

## Q 2.3 Why did God favor Abel's gift but not Cain's?

*[Although this story is omitted from 6 of our 7 earliest sources, we will assume for the purpose of this study that the account in Genesis 4 is accurate.]*

People often say God accepted Abel's offering and rejected Cain's because God desires animal bloodshed. This cannot possibly be the reason since all the prophets agree that God does not desire or require animal sacrifice. God favored Abel's gift because Abel's was offered by faith, meaning he offered his best to God without holding back. There is insufficient evidence to prove Abel's offering was a slain lamb rather than the presentation of a healthy living lamb, perhaps newborn and suckling milk from the lamb's mother's bosom. The reason the gift was accepted was because Abel offered his all to God from faith, not because God desires bloodshed of animals.

### **The Offerings of Cain and Abel**

A common belief is that the reason Abel's offering was accepted and Cain's offering was rejected is because Abel's offering was an animal sacrifice and that God wants animal sacrifices. The passage in question states: *"So in the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruit of the soil as an offering to the LORD, while Abel brought the best portions of the firstborn of his flock. And the LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but He had no regard for Cain and his offering. So Cain became very angry, and his countenance fell"* (Genesis 4:3-5, BSB). People often cite this passage as evidence that God is pleased by

bloodshed and displeased by the offering of fruit, despite fruit being the food He specifically told us our diet was to consist of, *“And God said, ‘See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food’”* (Genesis 1:29, NKJV).

### **Omitted from All the Earliest Sources**

The earliest accounts of the Garden of Eden story are found in Genesis and what is known in academia as the *Primary Adam Literature*. Genesis is preserved in Hebrew while the Primary Adam Literature is preserved in Armenian (The Penitence of Our Forefather Adam), Georgian (The Book of Adam), Latin (The Life of Adam and Eve), Greek (Apocalypse of Moses), and Slavonic (Life of Adam and Eve). The story of Cain offering fruit and Abel offering a lamb is preserved in none of these ancient witnesses except Genesis. And within Genesis, it is only found in the later J-source (Yahwist) layer. It is not found in the original E-source (Elohist) layer of the text. In other words, it is not found in what Hilkiah discovered (E-source) when renovating the temple.<sup>1</sup> This means the only ancient source out of the seven that contains this story is the one the apostle Peter describes as a later corruption introduced into the Scriptures,<sup>2</sup> and which the prophet Jeremiah refers to as an invention of lying scribes, *“How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the Law of the LORD is with us,’ when in fact the lying pen of the scribes has produced a deception?”* (Jeremiah 8:8, BSB). With that said, even from the traditional perspective, the evidence in Genesis does not support the interpretation that God is pleased with bloodshed and displeased with offering fruit.

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<sup>1</sup> “Then Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, “I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD!” And he gave it to Shaphan, who read it” (2 Kings 22:8, BSB). See also 2 Chronicles 34:15.

<sup>2</sup> See Clementine Homilies 2.38-52; 3.2-5; 3.9; 3.17; 3.21-27; 3.39-53; 16.5-21; 16.13-14; 16.21; 18.19-22; 19.8.

## Animal Sacrifice Never Pleased God

According to the prophets, God never desired or required blood sacrifice, nor was He ever pleased by it. The prophet Samuel tells us, *“What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams”* (1 Samuel 15:22, NLT). Isaiah echoes this same idea: *“The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?” says the LORD. ‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats’* (Isaiah 1:11, NIV). Hosea adds what God desires instead of animal sacrifices: *“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings”* (Hosea 6:6, NIV). Jesus teaches to go and learn what this passage in Hosea means.<sup>3</sup> And David, with ears opened to hearing the truth, says God neither desires nor requires animal sacrifice: *“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—but my ears you have opened—burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require”* (Psalm 40:6, NIV). Jeremiah goes even further by saying God never commanded animal sacrifice! He says, *“For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices. But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you’”* (Jeremiah 7:22-23, NKJV). This consistent message echoed by all the prophets is proof that a desire for blood sacrifice could not possibly have been the reason that Abel’s gift was accepted and Cain’s was rejected.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Matthew 9:13, NKJV). See also Matthew 12:7.

<sup>4</sup> “Now if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you will be My treasured possession out of all the nations—for the whole earth is Mine” (Exodus 19:5, BSB).

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed analysis of animal sacrifice and the prophets’ opposition to it, see Study Guide Q4.1 Did God Ever Desire or Require Animal Sacrifice?

## Translating from Hebrew

If a desire for bloodshed wasn't the reason, then how are we to understand why Cain's offering was accepted and Abel's was rejected? Let's start by looking closely at the language used in the passage. The Hebrew phrase וּמִחֹלְבֵהֶן צֶאֱנֹן, roughly translated as *'the firstborn of the fat of his flock,'* only appears in Scripture this one time, making it difficult to translate, but the general idea is that Abel offered his very best to God. It was acceptable because God wants us to always offer our best to Him,<sup>6</sup> living by faith and trusting wholeheartedly in His instructions.<sup>7</sup> Anything less is wrong and unacceptable.<sup>8</sup> Cain did not offer *the-firstfruits-of-the-fat-of-the-land*. He only offered *some of the fruit off the ground*. Under this interpretation, it was this lack of qualifier of it being *"his best"* that is the key difference between Cain's offering compared to Abel's, and why it was rejected.

## Righteousness by Faith in the Original Instructions

God had instructed humanity to till the ground: *"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it"* (Genesis 2:15, NIV). So it wasn't the case that Cain's offering of fruit was rejected on the basis that God did not want him to be a tiller of the soil. Rather, it had to do with his motive, in contrast to Abel's motive, whose gift was favored. In Hebrews it says that Abel's gift was favored because it was offered from faith, *"By faith Abel*

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<sup>6</sup> "Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly" (Psalm 111:1, BSB).

<sup>7</sup> "For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" (Romans 1:17, NIV, quoting Habakkuk 2:4).

<sup>8</sup> "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37-38, NIV).

*brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous*" (Hebrews 11:4, NIV). Abel brought to God the firstborn of his flock. In other words, he offered the very best of what he had instead of withholding it for himself. It doesn't specify anything about Cain's gift other than it being '*some of the fruit of the soil,*' as opposed to the best of the firstfruits of the land.<sup>9</sup> This lack of qualifier suggests that Cain did not offer his best to God. God responded to Cain's offering by telling him, "*If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it*" (Genesis 4:7, NIV). Instead of humbly repenting at the hearing of this message and wholeheartedly offering his best, Cain continued in his anger<sup>10</sup> and killed his brother,<sup>11</sup> making matters much worse.<sup>12</sup> Nowhere in the first four chapters does God ever ask for or even suggest He wants animals to be sacrificed to Him. In fact, His instructions are the exact opposite—telling us to be plant-eaters and good stewards of the animals.

## **No Mention of Killing**

There is also no mention of Abel killing the animal he presents to God. The two jobs God gave humanity in the beginning were to be tillers of the ground<sup>13</sup> and

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<sup>9</sup> "Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God" (Exodus 23:19a, BSB).

<sup>10</sup> "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15, NKJV).

<sup>11</sup> "Then Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And while they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him" (Genesis 4:8, BSB).

<sup>12</sup> "The LORD said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a wanderer and a drifter on the earth.' Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is too great to endure!" (Genesis 4:10-13, NASB).

<sup>13</sup> "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15, NIV).

guardians of the animals, *“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”* (Genesis 1:26, NKJV). Therefore, Cain presenting to God an offering of the fruit of his labor as a tiller of the ground makes as much sense as Abel presenting to God an offering of the fruit of his labor as a guardian of the animals. It is reasonable to infer that the children of Adam and Eve were simply carrying out the two jobs God gave to humanity. To infer that the animal was killed would suggest Abel was doing something contrary to what God instructed. Author Ryan Hicks rightly points out there is no mention of any other item typically associated with animal sacrifice: *“The actual text has no mention of an altar, the killing of any animal, the blood of the animal being drained, or the burning of the offering”* (Hicks, 180).<sup>14</sup> God’s approval of Abel’s offering suggests that Abel likely presented to God a healthy, living animal and thereby followed the instructions God had given to humanity to take care of the animals.<sup>15</sup>

### **God’s Living Presence**

Another important point to consider is that humanity was aware of God’s presence with them at that time, *“Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they*

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<sup>14</sup> Hicks, Ryan. *Why Every Christian Should be Vegan*. Indy Pub, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> I acknowledge that the competing view, namely that Abel killed and brought a slain lamb, is also plausible, albeit less likely, given the evidence available. This competing view is that the slain lamb is a symbol foreshadowing Jesus as the Lamb of God who later dies for our sins. My view of Abel presenting a living lamb instead of a slain lamb would still be a symbol foreshadowing Jesus as the Lamb of God. The difference would be that my view highlights the eternal life of Jesus in the bosom of the Father rather than the death of Jesus on the cross.

*hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden*” (Genesis 3:8, NIV). And God held conversations with them.<sup>16</sup> These conversations continued even after the fall, including the one in question between God and Cain before and after Cain killed Abel out of anger. This personal relationship with God is very different from the kind the Israelites had with God. Instead of the Israelites having private conversations with God, they required Moses to climb a mountain to speak to God in a bush or a cloud and report back to them what was said.<sup>17</sup> It therefore makes sense to assume Abel’s gift was that of a living sheep to the living God<sup>18</sup> who was physically in their presence rather than that of a slain sheep offered to a far-away God outside of their presence. The gift-presentation would thus be more akin to a baby dedication rather than a blood sacrifice.

### **Fat or Milk?**

When discussing this passage, first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote: “*But Abel brought milk.*”<sup>19</sup> In the phrase *וּמִחֶלֶבָהּ צֵאֵנוּ מִבְּכֹרוֹת*, ‘*the firstborn of the fat of his flock*’ the word translated ‘fat’ in Hebrew is *חֶלֶב* (cheleb), which is identical to the Hebrew word for ‘milk’ *חָלָב* (chalab), but with different vowels.<sup>20</sup> Since vowels were not added to the Hebrew alphabet until hundreds of years

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<sup>16</sup> “But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’” (Genesis 3:9-10, NIV).

<sup>17</sup> “Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, ‘This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel:’” (Exodus 19:3, NIV).

<sup>18</sup> “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!” (Mark 12:27, NIV).

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, Flavius. *The Antiquities of the Jews: History of the Jewish People from Adam and Eve to Jewish–Roman Wars* (Bk.1 Ch.2.1), tr. by William Whiston. E-artnow, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> “And they gave this account to Moses: ‘We went into the land to which you sent us, and indeed, it is flowing with *milk* [חָלָב (chalab)] and honey. Here is some of its fruit!’” (Numbers 13:2, BSB).

after Josephus, it is plausible that the original word describing Abel's gift was *milk* rather than *fat*. If this is the case, then Abel likely presented to God a firstborn baby lamb nursing milk from the bosom of the baby's mother, a perfect illustration and foreshadowing of humanity abiding in Christ,<sup>21</sup> the Lamb of God,<sup>22</sup> who is in the bosom of God, *"No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him"* (John 1:18, NKJV). Contrast this understanding with the standard reading of Abel offering a slaughtered lamb to God, which looks more like what the hands of those who don't know God did to the Lamb of God.<sup>23</sup> Presenting to God a firstborn baby lamb nursing milk from the mother would also signify to God that Abel was doing his job as a proper guardian of the animals,<sup>24</sup> enabling them to be fruitful and multiply as God instructed them to do,<sup>25</sup> which would explain why God accepted such an offering.

### **Giving Our All to God**

Cain and Abel bringing offerings to God was likely very similar to the time when the children of Israel, in Exodus 35:21-29, freely brought offerings of labor and whatever material things of value they each had for the building of the tabernacle

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<sup>21</sup> "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me" (John 15:4, NKJV).

<sup>22</sup> "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29, NIV).

<sup>23</sup> "When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'" (Luke 23:33-34a, NIV).

<sup>24</sup> "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:26, NKJV).

<sup>25</sup> "And God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:22, NKJV).

of meeting, so that God would dwell among them.<sup>26</sup> It says: *“Then everyone came whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and they brought the LORD’s offering for the work of the tabernacle of meeting, for all its service, and for the holy garments”* (Exodus 35:21, NKJV). Abel brought his best gift of service to the place where God dwelt with and conversed with humanity at that time. In contrast, Cain withheld his best. As the body of Christ, we are living stones being built up together into a spiritual tabernacle for God to dwell among us.<sup>27</sup> By willingly offering our all to God in service to God's kingdom,<sup>28</sup> the body of Christ works in unison for the good of the whole.<sup>29</sup> We therefore ought to be careful not to embody the spirit of Cain, giving less than our all to God’s kingdom work. Otherwise we risk ending up like Ananias and Sapphira who held back from offering all they had.<sup>30</sup> Instead, we should embody the spirit of Abel, offering our all in service to God’s kingdom. And what does God require? In the words of Micah the prophet, *“He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8, BSB).

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<sup>26</sup> “And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8, NKJV).

<sup>27</sup> “You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5, NASB).

<sup>28</sup> “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had” (Acts 4:32, NIV).

<sup>29</sup> “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:4-5, NIV).

<sup>30</sup> “Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ...You have not lied just to human beings but to God.’ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.” (Acts 5:1-5, NIV).