

Lecture XII

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

Part III

by

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(Abridged and Paraphrased)

***"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and by it he, being dead, yet speaks."
(Hebrews 11:4)***

In the two previous lectures we have shown [1] that there is no reason to suppose that Moses omitted to record a divine command, if one was given, for animal sacrifices after the fall; [2] that the existence of such a command at that early period cannot be fairly or satisfactorily inferred from his narrative; and [3] that neither the universal prevalence of sacrifices nor the declaration of St. Paul--that "by faith Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain"--can be made of any avail to prove the disputed point.

But there remains yet another circumstance to be examined from which the same conclusion has been attempted to be drawn, and that is the alleged absurdity of sacrifices in the eye of reason. It is asserted that "unprejudiced reason never could have dictated that destroying the best of our fruits and creatures could be an office acceptable to God, but quite the contrary."¹ Others, while they seem to allow that the vegetable offering of Cain might indeed be the result of rational deductions alone, yet maintain that no such admission can be allowed with regard to the animal sacrifice of Abel. They hold "that no reasonable notions of God could teach men that

1 Delaney's Rev. Examined, Vol. I, p. 125.

he could delight in blood, or in the fat of slain beasts."²

There are, however, three sources at least from which it is conceivable that the practice of sacrifices of blood may have been derived: reason, revelation, and superstition.

The skeptic will only infer that, as they did not originate in reason, they must have been the suggestion either of superstition or a divine command. And maintaining that the existence of a divine command for their institution cannot be satisfactorily or even plausibly proved, he will insist upon superstition as the cause, thereby gaining an advantage in objecting to the whole doctrine of sacrifice for sin.

Therefore, I shall now show that the reason of Abel might easily have suggested to him the practice of animal sacrifice as an act of grateful piety; and as his service was a rational service, so the faith with which he was endued justly obtained from God a respect both to himself and to his offering.

Now it is evident that the whole force of the argument in support of the unreasonableness of animal sacrifices, if not sanctioned by a divine command, rests upon the supposition, first, that Abel had no justifiable pretext for taking away the life of any of the sentient creatures of the Almighty; and secondly, that even if he could have deemed the deprivation of their life an innocent action, he could never have imagined that the offering of the slain victim would be received as an acceptable mode of worship.

These, therefore, are the points we must examine. If we can show that men had already been authorized to put to death the firstlings of their flocks for a specific and useful purpose, and that the offerings of the animals would appear a natural acknowledgment of gratitude to God (who had devoted them to man's service and subjected them to man's power)--if these two propositions can be fairly established, we shall feel but little difficulty in admitting that the reason of Abel might alone have led him to an animal sacrifice.

1. If we turn to the book of Genesis we shall find that no sooner had the Deity reproved and pronounced the sentence upon our first parents after their transgression, than it is immediately written that "unto Adam and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins and clothed them" (Gen.

² Magee on Atonement, Vol. II, p. 73, 3d edit.

3:21). That these animals had died simply an ordinary death will scarcely be maintained, for the power of death along with the power of sin had only just been introduced into the world. It has, therefore, more generally been asserted that they were the skins of those animals which had been slain in sacrifice. But the defense of this opinion involves the very subject upon which we are at issue. It supposes that the very issue of debate--early and divine institution of sacrifices--to have been already proved.

Also, no one asserts that sacrifices were appointed before the sentence pronounced upon our first parents. According to the narrative of Moses, the animal coverings provided for man took place, if not at the very time, yet immediately subsequent to the denunciation of death as the penalty of the original transgression. Hence it is evident that the institution of animal offerings and the clothing of the human body must have been almost, if not exactly, simultaneous events--the skins which were taken for this purpose must have been the skins of almost, if not the very first, creatures which were slain in sacrifice.

Now if sacrifices and the clothing of man were appointed at the same time, why should Moses have so carefully recorded the appointment of the clothing but neglected altogether the appointment of sacrifices? This silence is noteworthy, for a change in the ordinance of sacrifice, after its original institution, must be assumed. The skin, which together with the rest of the victim was at first offered up as a whole burnt-offering unto the Lord, must now be conceived to have been afterwards *set apart* for the use of man while only the body of the animal would be consumed upon the altar.

Upon the whole, therefore, it is so much more simple to suppose that these animals were slain for the very purpose of affording covering to man. As God had allowed the fruits of the earth for necessary food, so did he now by his own solemn act sanction the killing of living and sentient creatures for his necessary raiment. Thus Abel had indeed a justifiable pretext for taking away animal life.

2. Having now seen that Abel had not only a justifiable pretext but an undoubted authority to take animal life for raiment, we must next examine whether he could reasonably suppose such an offering to be acceptable as a religious service.

It is generally and justly allowed³ that Cain might be led by the mere

³ See Kennicott's Two Dissertations, p. 200.

principles of nature to bring an offering of the produce of the earth as an acknowledgment of the divine goodness in giving him the fruits of the ground for food. The same reasoning might very well lead Abel to bring an offering of the firstlings of his flock as an acknowledgment of the divine goodness in giving him their skins for raiment. Animal sacrifices would then appear neither an unnatural nor an irrational mode of testifying a grateful sense of a blessing so specially and singularly conferred. As God had actually provided man with raiment by the death of an animal, then the presentation of an animal sacrifice upon his altar in return became one of the most natural modes of expressing gratitude for one great necessity of life. It was at once an innocent, a pious, and an appropriate act of homage.

The reasonableness of Abel's sacrifice is as clear as that of Cain, and their gratitude explains and justifies both. For the two great and most comprehensive blessings we enjoy are those of food and raiment. We have shown that while the one of these two brothers was offering up a natural service of praise and thanksgiving for the appointed means of sustenance, the other was doing the same for the appointed means of clothing.

The reasonableness therefore of Abel's service, when aided and sanctified by the righteousness of his person through that faith and holiness in which Cain was deficient, afford a just and intelligible foundation for the superior respect with which both himself and his offering were received. It was right to prefer the reasonable service of righteous Abel before the reasonable service of unrighteous Cain.

Lecture XII from *On Scripture Difficulties* by C. [Christopher] Benson (Cambridge: Printed by J. Smith, Printer to the University, for Baldwin, Cradock, & Joy, London, 1843).