

Lecture X

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

Part I

by

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(Abridged and Paraphrased)

***"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 the division of labor. The curse upon the ground and man's banishment from the beauty and blessings of the Garden made it necessary that some should exclusively employ themselves in the production of food for the common sustenance. So too the animal creation seems to have so far deteriorated that the care and superintendence of man was needed for the preservation and defense of, at least, the more helpless of the species. Hence Abel is represented to us as "a keeper of sheep" and Cain as "a tiller of the ground."

But God's presence was not altogether withdrawn, nor his power and providence unfelt, nor his mercies left unacknowledged. "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 each man's respective occupation and out of the increase which his labor had gained, he made a grateful return to God by bringing an appropriate offering unto the Lord, the giver of all good things.

The act of worship and gratitude of both Abel and Cain was not, however, received in the same manner, 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 the reason was for this different treatment is not explicitly stated and must be determined from a careful review of the whole transaction.

In order to justify so marked a distinction between the respect received by Abel and the lack of it by Cain, we must find out some corresponding distinction between the men themselves. 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. Some have implied that the sacrifices themselves were the foundation of that difference with which Cain and Abel 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 by a figure common to all languages we are authorized to consider it as probably intending to imply that God had respect to the offering of Abel in and of itself. If this be the true interpretation, then the offering of Abel must have been superior to that of Cain either in its nature, its magnitude, or its quality.

However, if we consider both sacrifices impartially, we shall find it extremely difficult to account for the preference of one over the other from their nature alone; for when we bring their intrinsic character to the test of ordinary reason and make a comparison between them based on 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. Cain brought 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. 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 alone the balance would appear rather to weigh in favor of Cain.

As far as quantity is concerned, there is nothing to authorize any certain conclusion; and I can scarcely 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. 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 reason to turn to the advantage of Cain.

Thus it would appear that some moral or religious qualification is conceived to have sanctified both the person and offering of Abel, and this seems 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.

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 there is no trace of such a notion in the narrative itself, and 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. 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 proven that Adam and Eve 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 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. Thus 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 a high degree of religious light seems untenable.

Yet the almost universal hypothesis among divines is 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's death. 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.

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 Bible.

Yet notwithstanding this lack of any direct appointment, it is still maintained 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 examine.

1. It cannot be denied that the omission of the divine institution of sacrifices, if such an institution had taken place right after the fall, is an omission of most profitable information. A little addition to the bulk of Moses' composition would have been in order for the insertion of such a

fact. But the truth is that no addition whatever would have been required, for all Moses needed to say was "It came to pass as the Lord had commanded," rather than "In process of time it came to pass." The substitution of one phrase for the other would have settled the doubt and not injured his brevity.

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 because it was needless it was omitted. But was not the Sabbath also enjoined with still more solemnity and fulness by Moses in the Law? The ordinance of the Sabbath 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.

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? Except 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 scarcely 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.

But still more unaccountable does the omission become when we consider that every difficulty connected with the acceptance of Abel's offering would have been removed if the practice of animal sacrifices had been contained in the fourth chapter of Genesis. In a word, why was a fact at once so interesting and so material in a religious point of view omitted by Moses, when his objective appears to have been to give an account of everything of that nature?

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.

I am aware that there are yet other grounds upon which the silence of Moses may be accounted for; namely, that it was not necessary for Moses to explicitly state it, provided the information could be gathered either by natural inference from his narrative or deduced from other and independent considerations.

This must be allowed. The discussion of these two points, therefore, 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).