

Lecture X

"The Offerings of Cain and Abel, and the Origin of Animal Sacrifices Considered"

Part I

by

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***"The LORD [Yahweh] had respect unto Abel and to his offering;
but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect."
Genesis 4:4***

One of the immediate consequences of the fall appears to have been that prudential arrangement for the purpose of lightening toil, which in the political philosophy of modern days is designated the division of labor. The curse upon the ground and man's banishment from the beauty and blessings of the Garden, which God had planted for his delight and support, made such a change in the situation of the human race as to render it necessary that some should exclusively employ themselves in the production of food for the common sustenance. The condition of the animal creation seems also at the same time to have so far deteriorated as to require the care and superintendence of a rational being for the preservation and defense of, at least, the more helpless species. Hence Abel is represented to us as "a keeper of sheep" and Cain as "a tiller of the ground."

But whatever may have been the diminution of God's kindness towards a sinful and corrupted race, his presence was neither altogether withdrawn, nor his power and providence unfelt, nor his mercies left unacknowledged by the incense of grateful piety. "In process of time, it came to pass that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock, and of the fat thereof" (Gen. 4:3). According to his respective occupation, and out of the increase with which his labor had been recompensed, each made a return after his manner and power, expressing by the act of his hands, the feelings of his heart, and confessing the great source from whence all blessing flow, by bringing an appropriate offering unto the Lord and the giver of all good things.

The act of worship and gratitude was not, however, received in the same manner from both, nor were the two brothers alike approved in their deed of piety. "The LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering; but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect." What was the reason of this different treatment is not explicitly stated, and a similar obscurity is also left upon the mode in which the approbation and disapprobation were severally expressed. Both these points, therefore, if they are to be determined at all, must be gathered from a careful review of the whole

circumstances of the transaction.

Upon the latter of these questions, however, that is, upon the manner in which the divine approbation or disapprobation was shown, I shall not take the trouble to dwell. The wrath of Cain, his fallen countenance and his uplifted hand, his countenance fallen in sullen and envious melancholy and his hand lifted up against his brother in unholy wrath, bear sufficient testimony to the preference which Abel obtained and to the reality of the rejection of Cain, and to the clearness with which both were revealed.

Whether, as in after times, the acceptance of Abel's offering was proclaimed by the descent of a fire from Heaven upon the altar, or by an answer proceeding from the Shechinah of God's glory, or by a whirlwind or an earthquake or a still small voice, is a matter not only of extreme uncertainty but also of very little comparative importance. The truth of the fact is what alone we are particularly concerned to know--and [it is] that [which] the words, the circumstances, and above all the sad consequence, of the tale declare.

But the inquiry into the ground and reason of the difference between the acceptableness of the two sacrifices is a question of another kind, [and one] far more essential and (on a casual inspection) not less obscure. The equity of God is deeply involved in it. For to justify so marked a distinction as that which subsists between respect and a want [lack] of it, we must find out some corresponding distinction between those who were made the subjects of such opposite treatment. The offering or the offerer must be proved on the one side to have had some comparative or positive excellence, and on the other [side] to have had some positive or comparative demerit and defect.

1. First then, the words in which the rejection and acceptance are specified by the historian have seemed to imply that the sacrifices themselves were the foundation of that difference with which the individuals who offered them were received. "To Abel and to his offering," says Moses, "the LORD had respect; but to Cain and to his offering he had not respect." Such is the phrase; and it is said that by a figure common to all languages--and particularly prevalent in that in which the book of Genesis was originally composed--we are authorized to consider it as probably intending to imply that God had respect to the offering of Abel in itself. If this be the true interpretation, the offering of Abel must have been superior to that of Cain, either in its nature, its magnitude, or its quality.

If, however, we take the sacrifices of Abel and Cain and consider them impartially together, we shall find it extremely difficult, from their nature alone, to account for the preference which was shown to that of the former. For when we bring the intrinsic character of the offerings themselves to the test of ordinary reason, and institute a comparison between them for the purpose of determining their relative value on the common principles of human estimation, we are not only at a loss to explain the grounds of the preference but are almost tempted to think that it ought to have taken a different direction.

Abel's was a bloody [sacrifice], Cain's a bloodless sacrifice. Abel's quenched the sacred principle of life in the sentient creatures of the Almighty's goodness, and inflicted pain and robbed of their happiness and their being those to whom the hand of Heaven had communicated both. Cain did but bring the fruits of the ground which the word of God had authorized him to take and to

enjoy. Abel sacrificed what he had no permission (either express or implied) to use for food, while Cain appeared with that which he had been allowed and commanded to eat. The one came with hands still reeking with his victim's blood; the other, in the simplicity of the primeval occupation, adorned the altar of the Lord of life with the beautiful products of that vegetable nature which had been ordained for universal use and admiration.

Look only to this representation, weigh only the essential nature of the things offered, and it will require but little penetration to perceive that the sacrifices, considered merely in themselves, could not have been the only ground of the superior acceptableness of that of Abel. Upon this footing, the balance would appear rather to preponderate in favor of Cain.

Considerations like these have not failed to operate both with Deists and Divines. The Deist has triumphed in the supposed impropriety, if not inhumanity, of representing the Deity to have marked his preference of a sanguinary [bloody] service; and the Divine, to meet the objection, has consequently insisted not so much upon any difference in the nature as in the quantity or quality of the respective offerings. But as far as quantity is concerned, there is nothing to authorize any certain conclusion; and I can scarce persuade myself that any more definite opinion can be formed upon the quality of what was presented. It is true that Cain is only stated to have "brought of the fruits of the ground" while of Abel it is added that "he brought of the *firstlings* of his flock and the *fat* thereof." There is here an evident difference of expression, and more is said of one sacrifice than of the other.

Yet it may be very dubious whether this difference was purposely introduced. Still less positive ought we to be in asserting that it was designed to reprobate the worthlessness of the offering of Cain or as implying his want [lack] of reverence in withholding from God the best of his substance, and profaning the service of religion by bringing of that which cost him nothing. For if every little variation in the words of the narrative is to be deemed a sufficient foundation for grave and solid argument, there are other variations to be found which an ingenious mind might contrive with equal ease and equal reason to turn to the advantage of Cain.

Thus of Abel it is only said that he brought his offering, while of Cain it is added that he brought it as "an offering *unto the LORD*;" and had this last expression been found as exclusively applied to Abel as it is to Cain, I doubt not but that it would have been insisted upon as a cogent argument for the superiority of his religious feelings and views. But upon such minute particulars it is generally hazardous to rest much. The soundest way of arriving at the true object of Scripture is by considering the general tenor and complexion of the whole passage; and it is always unsafe and unsatisfactory to make large and decided conclusions from phrases whose introduction or omission might be only casual.

I merely mean to say that the opinion, as being only probable, is not sufficient to bear the weight imposed on it of accounting for the issue which followed, and that it will be better to resort to the literal interpretation of the text. It will be both wiser and safer to explain the phrase, in which it is said that "to Abel and his offering the Lord had, but to Cain and his offering he had not respect," as referring to the individuals alone, or at least as comprehending both the individuals and their sacrifices and not as being confined to their sacrifices.

In this light the matter has been generally viewed. Some moral or religious qualification is

conceived to have sanctified both the person and offering of Abel; and this seems also to be the opinion which the narrative of Moses himself has authorized us to form. For when God expostulated with Cain upon his wrath, he said, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (Gen. 4:6,7 [NKJV]). Thus was it implied that his offering had not been accepted because he had not done well. The same reason is more explicitly put forth by St. John when he declares that Cain's "works were evil and his brother's righteous" (John 3:12). But in what respect Abel had done well, [and] in what respect his works were righteous and his brother's evil, is not expressly pointed out in either of these passages; and, therefore, we still find a considerable difference of opinion with respect to the nature of that qualification in Abel which recommended his sacrifice in preference to that of Cain.

By some the preference is attributed to the object and intention with which the offerers presented their respective offerings. They suppose the Lamb of Abel to have been slain as an expiatory and propitiatory sacrifice, an express and intended prefiguration of the great Christian atonement; while the fruit of Cain was, in their opinion, nothing more than a eucharistical and self-righteous service, a mere profession of gratitude for having received from God the food which he deserved.

But, besides there being no traces of such a notion in the narrative itself, we assume far more than we can prove when we suppose that the same distinction of sacrifices which was afterwards established in the Mosaic Law was known and admitted at so early a period of the world. And it would be difficult to demonstrate that the sacrifice of Noah, the next in the order of time, was anything else than a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise for his mighty deliverance from the perils of the universal flood. If indeed it could be allowed that the first parents of mankind had been clearly informed with regard both to the person, the office, and the sufferings of the Messiah, we might have some ground for maintaining that Abel intended the firstlings of his flock to be a direct representation of the future death of Christ upon the cross, a professed type of the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." But such an idea contradicts the whole tenor of Scripture.

The only recorded revelation of this great event at that time was the promise of a victory over the serpent, which, though sufficiently positive to enliven hope, was too indefinite to convey any exact knowledge of the means or time of the triumph. The only points which God had vouchsafed [condescended] to reveal after the fall, and the only allusion he then made to the means of our redemption from the enemy, was contained in the declaration that there should be enmity between the serpent and the woman's seed, and that the latter should obtain a decided superiority over the former. The time, the manner, and the individuals for whom this great triumph was reserved were left alike in the most perfect obscurity.

In consequence, and as a proof of this obscurity, we find each succeeding generation firm in their belief of the fulfilment of the promise but doubtful as to the person and mode and period of its fulfilment. To attribute, therefore, to Abel such an accurate insight into the great scheme of human redemption as enabled him distinctly and consciously to typify it by his offering is without any authority and contrary to every reasonable presumption, to endue him with a degree of religious light which, until the sacrifice of Christ was completed on the Cross, seems never to have been entirely unveiled to any.

But though Abel himself could not have so thoroughly understood the "shedding of blood for the remission of sins" as to make an offering of blood as a type of the propitiation of Christ, yet doubtless the Almighty had already fixed the plan of our salvation in his immutable counsels, and might have instituted animal sacrifices to prefigure it. He might have commanded the firstlings of the flock to be slain in order to indicate, by the victim's death, the kind of propitiation which would be accepted for our sins, and to show by the continued existence of such rites in the world that the plan of redemption, which was afterwards to be accomplished on the cross, was the very plan which from the beginning had been predetermined for our salvation from punishment and guilt.

This is, in fact, at present the favorite and almost universal hypothesis among divines. They conceive that God had no sooner pronounced the sentence upon the transgression of our first parents, and snatched them from despair by the promise of some future mitigation of their woe, than he instituted the ordinance of animal sacrifices as a mode of worship and a type of the Messiah wounded for our iniquities and brought as a lamb to the slaughter for our atonement. They next conceive that Abel believed in this appointed propitiation for sin, and by faith in its efficacy brought a more acceptable and excellent sacrifice than Cain, to whom the efficacy of blood was a stumbling-block and foolishness, and who in the presumption of unbelief rejected its aid and changed the nature of the offering.

Such is the prevalent opinion upon this point. And certainly if the divine institution of sacrifices at so remote a period could be either clearly shown or only fairly inferred, the obedience of Abel and the implied disobedience of Cain to so sacred a command would form a satisfactory reason for the distinction shown in the reception of their offerings. But where is this divine institution of sacrifices to be found? The enactments of the Mosaic Law, or even the command to Abraham to offer Isaac, are found in Scripture indeed, and incontrovertibly contain a divine command for sacrifice. But they were long posterior to the event we are considering; and it is freely admitted that there is no positive injunction for animal sacrifices expressly related in any previous part of the sacred Volume.

Yet notwithstanding this want [lack] of any direct appointment, it is still maintained that such an appointment was made immediately after the fall, and that its omission by Moses may be easily accounted for by the brevity of his narrative and the subsequent renewal of the institution under the Law. Each of these pleas I will now proceed to examine in their order, throwing aside as far as possible all those collateral inquiries and all that cumbrous load of controversial learning with which the question has been almost overwhelmed.

1. The brevity of the Mosaic records in the earlier portion of the history of the human race is confessed. No mind of common curiosity can contemplate this compendious narrative and not be tempted, however reluctantly, to express a regret at the many interesting points they have left unnoticed in matters of literary and scientific research. But in religion, brief as the book is, it is full enough for all the essential purposes of instruction; and the more carefully it is examined, the more clearly it will be perceived to have left out nothing profitable for practice or material to faith.

It cannot however be denied but that the omission of the divine institution of sacrifices, if such

an institution had from the beginning taken place, is the omission of a piece of most material and profitable information. A little addition to the bulk of his composition is, therefore, what the author might very properly have granted to himself for the insertion of such a fact.

The truth however is, that no addition whatever would upon this occasion have been required. I will not argue with Warburton that when Moses introduces the phrase, "In process of time it came to pass that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground," he means us to infer that he and Abel brought their offerings from the dictates of their own minds. But I will say that if, instead of stating that "In process of time it came to pass" he had declared that "It came to pass as the Lord had commanded," he would not have increased the length of his work and he would have done all we could reasonably wish. The substitution of one phrase for the other would have settled the doubt and not injured his brevity. For we wanted no "formal history of the rite," no "formal account of its origin, explaining *how* or *when* it was instituted"¹ by God. We wanted merely an assurance of the fact that God had commanded the practice of animal sacrifices; and that assurance, by a mere change of expression, might have been introduced without at all increasing the bulk of the history. Brevity, therefore, alone cannot possibly be regarded as the reason of the omission of the divine command for sacrifice, if actually given.

2. But it is further stated that the subsequent injunctions for sacrifices in the Law made the repetition of the command needless in the book of Genesis; and that, consequently, because [it was] needless it was omitted.

It is certainly true that sacrifices of every kind were solemnly and positively instituted by God in the Mosaic law, and that, consequently, neither did the Jews require any additional authority for the practice nor we ourselves any additional vindication of its propriety. But was not the Sabbath also enjoined with still more solemnity and fulness by Moses in the Law? The ordinance of the Sabbath stands not like the ordinance of sacrifices only among the ceremonial rites of the Jewish covenant. It has a higher place, a more impressive character assigned to it by being embodied among the ten primitive and fundamental commandments which were entrusted to the prophet on Mount Sinai. Nor is this holy ordinance merely inculcated as a precept. Its reason is added and its mode of observance prescribed.

Yet notwithstanding all these various circumstances, which might have seemed to render any further notice of the institution needless, Moses has distinctly recorded the origin of the Sabbath in its proper place in Genesis, and that not of necessity or because his narrative would have been incomplete without it. He has almost interrupted the progress of his narrative for its introduction; or, if this be too much to assume, we must at least allow that the account is incidentally and parenthetically made. Surely, then, upon the same principle he might have been expected to have recorded with equal distinctness the original institution of sacrifices.

I venture to urge this point strongly, because what has been said in diminution of the force of the argument appears entirely to fail. The observation of Delaney², that, as Moses had loaded the rite of sacrifice with many additional ceremonies, he might have wisely designed not to record the simplicity of the original institution "lest the Jews might think themselves ill used by any additional burden of trouble or expence," is not of much weight; and if true, would assign to

1 Magee on Atonement, vol. II, page 79.--Edit. 3.

2 Revelation Examined, Vol. I, p. 137.

Moses a mode of proceeding scarce consistent with historical honesty.

The other remark of Magee³, that Moses recorded the origin of the Sabbath to enforce with greater weight upon the Jews the religious observance of its duties, is still more destitute of importance. For if, as some suppose, the mention of the Sabbath in Genesis does not imply its divine institution from the beginning, no force whatever is added to the fourth commandment by such a notice of its object. I deprecate, however, most earnestly this idea, and would ever maintain that the origin of the Sabbath was coeval with the world.

But what advantage does this admission give to the reasoning we combat? The original establishment of the seventh day as a day of holy rest, which Moses relates in the second chapter of Genesis, he simply relates in his character of a historian. In the book of Exodus he issues out his authoritative command for its inviolable repose and sanctity as a Legislator and a Prophet commissioned from Heaven. The passage in Genesis was written by his own mortal, though not uninspired pen; the latter by the finger of the eternal God. In Genesis the origin of the Sabbath is briefly noticed as a fact, and no commandment for its celebration given. In the Law it is detailed with its accompanying reasons, and the method of its observance is minutely pointed out and most solemnly enforced. In the one it forms only a part of a continuous narrative. In the other it is singled out from every other positive rite to be bound up forever among the moral commandments, and in the same page with the prohibition of murder and the duty of filial obedience.

In what possible respect, then, could this repetition or anticipation of the institution of the Sabbath in Genesis either strengthen or increase the necessity or the solemnity of its religious observance as laid down in the Law? What new or more "particular information" did it convey "of the time and occasion of its first institution?" The command for the Sabbath (which, as the messenger of the Most High, Moses brought down from the Mount and [amid?] the thunders and the glories of God) could receive no fresh sanction from his narrative as a historian. Nor could his casual notice of the Sabbath as a man render more sacred the full and circumstantial account which God himself vouchsafed to write.

Except then for the purpose of making us acquainted with the fact and the time of the original establishment of a day of rest for man, there was no imperative call upon Moses for introducing this statement upon the subject in Genesis. But doubtless he thought such a piece of religious history would be both acceptable and useful to man; and as a faithful, though concise, historian he has therefore inserted it.

Now we maintain that similar motives would have operated with him in a still higher degree in the case of sacrifices; and that, had they been instituted by God before the offerings of Abel and Cain, he would scarce have failed to notice the institution. For though sacrifices are most minutely described and most solemnly enjoined in the Mosaic Law, yet their divine origin at an earlier period would still have been a most interesting fact to be known. It does then undoubtedly seem strange that the communication of this interesting fact should have been withheld by one who has so carefully recorded and, as some would suppose, even anticipated the first institution of the Sabbath.

3 Magee, Vol. II, p. 77.

But still more unaccountable does the omission become when we reflect that it is universally allowed that had a divine command for the practice of animal sacrifices been contained in the fourth chapter of Genesis, every difficulty connected with the acceptance of Abel's offering would have been removed. Why then did not the inspiration under which Moses wrote lead him both to the knowledge and communication of this command for sacrifice, if actually given after the fall, and thus simplify to believers the defense of this memorable transaction? In a word, why was a fact at once so interesting and so material in a religious point of view omitted by him whose object it appears to have been to give an account of everything of that nature?

These are questions which naturally arise to the mind. And until these questions have been answered, we may safely maintain that the insertion of the divine institution of sacrifices would not have been a needless insertion in the book of Genesis; and that it is, consequently, impossible to maintain that the fact was omitted by Moses because of its needlessness.

Up to this point the reasoning into which we have entered seems sound. First, the brevity of Moses would not have been injured by mentioning the divine institution of sacrifices. This brevity therefore cannot possibly account for his not mentioning it. Secondly, even if the insertion of the fact had been almost needless, the manner in which he has acted with regard to the Sabbath would yet have taught us to expect the insertion as a mere matter of history. And this expectation is raised into certainty by the conviction that the fact of the divine institution of sacrifices, instead of being needless, is one of the most material consequence in a religious point of view.

After carefully reviewing these arguments and conclusions, I cannot perceive in them any apparent fallacy. I am aware, however, that there are yet other grounds upon which the silence of Moses may be accounted for: However necessary it may be for believers to know that sacrifices had been commanded to Abel and Cain, it was not necessary for the historian [1] explicitly and verbally to state it provided the information can be gathered either by natural inference from his narrative or [2] deduced from other and independent considerations.

This must be allowed. The discussion, therefore, of these two points, namely, first, whether a positive injunction from God for the practice of animal sacrifices be not implied though not expressed by Moses in his narrative, and, secondly, whether it may not be established by reasoning altogether exclusive of the narrative of Moses, is that to which we must proceed in the following Lecture.

Lecture X from *On Scripture Difficulties* by C. [Christopher] Benson (Cambridge: Printed by J. Smith, Printer to the University, for Baldwin, Cradock, & Joy, London, 1843). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.