוֹת צֹאנוֹ (firstlings of his flock)	מִנְחָה <i>Minhah</i>
Cain	עֹבֵד אֲדָמָה (a tiller of the ground)	מִפְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה (fruit of the ground)	מִנְחָה <i>Minhah</i>

As indicated in Table 2, the vocations of Abel and Cain correspond with their types of offerings. The issue is that although the types of offering are different, the name of offering is described with the same term in Hebrew מִנְחָה (read: *minhah*). (Waltke, 1986) In other words, *minhah* refers to either the “firstborn of animal” or the “first fruit of the ground.” (Tsevat, nd) The basic idea of this word in Hebrew appears to be gift, tribute, or offering (Tsevat, nd). It can be a gift or sacrifice to God or to people. G. A. Anderson denotes that this word, which occurs 211 times

in the OT, has four basic meanings in the OT. (Anderson, 1987) The first two meanings are found in the religious contexts and the last two meanings occur in the non-cultic (secular) context. The first meaning refers to the general term for offering, whether from *crops* or *flocks* (e.g., the offerings of Cain and Abel in Gen. 4:3-5). This term in vv. 4-5 is used in the wider sense to describe Abel's offering of animals (Wenham, 1998). The second meaning of this term is used as a specialized term for *grain offering* (Lev 2:8) in contrast to *animal sacrifice* (e.g., Lev 2). This narrower sense aptly suits Cain's offering. The third meaning refers to a general term for a gift or present between people (Gen. 32:20-22; cf. 43:26). Fourth meaning is used in a specialized sense, for a tribute to a superior or to a foreign king in political contexts (Judg 3:15-18; cf. 2 Chr 17:11). (Averbeck, 1997)

Cain presents his offering מִפְרִי ("from first fruit," *singular form*) but Abel presents his offering מִבְּכֹרוֹת ("from first born," *plural form*). In Mosaic legislation, *minhah* is frequently offered for sin offering, burn offering, guilt offering, or peace offerings. (Averbeck, 2003) In religious context (the first two meanings), the term can refer to the offering of incense (Num.16:15), a combination of meat and bread offering (Judg 6:18), or meat offering in particular (1 Sam 2:17). It also refers to offerings in general, without any indication of the materials offered (Ps 96:8; Zeph 3:10; cf. 1 Sam 26:19). Evidently, this relates to the pleasing smell caused by the burning of an offering upon an altar currying the favor of the Lord (see Gen 8:21; Lev 26:31). (Averbeck, nd)

God's Assessment (Verses 4b, 5a)

God's approval of Abel's offerings was formulated in a positive statement (v. 4b) while His approval of Cain's offering was formulated in a negative statement (v. 5a). The striking idea of God's assessment in these two statements laid at the object of God's action, namely אֶל-הֶבְרֵל וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ "to Abel and to his offering" (v. 4b) and וְאֶל-קַיִן וְאֶל-מִנְחָתוֹ, "to Cain and to his offering" (v. 5a). The two prepositional phrases in these two statements recount a basic theological presupposition of offering in the Scripture. Offerings stand as the representation of human beings. In this case, Cain and Abel presented their offerings as the representation of their life as "a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God" (Rom 12:1). The text construction implies that God's disapproval of Cain's offering is hinged on the thought, motives, and attitudes of Cain as the presenter. Similarly, God's approval of Abel's offering hinged on the internal aspect of his faith and character.

God's approval and disapproval of the offering of the two main characters in vv. 4b and 5a precede the reaction of Cain. The text states, "Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell" (v. 5b). God's assessment and Cain's response stand in juxtaposition and have a causal connection: "Cain was very angry" (v. 5b) because "God did not respect Cain and his offering" (v. 5a). The Hebrew verb רָשַׁע from רָשָׁע, parallel which is with ἐπειδὴ in LXX, simply means "to respect" or "to regard." In the context of offerings in the worship service, God stand as the subject of the verb, which simply means to "look with favour" (cf. Isa 17:7) or "look closely into" (Exod 5:9). More specifically, Theodotian translated רָשַׁע as ἐπύαρισε which is connected with the meaning "he burnt." (Gordon, 1998) This translation explains how Cain and Abel recognized God's approval through his fire that burnt up Abel's

offering but not Cain's. (Gordon, 1998) Unfortunately, this argument has no strong basis to be accepted since the issue in the discourse focuses on God's disapproval.

As the literary context is concerned, Cain's response in v. 5b is the prologue of the dialogue between Him and God in vv. 6-16. Since God stands as the Assessor of the offering, most probably, the negative response of Cain was addressed directly to God. Cain's response denotes two different focuses, which is seen in his discourse to God. While Cain focused on the offering that offers, God focused on his heart. In other words, Cain's negative response is the materialization of his heart and motive (faith). His annihilation of his brother, Abel, in v. 8 is another proof of what is in his heart. (Anderson, 1987)

The Response of Cain (Verses 5b-7)

To underscore the reason of God's rejection of Cain's *minhah*, J. P. Lewis indicates that the early interpreters (e.g., Josephus, Irenaeus, and Augustine) attributed the success of Abel to his noble character. (Lewis, 1994) These Hebrew writers assumed that God's approval of Abel's *minhah* was based on Abel's character as the offerer instead of his offering. In affirmation to that presupposition, W. Lane convincingly states: "The superior quality of Abel's offering is derived from the integrity of his heart rather than from the nature of the offering itself." (Lane, 1991) This interpretation is slightly different from the interpretation of the later rabbinic midrashim that insists that Cain was mistaken for two aspects. First, he offered what was left over after a meal. Second, he offered grain from the ground which was already cursed by God. (Ginzberg, 1998) To accommodate these two perspectives, S. McKnight indicates that the interpretations of the Hebrew writers and the rabbinic midrashim suggest that the ritual or offering and the intent of the worshiper are to be distinguished. That is, the character of the worshiper is what God considers acceptable. (McKnight, 2003)

In a similar sound to the above mentioned argument, the later writers (e.g., U. Cassuto, E. A. Speiser, and Bruce K. Waltke) view God's rejection of Cain's offering from a different stand-point. They argued that Cain had presented a higher quality of offering to God, particularly the "first born" or "first portions. (Cassuto, 1998) This argument suggests that there is no problem with the nature of the offering presented by Cain and Abel. Thus, if God approves Abel's *minhah* due to his character of integrity, His disapproval of Cain's *minhah* should be also based on His assessment of Cain's heart (character). In the discourse, two brothers are specified by their names: "Abel and his offering" (v. 4, emphasis mine) and "Cain and his offering" (v. 5, emphasis mine). The juxtaposition of the offerer and offering in this construction suggests that the character of human being must go beyond the offering (Heck, nd. The text indicates that the dialogue between God and Cain (vv. 6-16) is preceded by the demonstration of Cain's distress (4:5-6). Thus, God's rejection and punishment are definitely derived from His internal assessment of Cain's character.

The narration implicitly indicates the causality between Cain's distress (4: 5-6) and behavior (4:6-7). That is, Cain's distress is caused by God's rejection of his behavior. To this point, McKnight indicates three pragmatic and theological issues on Cain's behavior. First, Cain has not done right to his offering. Second, Cain has succumbed to the lure of temptation. Lastly, Cain lost the opportunity to

master his “urge” to sin (McKnight, nd). These three points picture Cain’s heart and motive in the worship. In ancient Hebrew worship, the person’s heart, motive, and disposition are fundamental requirements. The apostle Paul states, “By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain” (Heb 11:4). In like manner, John states, “Not as Cain *who* was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother’s righteous” (1 John 3:12). These two pericopes indicate that Abel offers his *minhah* with faith, while Cain lacks faith in presenting his *minhah*. This suggests that “Cain’s heart is full of anger” (Gen 4:5-6) and “he is not concerned with God’s glory.” (McKnight, nd). In other words, Cain’s offering reflects his heart and so does Abel’s. Thus, God’s approval of Abel’s offering is solely because of his faith and supplication.

The question of God in v. 6 was formulated in a double interrogative pronoun: לָמָּהּ ”why.” This formula is to probe Cain’s motive if he had done what was right. (Herion, nd) In the following discourse (v. 7), God’s interrogation was formulated in a rhetorical question to delve the pragmatic aspect of Cain’s character, whether he is “doing good” (לֹא תַיִב) or “not doing good” (לֵא תַיִב). In this case, if Cain had done what was right, his countenance was supposed to be “*lift up*” [נשא] (v. 6a). (Wenham, 1987) However, Cain failed since God indicated how his “countenance [is] *fallen*” [נפל] (v. 6b). The implication is obvious: “doing good” or “not doing good” is the reflection of human character. In the case of Cain, the empirical indicator of his faith and character was expressed visibly through his countenance: “fallen” (נפל). On the other hand, the countenance “*lift up*” [נשא] (v. 6a) is an allusion to the divine acceptance of Abel and his offering in v. 4b. Reflecting on this passage, McKnight draws an important theological implication: “the personification of sin and how it develops in order to master the human, as well as the insight into human nature, reminds the reader of the serpent and sin of the fall (Gen 3:1, 4-6).” (McKnight, nd) He indicates that the “urge” indicated in Gen 4:7 is similar to the woman’s urge for Adam in Gen 3:16. (McKnight, nd)

Theological Implication

The theological implication of Cain’s story is obvious. God’s assessment completely depends on the character and spiritual state of human being. In the broader context, this theological presupposition is parallel with Samuel’s admonitions to King Saul. Samuel begins his discourse with a rhetorical question in a poetic form, as he states, “Has the LORD *as great* delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD?” He continues with a declarative statement, “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1Sam 15:22, NKJV).” This statement suggests that there is causality between the offerings and the presenters. God’s rejection of Saul as a king is not because of his offerings but because of his disobedience to God’s words. Hence, obedience to God’s words cannot be substituted by the offering, and vice versa. Offerings in an idealistic sense should be preceded by faithfulness of the offerer in order to be accepted by God. Thus, the offering of human beings stands as the empirical proof of human faith. The idea of Ellen G. White on this point is more comprehensive. She contended that God’s approval and disapproval of the worship of human beings are based on the “heart, motives, and the entire man.” (White, 2002)

The author of Gen 4 did not indicate the moral decadence of Cain in the previous scene (see Gen. 4:1-3). His moral imperfection came up in the worship context when God rejected his offerings and worship. In his hypothetical argument, John H. Sailhammer argues, “Worship that pleases God is that which springs from a *pure* heart.” (Sailhammer, 1992) Moreover, he states, that although the text does not indicate the previous text the empiric facts of his sins, “we [still] see the heart that lay behind the unaccepted offering.” (Sailhammer, 1992). Sailhammer is right in the sense that in the following text (vv. 4-8), the narrator described Cain’s character instead of discovering what was wrong with his offering. Cain has a two twofold response which was based on his character. First, Cain was very angry to God (4:4b). Second, Cain was against Abel and he killed him (4:8). To this point, Bruce K. Waltke states that instead of repenting for his failure to please God, he became angry with God and with his brother, Abel. (Waltke and Charles Yu, 2007) Even though the reason of God’s rejection of Cain’s offering is subtle in the text, his response manifests his character. In the broader context, this argument has a thematic idea with Jesus’s statement, “By their fruits you will know them” (cf. Jer. 7:5-7).

God’s assessment of the offering of Cain and Abel is similar to Jesus’s assessment of the offering of the poor widow in Mark 12:41-44. Rich people present their offering “into the treasury” (v. 41) with their abundance, but poor widow present only “two mites” (v. 42). Jesus said to His disciples, “This poor widow has put in more than all” (v. 43b). God makes the ground that “she offers out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood” (Mark 12:43-44). Here, Jesus emphasizes the faith and the motive of the presenters instead of focusing on their offerings. This premise is capitalized by the author of Hebrew, “By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous” (Heb. 11:4).

Summary and Conclusion

The intrafamilial strife in Gen. 4 is preceded by God’s approval and disapproval of the offerings of Cain and Abel. The issue on God’s disapproval of Cain’s offering and His approval of Abel’s is not based on their respective vocations as the presenters, since the literal context of the story does not indicate that God’s approval is based on the vocation and the nature of offerings (“first born” and “fat portions”), as most scholars has contended. The literal context of the story indicates the rationale of God’s disapproval of the offerings of Cain and this is indicated in these three points: (a) There is a causality between the offerer and the offerings, and God is able to distinguish the offering and the motives of Cain and Abel as the offerers. (b) The character and motive of Cain are explicated visibly through his resentment and envy to Abel. (c) Cain’s impiety accounts for his annihilation of Abel and evidently it is against the sovereignty of God. The causality between the offerer and the offering is based on the presupposition that the offering is a visible representation of the faith and integrity of the offerer. The quality of Abel’s offering is derived from his internal integrity and faithfulness. Similarly, the quality of Cain’s offerings is derived from his motives. This presupposition capitalizes the biblical theological tenor of the offering.

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