

The Early Narratives of Genesis.

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V.—THE STORY OF CAIN AND ABEL.

To the ordinary reader, the familiar narrative contained in the fourth chapter of Genesis seems to follow easily and naturally upon that of the fifth. In language and style the story of Cain and Abel greatly resembles the story of Paradise; and although in the genealogy of the Cainites (iv. 17-24) we are conscious of a change in the style, the change is not so marked as is the case in the following chapter (v.). In chapter iv. the narrative is, in the main, taken from the prophetic; in chapter v. from the priestly records employed in the compilation of the Pentateuch.

It is necessary, however, to look a little more closely into the structure of this chapter. For there are points even here which will have already suggested themselves to many a Bible student as difficulties or peculiarities; and a better understanding of the structure enables us to obtain a solution of them.

Chap. iv. 1-16.—To many it has perhaps seemed strange that we have no account of the life of Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Where exactly they dwelt, how they subsisted, whether Adam tilled the soil or followed a pastoral life, are questions to which no answer is given. The birth of Cain and Abel (iv. 1, 2) alone intervenes between the description of the cherubim with the flaming swords, and the narrative of the murder of Abel by his brother, Cain, at a time when apparently they had both already reached manhood. The brief reference in chap. v. 3-5 hardly lifts the veil which has hidden from our view the sight of the remainder of Adam's sojourn upon earth. But the narrative clearly presupposes much that is not related in the Book of Genesis. Abel is "a keeper of sheep," Cain "a tiller of the ground" (Gen. iv. 2). The process by which the distinction into pastoral and agricultural life had been reached we are not told. The Israelite narrative was composed when that distinction could be assumed to have a primeval origin, and to have resulted from the usage of the first family. In the present narrative, we are left in ignorance whether Adam, when he was driven from the garden, followed agricultural or pastoral pursuits, a settled life or a roving one;

whether Abel was the founder of pastoral habits, or received them from his father.

The practice of sacrifice is presupposed (chap. iv. 4, 5). An offering to the Lord might consist of "the fruit of the ground," or of "the firstlings of the flock and the fat thereof." But no account is given of the origin of the institution. And while it is often assumed that the Divine appointment of it is implied in the previous chapter, "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skins, and clothed them" (iii. 21), it is really impossible to regard such words as capable of literally conveying such a meaning. Candour requires us to acknowledge that the early narratives, as they have come down to us, fail to give any account of the institution of sacrifice. The mention of it in this narrative is introduced quite suddenly.

The custom of blood-revenge is presupposed. Cain's dread of the punishment imposed upon him is due to his fear, lest the dwellers in the land should avenge Abel's blood by putting the murderer to death (ver. 14). Such a custom, and the fears resulting from it, point to a more organised society, and to a larger development of the population, than the extant narrative gives us any reason to expect. Similarly, in the following section (vers. 17-24), Cain marries and builds a city (ver. 17); and this suggests a rapid increase in the numbers of the earth's inhabitants, of which we are told nothing beyond the fact that "Adam begat sons and daughters" (Gen. v. 4).

It is true that some have fancied they could find allusions in these passages to families that had sprung from a different stock than that of Adam, from other primeval pairs of whom no account is preserved. Into the scientific question which this theory involves we pretend no right, and therefore have no wish to enter. But we do not expect to find, in the early pages of Genesis, scientific hints of this allusive nature, as to the origin of the peopling of the globe. Without committing ourselves to an opinion whether the population of our planet is to be ultimately traced to one or to many primitive pairs, we are here content with restricting ourselves to the Scripture narrative. And the in-

ference, which we unhesitatingly draw therefrom, is that, in the opinion of Israel's theology, "every nation of men was made of one" (cf. Acts xvii. 26), viz. was descended from Adam.

It seems, indeed, to be placed beyond all doubt by the very mention of Cain's alarm. The ground of his dread is lest the avenger of blood should take away his life; and the avenger of blood, according to all Oriental custom, to which the narrative seems to point, belonged to the family of the murdered man. Cain's words seem to assume that all the dwellers on the earth were his kinsmen.

If so, the narrative presupposes the birth of many children to Adam and Eve, who thickly peopled the country at the time of Abel's murder. But all particular mention of them has been suppressed in the extant narrative.

Now we are hardly disposed to share the doubt, which some critics have expressed, whether the story of Cain and Abel comes from the same hand that wrote the two previous chapters. There is the same kind of dialogue; there is the same class of vivid narrative; there are the same marked expressions ("tiller of the ground," cf. ver. 2 with ii. 5; the unusual word for "desire," cf. ver. 7 with iii. 17; the "curse," cf. ver. 11 with iii. 14); "Eden," too, is referred to in ver. 16; and in the same verse another geographical term occurs with apparently a similarly symbolical significance (Nod, or Wandering, Nomad life).

If, then, this section comes from the same hand, and yet seems to presuppose acquaintance with numerous facts and incidents, the history of which is not recorded, we are forced to the conclusion that the narrative does not flow continuously from chap. iii. to chap. iv.; but that the compiler has extracted only such portions as seemed best to correspond to the purpose which he had in view.

On this hypothesis, we find an explanation for the absence of any further account of the life of Adam and Eve, or of their children. We may fairly assume that the tradition, in its earliest form, contained other narratives, such as illustrated the beginnings of agricultural and pastoral pursuits, and described the institution of sacrifice, and explained the origin of blood-revenge.

Either the prophetic narrator, or the compiler, has selected the narrative; he has not attempted to give a complete or a consecutive story. If, as is very possible, the narrative was one that was derived from the traditions of the polytheistic

ancestors of the Israelite race before the days of Abraham, he had probably to purify it of all taint of superstition, and, in that process, perhaps many details have been suppressed or modified.

If the earliest Hebrew traditions ever regarded the offspring and descendants of the first man as semi-divine heroes, it would have been only analogous to what we find in the mythologies of other races. But the Hebrew narrative is in this respect very different. The earliest patriarchs of the human race appear as simple men. They are endowed with no Divine qualities. Between the God of Israel and the founders of human society the division, according to the Hebrew narrative, is complete. This may have been the characteristic of the Hebrew tradition from the first. But it appears more reasonable to ascribe the religious purity and simplicity of the narrative to the prophetic writer, who, writing in the spirit and power of Jehovah, has moulded the traditions of his race into perfect harmony with the religious truths of which he was the inspired exponent, and admitted nothing which compromised the fundamental doctrines upon the Unity and the Love and the All-sufficiency of Jehovah.

To this method of making extracts from the existing tradition, we may attribute the abruptness with which the narrative of Cain and Abel is introduced at ver. 2 and dismissed at ver. 16. Possibly to the necessity of abbreviating the story, or to that of excluding some remnant of superstition, we may also ascribe the peculiarity of the words in ver. 8, "And Cain told Abel his brother," which, more literally rendered, would be, "And Cain said unto Abel his brother." What Cain actually said, the Hebrew narrative has not recorded. It is hardly likely that the attempt of the Septuagint Version to supply the gap with the somewhat vapid sentence, "Let us go unto the field,"¹ has preserved the original text. For, assuming it to have been in the original text, we can see no sufficient reason to account for its disappearance from the Hebrew copies. On the other hand, if the Hebrew text is correct, the words of the Septuagint addition have all the appearance of an explanatory gloss.

Whatever the words of Cain were in the original narrative, they have been for ever lost. But the reason of their having been lost is possibly to be found in the practice of the compiler or narrator,

¹ Διίλωμι ἕς τὸ πῶδες.

who, in extracting or condensing from the traditional narrative, would qualify, abbreviate, or omit that which did not seem suitable to, or was in actual disagreement with, the revealed religion of Israel. Some such explanation would account for the abruptness of ver. 8. It resembles as it were a piece of the rough edging which shows where a fragment has been torn off.

Some such explanation again will account for the other difficulties that the narrative presents—for the most part arising from the condensation employed by the Israelite narrator.

Thus, we are not told the reason why Divine preference was accorded to the sacrifice of Abel, nor how that preference was made known. The ancient views that an offering of animals was preferred above an offering of fruits of the earth, or that Abel had more correctly performed the ritual of the offering, are mere guess-work; and, even if correct, only touch the outer framework of the story. As the narrator has given us the story, omitting the grounds of preference which in the earliest tradition may have been of the childish superficial character indicated by the above suggestions, or of a superstitious character, due to the polytheism of the primitive Hebrews, it is clear he wishes himself to draw attention to the inner motives, and to the moral characters of the offerers, by which alone the value of their respective offerings could be really distinguished. This thought quite escaped the Septuagint translators, who seemed to suppose that the rebuke contained in ver. 7 turned upon Cain's neglect to prepare his offering according to strict ceremonial requirements.¹ The true insight into the matter is found in the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain" (xi. 4).

If the ground of preference was ever mentioned in the early Hebrew tradition, the Israelite narrator has omitted it. In the true spirit of Israelite prophecy, he may have wished to emphasise the teaching that it was the spirit of the offerer, and not the mode of the offering, which from the first determined the acceptability of every sacrifice in the sight of God (cf. Ps. l. 8-15; Isa. i. 11-17; 1 Sam. xv. 22).

Again, the mode by which the Divine preference for Abel's sacrifice was indicated is not recorded. Early Jewish interpretation (*e.g.* Theodotion, *ἐναπέ-*

μισεν), followed by Christian Fathers and Mediæval Jewish Commentators (*e.g.* Rashi), fancifully supplied the omission by maintaining that fire from heaven came down and devoured the offering of Abel. This theory was based on the supposition that the acceptability of sacrifice would be signified in the same way as in Judges vi. 21; 1 Kings xviii. 38. 2 Chron. vii. 1. Possibly the form of the original tradition possessed features which were out of harmony with the simple story the narrator has preserved.

Possibly, for some similar reason, he has not told us what the sign was which God appointed for Cain. The old difficulty which was connected with the words, "The Lord set a mark upon Cain," disappears with the rendering of the Revised Version, "The Lord appointed a sign for Cain" (ver. 15). A mark set upon Cain would have distinguished him, so that all who met him might know him. This would be no pledge of security, no consolation to the guilty man. But when we see that the Lord appointed a sign for Cain, so that, looking upon it, he might be reminded of the Divine protection, the words of the passage become easy to understand. The rainbow, in chap. ix. (cf. ver. 13), was thus "set" for "a token" to Noah and his descendants. What the token was that Cain received we are not told. In this particular, once more the narrator has withheld information, either for the purpose of condensing history, or for the purpose of suppressing some unsuitable element in the more ancient tradition.

Whether, then, the narrative presupposes acquaintance with facts which have not been narrated, or omits to give particulars of seemingly important elements in the story, the conclusion which we draw from the structure of the narrative is the same.

The peculiarities of the structure are due to the purpose which the narrator had in view. That purpose is not to reproduce in full the whole substance of the early Hebrew traditions respecting the history of primeval man. His purpose is rather to *select* from them just such incidents as will most simply and effectively illustrate the teaching of the Israelite religion respecting the attributes of their God and the nature of man; such, too, as would exemplify the steps by which primitive man declined from his true calling unto righteousness, and by which the selection of the chosen family and nation came to be ordained as

¹ Οὐκ ἴαν ἄβελ προσεύχεται, ἄβελ δὲ μὴ δίδως, ἡμαρτίαι;

the only means of the ultimate restoration of the human race.

The narrator's purpose, both in selecting the story and in condensing or embellishing it, is a truly prophetic one; he makes known the "Torah" or teaching of the LORD, "being moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Pet. i. 21).

For this reason, the story is not to be regarded as having been preserved to us, either in its original fulness or in exact continuity with that which precedes and follows. On the other hand, if the claim be made that the actual origin of the story is to be traced back to the recollection, in the people's consciousness, of the unceasing collision between the agricultural and the pastoral elements in prehistoric man, and of the dominance asserted by the former, it is not part of our province here to investigate the merits of such a plea. Neither that nor any archæological clue, however interesting to modern ethnological research, was present to the mind of the Israelite narrator, to whom we owe the preservation of the story.¹

What his purpose was in selecting it and assimilating it to the requirements of his people's religion, appears more or less clearly from the truths which the narrator so clearly brings to light. So clearly, indeed, do they stand out that they will have occurred to the majority of readers. Perhaps, however, it may not be altogether superfluous to summarise them here very briefly.

The religious teaching conveyed by the story of Cain and Abel relates to the subjects of sin, man's fallen nature, and the attitude of the Almighty towards the sinner.

1. As to sin, it teaches that propensity to it is transmitted from one generation to another. The sin of Adam and Eve is followed by that of Cain. The sin of disobedience to God is followed by the violation of human brotherhood. The first sign of sin's prevalence in the family of Adam is the murder of Cain. The rejection of God's love leads at once to the renunciation of human affection. There was no love to God, no willingness to listen to the Divine voice, in Cain. The occasion of the sacrifice is the temptation by which his character is put to the test. Self-will, pride, jealousy, these are the steps by which the thought of deliberate murder is reached. Cain becomes the archetype of sin and the antithesis

of the character of Christ. "Whoso hateth his brother is a murderer; and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby know we love, because He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John iii. 15, 16). Cain, according to the teaching of Israelite theology, personified the action of sin in human society. Hatred against fellowmen is the fruit of rebellion against God. "For this is the message which ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another: not as Cain was of the evil, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his works were evil, and his brother's righteous" (1 John iii. 11, 12). Worship offers no safeguard against temptation. An act of sacrifice had no with-straining influence over the murderous intention. Thus, in this early page of Genesis, we find an anticipation of the condemnation, pronounced on those that sought to honour God with the lip though the heart was far from Him (cf. Isa. xxix. 13; Mark vii. 6).

2. As regards human nature, the picture of Cain and Abel portrayed how, from the first, the opposition has subsisted between the good and the evil, between faith and self-will, between obedience and lawlessness. The two brothers, brought up in the same family, engaged in the same act of worship, become the types, the one of sin, the other of righteousness. "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he had witness borne to him that he was righteous, God bearing witness in respect of his gifts" (Heb. xi. 4). The approach to God, in the rite of sacrifice, was in Abel's case no mere outward form, but the true expression of his heart's desire to draw near to God. This was true "righteousness"; and it is thus that "the blood of righteous Abel" (Matt. xxiii. 35) stands at the head of the roll of martyrs, who paid with their lives for the inward yearning of their hearts towards God.

It was thus that "righteous Abel" became a type of the true Israel, of the prophets who witnessed for Jehovah against their countrymen, and, in the highest sense, of the suffering Servant,² who was Himself a sacrifice for sin. For, as the preference shown to Abel's sacrifice evoked Cain's murderous resolve, so the manifestation of perfect purity and innocence "convicted the world in respect of sin" (John xvi. 8). The death of Abel

¹ No certain points of contact with the story of Cain and Abel have yet been discovered in Babylonian literature.

² Cf. Isaiah liii.

strikes a prophetic note of warning. It proclaims the great opposition, of which we find the climax in John i. 11, "He came unto His own, and they that were His own received Him not." And we turn instinctively to another message of encouragement amid suffering, "If ye were of the world, the world would love its own; but because ye are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (cf. the whole passage, John xv. 18-24).

Once more, the narrative teaches that God left not Himself without witness, even with those who had estranged themselves from Him. The words spoken to Cain (vers. 6, 7) were the Divine witness, reminding us of the spiritual office of conscience, to the heart that had given itself up to the service of sin. If Cain hears rebuke, he receives also both exhortation and promise. But Cain is a free agent. He is under no compulsion to obey God. He is at liberty to hearken to or to reject the voice that comes to him. His sin is the outcome of the abuse of that free-will, the Divine gift of which he has received by inheritance from the first parents.

Not least, the narrative teaches the interdependency of the human race, the obligations which we are under, the one to the other. The lesson that we are our "brothers' keepers" has been little learned. And yet how much has the thought of it been drawn from the scene so simply and so vividly represented, in which Cain, confronted with his crime, and reminded of his duty of love to his brother, endeavours to repudiate his responsibility? (ver. 9).

3. In respect of its teaching about God, the narrative presents Him to us as long-suffering towards the sinner, as well as compassionate towards the innocent sufferer. He who arraigns Cain for the crime had, before its commission, warned him of his fault, and urged him to well-doing. Nothing escapes His eye, nothing is hid from His knowledge. It is not for the faithlessly offered sacrifice, but for the unseen passion of Cain's heart that the Lord calls him to reason.

The sin is no sooner committed than it comes under judgment. The punishment is heavier than it had been in the case of Adam and Eve. They were driven from Eden, out of the Divine presence. Cain is driven from the neighbourhood of Eden. The earth shall refuse to give him continued sustenance; he shall roam from spot to spot; he

is to be for ever homeless, unloved, a vagabond. But though banished from the sight, he is not shut out from the mercy of God. The judgment is tempered with compassion. Cain, though more terrified than penitent, receives the assurance of protection from blood-revenge. The favour of a token for good is granted to the first murderer; and symbolism is consecrated, in its earliest use, to hold a pledge of Divine love before the sinner's eyes.

THE GENEALOGY OF THE CAINITES.

Chap. iv. 17-24.

In passing to the next section in the narrative, we are conscious of a change in the general tone and style. If the story of Cain and Abel (vers. 2-16) has been taken from the same source as the story of Paradise, it is possible that vv. 17-24 have been derived from a separate stream of tradition, marked by a more curt and archaic, a less fluent and poetic style. If its separate origin is shown by the general difference of treatment, the greater antiquity of this source of tradition is also shown by the fact that, in ver. 15, there is, in all probability, an allusion to the Song of Lamech (ver. 24). Further evidence of its separate origin is forthcoming from the picture given of Cain. No restless fugitive or homeless nomad, he marries, he settles down and builds a city (ver. 17). No further reference is made to the crime he has committed; none to any sentence of dishonour that has been pronounced upon him. He stands at the head of a list of names; he is followed by Enoch, Irad, Mehujael, Methusael, and Lamech, with his sons Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain. The whole passage is clearly intended to describe the beginnings of primitive eastern civilisation. Cain and Enoch are the founders of town communities (ver. 17); Lamech is the first polygamist (ver. 19); Jabal (not Abel, ver. 2) is the originator of pastoral life, Jubal of musical arts, Tubal of working in metals (ver. 22). The civilisation thus alluded to is regarded as having continued without interruption since the days of these patriarchs. When it is said that "Jabal" was "the father of such as dwell in tents and have cattle," there is clearly no thought of a flood having destroyed all the descendants of Jabal; nor is such a catastrophe supposed as having overtaken the descendants of Jubal, "such as handle the harp and pipe" (ver. 21).

The structure and contents of these verses (17-24) suggest that they belong to an early tradition in which the story of the Flood did not appear. If so, they may probably be derived from the same source as chap. vi. 1-4 and, possibly, xi. 1-9.

This hypothesis will account for the difficulties, unimportant in themselves, that arise on the surface of the narrative. The prophetic narrator selected his material from different sources. He did not concern himself with reconciling, in every particular, divergences that presented themselves in the different narratives. The genealogy which he has preserved is that of Cain; and it does not appear from vers. 16-24 that any inherently evil character is associated with Cain's family in the tradition from which he borrows these verses.

The object of the genealogy in chap. iv. is to trace the origin of primitive institutions; the object of the genealogy in chap. v. is to trace the ancestors of Noah. The resemblance in the names of the two lists is remarkable; and can hardly be accidental. In chap. iv. we have Cain, Enoch, Irad, Mehujael, Methusael, Lamech, and Lamech's three sons; in chap. v. we have Seth, Enosh, *Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech*, Noah and his three sons. Reckoning Adam with these names, we have in the one case a list of seven, in the other a list of ten names; in each case, the last name splits up into three branches.

The numbers *seven* and *ten* were doubtless chosen to render the lists easier of remembrance. Such artificial aids to the recollection of genealogies were commonly employed. Thus the number "ten" is the number employed in the genealogies of Genesis xi. and Ruth iv. 10; the number "seven" is the unit in the genealogy of Matthew i.

What the names of the antediluvian patriarchs signified, we can hardly guess. The conjecture that the Cainite genealogy gives the races of Western, the Sethite genealogy those of Eastern Asia, has nothing to recommend it.

The names themselves are a puzzle to scholars; and it is even doubted whether they are all of Semitic origin.

The similarity of the two lists makes it possible that we have in them two divergent versions of the same original prehistoric tradition. In such a tradition, proper names, especially those of unusual sound or foreign origin, were apt to be confused and altered.

Perhaps we should not be far wrong in regarding them as the relics of a list of demigods or heroes, whose names in the earliest days of Hebrew tradition filled up the blank between the creation of man and the age of the patriarchs. Such a group would be in accordance with the analogy of the primitive legends of other races. The removal of every taint of such a superstition, the representation of these names as simple men, would be the work of the Israelite narrator.

The compiler of Genesis, finding the two versions of the Patriarchal list, the one in the Prophetic, the other in the Priestly Narrative, assigned to the Cainites the origin of secular supremacy, to the Sethites the direct ancestry of the chosen race. He explains his treatment of the two genealogies by the verses iv. 25, 26, which form the transition from the prophetic to the priestly writing.

As has often been pointed out, the different materials out of which the narratives have been constructed are nowhere more plainly to be recognised than here. The same writer, who records the birth of Seth and Enosh in chap. v. 3-8, is not likely to have recorded them in the section immediately preceding (iv. 25, 26). Again, whereas in iv. 26 we are told that "then began men to call upon the name of the Lord," we are surely not reading words from the same hand that describes the ceremonial act of worship performed by Cain and Abel (iv. 3, 4).

In thus distinguishing three different *strata* of Israelite tradition, represented in vers. 1-16, 17-24, 25-26, our object is to realise the method by which the narratives were actually compiled. The fact that the narratives are neither complete nor continuous, but fragmentary and various, receives from criticism an intelligible explanation. It enables us also to perceive that the object of the narrator is not to give the most full narrative, but that which best serves his purpose of conveying to his countrymen spiritual instruction, and of throwing upon the dim traditions of the past the same illumination which the Spirit of Jehovah, by other hands, shed upon the more recent history of the chosen people.

Before passing to the narrative of the Deluge, we must briefly notice the genealogy of the Sethites in chap. v., and the difficulty that has been occasioned by the great age ascribed to the antediluvian patriarchs. But we must reserve this discussion to a later communication.