

Genesis 4:8: Why did Cain Murder His Brother?

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Abstract

The literature on Genesis 4:1–16 advances several reasons why Cain murdered Abel. The majority of commentators believe that Cain killed him because of anger, jealousy or envy. Some suggest that the murder is to be explained by Cain's depression. Those who believe that Cain was jealous of Abel often confuse jealousy with envy. Then there are those who oppose the idea that Cain killed Abel out of envy, and suggest that God was capricious to reject Cain's offering. The aim of this paper is to make sense of these divergent views. First, it establishes with whom Cain was angry and why he got depressed. The thesis is that Cain got angry at God and not Abel, and became depressed because he realised that he could not obtain what he desired (God's favour) on his own terms. It then clarifies the conceptual connection between envy, covetousness and jealousy, and argues that Cain murdered Abel because he envied, resented and hated him for his character and spiritual qualities, and because he lost honour and esteem. It concludes, in contrast to critics, that God was not capricious when he rejected Cain and his offering.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

The Christian scriptures are an inexhaustible resource for the study of human feelings. That is hardly surprising, given the role that the passions and affections (emotions) play in our everyday relationships, not only interpersonally, but also our daily living in relation to our Maker. Scripture reveals that people are subject to joy and depression, to anger and fear, to sadness and grief. That is because we are self-conscious and goal-seeking creatures; we can recognise what frustrates our desires and purposes, and we can reflect on them and the loss of what we value. Because we are by nature social creatures, we are given to love, affection and loyalty, hence also subject to anger, envy, hate, hostility, jealousy, resentment, sorrow, guilt, shame, remorse and regret. Thus, and most importantly, in displaying our feelings, we reveal ourselves – what kind of person we are, what we care about, how much we care, and what reasons move us to action.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that Cain's murder of Abel has been an object of scholarly attention since antiquity. When Cain and Abel 'were in the field', the Bible says, 'Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him' (Gen 4:8).² Why did he do that? The answers to that question present us with three problems I wish to address.

2. The Problems

The literature on Genesis 4:1–16 reflects several reasons why Cain murdered his younger brother. These range from depression (Gruber 1978:89–90) and anger (Fruchtenbaum 2008:119; Gray 2003:347; Lin 1997:78; Michael 2015:458; van Volde 1991:29; Waltke 1986:370; Webb 2008:60) to covetousness (Gray 2003:347), hate (Hughes 2004:105; Lin 1997:78; Waltke 1986:371), hostility and rage (Reis 2002:107), irritation and resentment (Burnett 2016:47, fn. 7; Hughes 2004:104; Lin 1997:78; Moberly 2009:97, 99) to jealousy (Davis 1984:577; Smit 2013:7; Webb 2008:60) and envy (Blowers 2009:22; Hagedorn and Neyrey 1998:32; van Volde 1991:29). The problem is that these commentators rarely clarify the similarities and differences between these emotional states and passions.

An even larger problem relates to what Genesis 4:1–16 does not say. Some commentators suggest that readers of the text make a mistake to turn to the New Testament to validate their understanding of the narrative. For example, John Byron (2012:334) states that the text does not declare Abel righteous; 'it is awarded to him posthumously by later interpreters'. His

2 All references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise indicated.

righteousness in Matthew 23:35 ‘is a Matthean addition’ (p. 336), and ‘As with Abel, Cain was saddled by interpreters with titles and character traits that do not appear explicitly in the Genesis 4 story’ (p. 338; cf. also Kim 2001; Lohr 2009). However, if Byron’s objection is valid, then we would be unable to understand, for example, the meaning of the bronze serpent in Numbers 21:8–9 and 2 Kings 18:4. To see why Byron’s objection is misleading; note that the bronze serpent is referred to only twice in the entire Old Testament before Jesus refers to it again in John 3:14–16 as a prophetic type of his crucifixion for the healing of our souls. Therefore, if it is a sound hermeneutical principle to allow scripture to interpret scripture, then our understanding of the reason Abel was killed does not begin and end in Genesis 4.³

3 As Waltke (1986:364) pointed out, there is nothing wrong about an approach to the text that presupposes that the narrator drops clues that demand the close attention of the reader, and that the reader may turn to the rest of scripture to determine the meaning of those clues.

The third problem I wish to deal with is the accusation that God was capricious to reject Cain’s offering. According to Angela Kim (2001:66), interpreters ‘recast the story in light of sibling rivalry and envy’, and along this way ‘deflect attention away from the more troubling problem of YHWH’s capriciousness’ (p. 66): God unfairly rejected Cain’s offering. But that is not what scripture says; God rejected *both* Cain and his offering (Gen 4:5). An additional problem for her is that ‘envy itself is not presented as the explicit motive for the murder’ in the text (p. 68), in contradistinction to how most Jewish interpreters and church fathers understood the reason for Abel’s murder.⁴

4 Blowers (2009:22) concludes his study of envy on the following note: ‘Pagan and Christian writers alike in late antiquity recognised that the invidious emotions took shape through their subject’s incipient judgments of superior or inferior status or stature in relation to a desired good (honor), moral or otherwise’.

My aim is to shed some light on these problems. I want to suggest that the emotions that are listed as explanations for the murder are all, in one way or another, interconnected. The challenge is to place them in the right perspective. For example, with whom was Cain angry, and if he got depressed, why. I hope to show that Cain got angry with God and not Abel, and became depressed because he realised that he was unable to have what he desired on his own terms. By implication, his will was frustrated. Events in the life of Jonah, Amnon (2 Sam 13:1–6) and King Ahab (1 Kgs 2:1–16) will hopefully help us to understand that. I will then clarify the conceptual connection between envy, covetousness and jealousy, and argue that Cain murdered Abel because he envied, resented and hated him for his character and spiritual qualities, and the honour and esteem he lost. Evidence from the New Testament will be used to defend the thesis. Taken together, the evidence will help us to determine whether God was capricious when he rejected Cain and his offering.

3. Cain's Rejection, Anger and Depression

Our text states the following about Cain's anger and what several authors referred to as his 'depression' (Kruger 2004:214):

So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. And Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell' (Gen. 4:3–5).

For Mayer Gruber (1978:96), 'Cain's murdering Abel is to be explained ... by reference to the etiology of depression'. Although he thinks Cain got depressed because he was 'rejected by his love-object' (p. 94), he leaves his reader totally in the dark about what rejection entails. He also seems to think that Cain was rejected because he did not offer his offering 'correctly' (p. 94, fn. 19). From a biblical perspective, to be rejected by a loved one is a devastating experience. Isaiah puts it thus: 'Like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, even like a wife of youth when she is rejected'. Here the youthful wife is rejected because of no fault of her own. However, the Bible shows that when God rejects a person, he does so for good reason. For example, King Saul was told because 'you rejected the word of the Lord' the 'Lord has rejected you' (1 Sam 15:26; cf. vv. 22–23). The author of Hebrews admonishes his readers to see to it that there is 'no immoral or godless person like Esau' among them; he 'sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it with tears' (Heb 12:15–17).

From our quoted passage above, two things seem quite obvious. The first is that Cain could not have been angry at Abel.⁵ If anger is an emotional response to an insult or offence to one's status, pride, or dignity, and is directed at an offender, then Cain's anger must have been directed at God. The context provides no clue that suggests that Abel insulted or offended Cain in any way or at any time. The second point is straightforward: the quoted passage explicitly states that God looked with favour upon *both* Abel and his offering as well as with disfavour upon *both* Cain and his offering.⁶ The New Testament writers are, therefore, not inconsistent about what they wrote about Cain and Abel. The writer of Hebrews affirms that 'Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain' (Heb 11:4), and the Apostle John affirms that Cain was without love⁷ and was 'of the evil one' (1 John 3:10–12).

5 Most commentators agree that Cain's anger was directed at Yahweh (Michael 2015:458; Waltke 1986:370). However, Sailhamer (1992:112) describes Cain's response as one of anger against both God and his brother. Smit (2013:7) seems to think that Abel's murder was Cain's claim of victory over Abel: 'This was in fact an ultimate victory, as Abel was no longer there to taunt him or seek favours ahead of him'.

6 Commentators seem divided on this point. As noted by Moberly (2009:93), the great majority of interpreters from antiquity to the present explain God's preference of Abel's offering in terms of a defect in either Cain or the quality of the sacrifice (cf. Gray 2003:347; Michael 2015:458; Webb 2008:60). Fruchtenbaum's (2008:118–119) contention is that Cain killed him out of anger when his bloodless sacrifice was not accepted by God. However, Waltke (1986:369) is adamant that Cain's offering was not rejected because it was bloodless. The deformity was 'in his character' (see also Sailhamer 1992:112). Hughes (2004:103) concurs: 'the Old Testament Scriptures honor both types of offerings ... The difference was that of heart attitude'.

7 Of all the commentators listed in this paper, Moberly (2009:88) is the only one who describes the 'Cain and Abel narrative as a negative exemplification of the double love commandment' in Matthew 22:36–39.

The foregoing information leads to the question of whether Cain had any reason to become angry and depressed. Our text states, 'Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door, and its desire is for you, but you must master it"'. And Cain told Abel his brother (Gen 4:6–8).

God's questions suggest that Cain had no reason to have felt the way he did. Otherwise the questions 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?' would have been inappropriate or out of place. It is also clear that God did not only act graciously by offering Cain an opportunity to change his situation; God informed Cain what was expected of him: he had to master his sin and do right. It implies that Cain realised, thus was fully aware, that he could not obtain God's favour on his own terms, and that, I submit, explains his depression. To see why, it would be useful to take a brief look at events in the lives of Jonah, Amnon and King Ahab.

3.1. Jonah and anger

The prophet wrote that he became 'greatly displeased... and angry' (Jonah 4:1) after he became aware that 'God relented concerning the calamity which he had declared he would bring upon' the wicked Ninevites (3:10). It suffices to make three points. First, the quotations suggest the reason he got so intensely unhappy and angry was because his knowledge of God's compassionate nature and willingness to forgive repented sinners (v. 2) was at cross-purposes with his own wishes for them. What Jonah wished for was nothing less than their death. It suggests that Jonah had absolutely no concern for the well-being and/or future of these people. Second, Jonah must have realised that God challenged his uncaring and unforgiving attitude; but instead of being willing to change it, he wished to die (v. 3). Finally, just as God did with Cain, God graciously asked Jonah (twice!) whether he had any 'good reason to be angry' (vv. 4, 9), and that after God demonstrated his own care of and goodness toward Jonah with a miracle (vv. 6–11).

3.2. Amnon, King Ahab and depression

In 2 Samuel 13, we read of King David's eldest son Amnon, who thought he was 'in love' with his beautiful half-sister Tamar (vv. 1, 4). But Amnon was a deeply frustrated man; he could not have his way with her sexually, for three reasons: (1) she was a virgin, meaning she was unmarried (v. 2); (2) because she was a virgin, she was most probably never alone, since it was the custom among the Israelites to keep young unmarried women protected; and (3)

the Law of Moses (God's will) forbids incest (cf. Lev 18:6–18; 20:11–14, 17). Scripture says that 'Amnon was so frustrated because of his sister that he made himself ill' (v. 2). That 'illness', referred to in verse 4 as depression, was something Jonadab, Amnon's shrewd friend, could observe 'morning after morning' in Amnon's demeanour and behaviour—he refused to eat. Here we have a person who is willing to starve rather than deal with his sinful desires. Because of that, he eventually raped her in order to satisfy his lust (v. 14).

The emotional reaction of Amnon has similarities with those of Cain and King Ahab. 1 Kings 21 documents that King Ahab visited Naboth only to express his desire to have Naboth's vineyard (v. 2). Because Naboth lived according to the will of God, he said to Ahab, 'The Lord forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers' (v. 3; cf. Lev 25:23; Num 36:7). Thus, unable to obtain it on his terms (vv. 1–2), he got 'sullen and vexed' (depressed), laid down on his bed, and just as Amnon, he refused to eat (v. 4). The most amazing thing is, when the king heard that Naboth was dead, he immediately got up from his 'sickbed' and took possession of what he coveted (desired).

By way of summary, it is not difficult to see why Cain got angry and then depressed. Just as Jonah, he became angry for no good reason. Jonah would rather die than accept God's will for the Ninevites. His anger demanded retaliation and retribution, because he judged them to be unworthy of God's forgiveness. Cain, as Amnon and King Ahab, became depressed when his desires to obtain God's favour were frustrated. Instead of mastering their sinful passions, these people chose to focus on the person whom they judged to be the cause of their frustration rather than God's will. Cain, instead of following God's advice and approaching God on God's terms, decided to have his own way, a way the New Testament refers to as 'the way of Cain' (Jude 11). It began with anger and depression, followed by the rejection of God's counsel and eventually, the murder of an innocent person.

I shall next distinguish between envy, covetousness and jealousy, and by so doing, lend support to commentators who believe that Cain killed his brother out of envy. The analysis will show that these passions are also interwoven with resentment, hostility and hatred, which are all forms of anger. At least, it will show that the boundary of our feelings is not always neat and clean. Some often occur together, for one quite naturally transmutes into another. Nevertheless, they are distinct feelings, involving different beliefs and what people value (Taylor 1988:233–249).

4. Envy

8 According to Cruz (1984:357), OT expressions of 'evil eye' and 'to eye' indicate 'envy and jealousy' (cf. 1 Sam 18:9; cf. Mark 7:22). In contrast, a 'good eye' signalled an honourable and benevolent person (Prov 22:9). For an in-depth study of the meaning of 'evil eye' and envy, see Elliott (1992:52–65; 1994:51–84).

9 'It is resentment at not having that to which we believe ourselves entitled. Our envy begrudges both the good fortune of beneficiaries and generosity of benefactors' (Elliott 1992:59).

10 'Passion' or 'urge' (*thymos*) can refer to an evil feeling (*pathos*), desire or pleasure. Cf. Num 5:14; Prov 6:34; 14:30; Rom 1:26; Col 3:5; 1 Thess 4:5; in Rom 7:5 and Gal 5:24 passion is associated with the 'flesh' (sinful nature). See Vine (1984:28–30).

11 'Envy and strife' in Phil 1:15 is contrasted with 'good will' (*eudokia*) (Field 1975:58).

The envious person is one who has his or her eye⁸ on another person as a target for hostile feelings and resentment.⁹ According to John Elliott (1992:55), implicit traces of the concept of the 'evil eye' can be suspected in texts that refer to envy, hatred, greed or covetousness (Gen 4:5; 30:1; 37:11; Exod 20:17; 1 Sam 2:32; 18:8–9; Ps 73:3; Prov 23:1; Jer 22:17). Hostility, as a form of anger, is the desire to spoil the better position of another, because what the other has is not available to the envier (cf. Gen 26:14–22; Luke 11:49–54). It seems that it is not so much the qualities of the possessor that are the reason for envying him or her; rather, they indicate to the envious person that he or she is lacking them. It is a deeply painful feeling, for the presence of the possessor of the desired goods is a constant reminder of the envier's inferiority and envy.

Paul Blowers (2009:22) refers to 'envy' as a 'vicious passion'.¹⁰ The book of Proverbs compares it to a cancer: 'passion [envy; NKJV] is rottenness to the bones' (Prov 14:30). Jesus teaches that its source is the sinful heart (Mark 7:21–23), and Paul mentions it as one of the manifestations of the sinful nature (Gal 5:19–21). Envy is also mentioned in word groups in which covetousness, maliciousness, strife and evil speaking is mentioned (Mark 7:21–23; Rom 1:29; Gal 5:26; 1 Tim 6:4; Titus 3:3; 1 Pet 2:1). In addition, the scriptures show that envy has certain objects, which can range from material objects to someone's status or stature and character qualities. For example, the Philistines envied Isaac for his possessions (flocks, herds and 'great household') and might (Gen 26:14, 16), the consequence of which was constant frustration for Isaac, and continuous strife and hostility (vv. 15–22); a person may be envious of wrongdoers (Ps 37:1) as well as the prosperity of the unbeliever and wicked (Ps 73:3; Prov 3:31; 23:17; 24:1); the labourers in Matthew 20 were envious of the goodness (i.e. character) of the landowner who said to them: 'Is your eye evil because I am good?' (v. 15); and some people even preach salvation in Christ 'from envy and strife' (Phil 1:15).¹¹ The desire of the latter was to undermine Paul's reputation.

Based on the information which the Bible provides, it is reasonable to infer that someone cannot feel envy without some conception of himself or herself and an awareness of his or her own limitations. It implies concern with esteem (or honour), and the degree of the intensity will depend on how undermining one's own and others' favourable view of oneself is, including what the relevant good is one is believed to be lacking.

4.1. Envy and covetousness

Covetousness¹² is not only related to envy; it is also possible that it is the root of envy. From what we have seen so far, it seems reasonable to distinguish at least three main differences between envy and covetousness. In the first place, envy seems to have a wider scope. Covetousness is the desire to have another's possessions—anything that belongs to one's neighbour (Exod 20:17—a wife or husband, house, cattle, servants, and so forth). But we have also seen that the envier, in addition to coveting someone's possessions, envies another's character and moral qualities, position of honour, esteem or reputation (Gen 26:14, 16; Matt 20:15; Phil 1:15), if not also someone's faith and right standing with God (Heb 11:4, 6). In the second place, unlike covetousness, envy involves ill-will towards the person envied. Envy is not the desire (passion) to merely have what another has; it is a feeling of discontent, displeasure or resentment that another has what someone wants or desires for oneself. Finally, whereas a covetous person may feel satisfied when he or she attains what another has, the envious feels satisfied when the other loses what he or she is envied for having.

4.2. Envy and jealousy

What a person envies and is jealous of matters deeply to that person.¹³ Whereas envy 'is the displeasure at the assets and success of another, a resentful consciousness of inferiority to the person envied, a sense of impotence to acquire what is desired, and a malevolent wish to harm the envied one or to see him deprived of what he has', jealousy 'involves the fear of losing what one already possesses and has legitimate claim to' (Elliott 1992:58). In scripture, God is referred to 'a jealous God' (Exod 20:5), which refers to God's intimate and exclusive relationship with Israel (Exod 20:4–6; 34:12–16). Not surprisingly, this relationship is illustrated with a marriage (Isa 54:5–6; 62:5). The Apostle Paul informed the church in Corinth that 'I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy' (2 Cor 11:2) in order to denote God's deep concern for them.

It seems reasonable to infer that the paradigmatic objects of jealousy are relationships and love, pre-eminently those characteristics of the marriage relationship. It involves rage and vengeance (a desire for retaliation) at the discovery of unfaithfulness and betrayal (Prov 6:34), and is mostly linked with strife (Rom 13:13; Jas 3:14, 16) and anger (2 Cor 12:20). We may say that someone can become jealous of the love and affection bestowed on another (Gen 37:11, 28; 39:2, 21ff.) and another's status or importance, even in the church (1 Cor 3:3). Thus,

12 'Covet' means to fix one's desire upon something or someone (*epi*, upon, and *thymos*, passion). It is used in a good sense (1 Cor 12:13 [v. *zēloō*]; 14:39) or bad sense (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21; Rom 7:7–8; 13:9; 1 Cor 10:6 [n. *plonexia*, from *pleon*, more, and *echō*, to have]; 1 Tim. 6:10 [v. *oregō*]). 'Coveting' in Mark 7:22 is 'covetings' in the original, meaning various ways of coveting. In Rom 1:29 the word is 'greed' (cf. Luke 12:15; Eph 4:19; 5:3; 1 Thess 2:5; 2 Pet 2:3, 14) which is idolatry (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5). The adjective, *pleonektēs*, literally means eager to have more, to have what belongs to others or greedy (1 Cor 5: 10–11; 6:10; Eph 5:5). See also *philarguros* (lit. money-loving) in Luke 16:14 and 2 Tim 3:2. Moo (1996:433) states that 'coveting' refers to an 'inner desire to "possess"' and adds that it encompasses 'illicit desires of every kind' (p. 434).

13 'Jealousy' (*zelōs*) is the 'desire to have the same or the same sort of thing' (Vine 1984:369). Cf. Jas 4:2 (you are 'envious' [v. *zēloō*] and do not obtain'); Jas 3:14, 16 ('bitter jealousy' [also Gal 5:20] and 'selfish ambition' [*eritheia*; also Phil 2:3]). Where this passion is present 'there is disorder and every evil thing'. It is also used in a good sense (Jas 4:5).

jealousy, just as envy, may involve a sense of humiliation; in the case of envy, a person may feel humiliated by competitive failure in which the person bitterly envies and resents the esteem or honour of a rival. In the case of jealousy, a person may feel humiliated at the loss of love and betrayal, for the betrayed had bared his or her soul and body to the gaze of the beloved. While the jealous seem to value relationships, intimacy, devotion and possessions and, therefore, want to keep and protect it, what the envious value is his or her status, esteem and honour and, therefore, desire the good the other has. Note, however, that the jealous value what he or she believes is important enough to warrant protection in the face of a perceived threat. By contrast, the envier does not necessarily value the other's good; he or she believes that the other is not entitled to his or hers. Thus, if we think of jealousy as a defensive emotion, then we may think of envy as a self-protective emotion. However, despite the common features of envy and jealousy, there are several differences between these two passions.

Firstly, the feeling of envy is rooted in the desire to deprive another of what he or she has, and jealousy is rooted in the desire to have for oneself the same sort of thing another has. Secondly, whereas the envious desire to have or acquire what another has, to begrudge the possessor his or her possessions, and to take malicious pleasure in his or her loss of them, the jealous person desires to keep the love that a beloved has granted him or her, fearing and profoundly resenting its loss to another. Thus, while someone may envy the character traits, esteem or possessions of another, the object of jealousy is a relationship that obtains between two other people (cf. Acts 7:9; 13:44–46). Thirdly, the envious person does not necessarily desire, if at all, an exclusive relation with another. Jealousy does. We can, therefore, infer that envy may lead to malice, spitefulness and hatred, and jealousy to resentment at the deprivation of an exclusive love and anger at the loss of intimacy and devotion, if not also a desire for revenge and punishment (cf. Num 5:14, 30; Prov 6:34).

So when Cain murdered his brother Abel, for what could it possibly have been? It is easy to conclude that Cain was jealous of Abel; Cain's offerings were rejected by God, he lost God's favour, and we may even conclude that he lost his 'love-object' (Gruber 1978:94). But if so, what was he jealous of? The problem is that Genesis 4:1–16 provides no clue that allows us to think that Cain cared about his relationship with God, the object of his anger; if he had, he would have done something to keep or obtain God's favour. In fact, there is a total absence of love on Cain's part, hence the Apostle John's explanation for the killing of his brother (cf. 1 John

3:10–16). John suggests that Cain hated him (cf. vv. 13, 15). It is possible that Cain hated Abel because he cared more about honour and esteem, for one of the first things he did after he ‘went out of the presence of the Lord’ was to ‘build a city’ (Gen 4:16–17). Perhaps it was his way of attracting the honour and esteem he so deeply and desperately desired. I wish to submit that Cain killed him out of envy, despite the fact that he may have been jealous of God’s relationship with Abel.

4.3. Envy and Cain

We recall that God rejected *both* Cain and his offering. Thus, to obtain God’s favour, he had a choice: either he wished to master his sin and become like his brother, or, if unwilling, not to let Abel have his valued goods either. And here we come to the distinguishing mark of envy, which has been alluded to throughout the foregoing analysis: envy, as opposed to jealousy, essentially involves comparison. Envy is experienced as frustration at not having what the envier believes he or she needs, with consequent anger and resentment directed at the other. The good is, therefore, not desired for its own sake, but primarily to boost self-esteem. That is so because the envier would not feel as frustrated and hostile if his view of himself needed no protection from comparison.

Not only has Cain compared his offering with that of his brother, and realised that his brother’s was better, he also compared himself with Abel’s character and spiritual qualities. He consequently felt himself as deprived by comparison; it was Abel’s qualities which explain his comparatively advantageous status and position, and that is what Cain desired to remove or eradicate. We can say that Abel had become a competitor or rival whose acceptance by God was in some way linked to his own failure. It means Abel had become a thorn in Cain’s flesh, rather than an object of admiration. I want to suggest that Cain envied and resented Abel for at least three things.

The first was Abel’s righteous status before and in relation to God (cf. Matt 23:35). The second is that he envied Abel’s faith (Heb 11:1–4), and the third is that Abel was resented for his prophetic office (Luke 11:49–51). Thus, if they had indeed been in the field, as Genesis 4:8 states, then it is not difficult to imagine that Cain may have not approved of what Abel, as a prophet of God, may have revealed to him about himself and what it was that was pleasing to God; for scripture says, ‘And without faith it is impossible to please Him’ (Heb 11:6). Thus, the mere presence of Abel was much more than he could bear. Lest the reader think this is far-fetched, let us consider Jesus.

4.4. Envy and Jesus

Two of the Gospel writers noticed and recorded that ‘he [i.e. Pilate] knew that because of envy they [the chief priests] had delivered Jesus’ to him (Matt 27:17–18; Mark 15:10).¹⁴ What did they envy Jesus for having? The short answer is, for everything about him which they could not be and have for themselves. Realising that, they decided that Jesus should not have it either—by having him killed. What this confirms about Cain’s envy and that of the chief priests is that the root of their passion lay in comparison and self-love (self-centredness) which, in turn, is the reason for the rivalry (cf. Jas 4:2). It also reveals that envy, like most other passions and affections, provides the envier with a motive for action; it is the envier’s reason for doing evil. The envier acts to deprive the envied of that object he or she desires or wants only for him or herself, even if it means bringing about the death of the envied.

Losing the esteem or favour of either God or others is nothing but a painful experience (cf. Gen 4:13–16). It is, therefore, connected with two more passions or affections. One is the fear of losing esteem or favour; the other is the passion to gain it – at whatever cost. It appears to be a problem in the church as well, as can be illustrated by events that occurred in the lives of Ananias and his wife Sapphira (Acts 4:1–11). They must have compared themselves with Barnabas, of whom it is said that ‘he owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet’ in order that it be used to meet the needs of the needy (Acts 3:34–37). Noticing his generosity and benevolence (i.e. his goodness), Ananias and his wife must have thought that that was a quick way to gain the esteem of the church, albeit through deception. Simon the magician had been in ‘the gall of bitterness’ after he became a Christian, for he realised that he, by comparison with the apostles, no longer enjoyed the attention of the ‘smallest to the greatest’ (Acts 8:23). Scripture says, ‘Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of hands, he offered them money’ (v.18). He thought that he could purchase the Holy Spirit as one would purchase a commodity only for its instrumental value, thus to restore what he valued most and lost, namely, the honour and esteem of others.

Let us return to Jesus and see why he was envied. It is most interesting that both Matthew and Luke refer to ‘the righteous Abel’ in the context of a set of woes that Jesus pronounced to ‘experts’—scribes, Pharisees and lawyers (Matt 23:13–36; Luke 42–52). For my purposes, it is enough to note that Jesus, himself a prophet, referred to prophets these ‘experts’ had killed, ‘from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah’ (Luke 11:51). If Abel and

¹⁴ It is interesting that Carson (1984:569) makes no reference to envy or jealousy in his commentary on Matthew 27:17–18. But, on page 428, he writes that ‘envy’ (lit. ‘evil eye’) in Matthew 20:15 ‘refers to jealousy’. Turner (2008:479), in turn, says that ‘evil eye’ in that text ‘reflects deep envy’. Both Wessel (1984:774) and Stein (2008:701) write that ‘evil eye’ in Mark 15:10 ‘clearly means envy’ and not jealousy. It is also interesting that ‘envy’ in Mark 7:22 and Galatians 5:21 appears in the plural (*phthonoi*), which suggests, as with coveting, many kinds of envy.

Jesus were killed out of envy, then it is most probably the reason the other prophets were killed, and by implication, because of their reputation and because they enjoyed God's favour. It is also reasonable to conclude that Jesus' presence and reference to the righteous Abel made them aware of their own envy. For scripture says that soon after Jesus spoke to them about the killing of Abel and the prophets, 'the scribes and Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question him closely on many subjects, plotting against him, to catch him in something he might say' (Luke 11:54).

If the scribes and Pharisees compared themselves with Jesus and saw him as a rival, then we may ask for what did they compete? Without any doubt, it must have been their love of honour and fame, for which Jesus berated the Pharisees as follows: 'Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the front seats in the synagogues, and the respectful greetings in the market places' (Luke 11:43). Jesus was telling them that they did not deserve that honour, because they 'are like concealed tombs' over which people walk but are unaware of them (v.44). The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus' 'fame spread throughout all the region around Galilee' (Mark 1:28; NKJV. See also 1:45; 2:1-2, 13; 3:7-8, 20; 4:1; 5:20-23, 27-28; 6:14, 32-34, 53-56; 7:24-25; 8:1, 27-30; 10:1, 46; 11:1-11, 18) and that great crowds of people 'enjoyed listening to him' (12:37; lit. 'were gladly hearing him'). To the enviers, that must have been a painful feeling: their reputation diminished, and Jesus' fame meant their loss. In the words of Peter Hacker (2018:183), 'The acclaim given to another person may be disturbing in the extreme to someone who feels robbed of due recognition, and who resents the actual recipient's being granted it'. It is no wonder that the 'evangelist summarily identifies all the hostility against Jesus in Mark 14-15 as the result of envy' (Hagedorn and Neyrey 1998:46).

5. Was God Capricious to Reject Cain and Cain's Offering?

It is no coincidence that Jesus said that a prophet is everywhere honoured, 'except in his home town and among his own relatives and in his own household' (Mark 6:4). Abel was the first one who was murdered because he was envied by his elder brother for his character, spiritual qualities and the favour God showed to him. Cain was a reckless person; he could not care a bit about the quality of his offering or the attitude of his heart—as long as he could obtain God's honour and esteem. Realising that it was not going to happen on his terms, he decided that Abel should not have it either.

The Bible shows that when God rejects a person, he does so with good reason. I therefore conclude that God was not capricious in rejecting Cain and his offering.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to make sense of the various reasons for which commentators believe Cain murdered Abel. That was done by clarifying the characteristics of some of the passions and emotions. The paper then focused on envy. Envy, understood from a biblical perspective, is a vice par excellence; it is a deadly sin. It involves other-directed hostility, resentment and hatred. It is essentially an emotion rooted in comparison and hence, its interconnectedness with covetousness and jealousy. In contrast to the coveter who cannot find rest for his or her soul unless they possess what another has, the envier cannot rest until the other loses what he or she has. And in contrast to the jealous who value love, devotion, and an exclusive relationship, the envier has no need of that, except for whatever honour or esteem it may bring to him or her.

In the final analysis, what scripture teaches us is that a loss of honour and esteem is not only a painful experience; the passion to gain it no matter what the cost is self-destructive. It is nothing less than ‘rottenness to the bones’. Our Lord asks, ‘For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?’ (Mark 8:36). His answer is nothing (v. 37).

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