

A Muse: B'reishit

“Surely if you do right there is uplift, but if you do not do right sin couches at the door; its urge is toward you, you can be its master. Cain said to his brother Abel...and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.” (Genesis 4:7-8)

Many of our commentaries have indicated concern with the punishment Cain received. In murdering Abel, Cain’s punishment is to roam the earth with the mark of Cain on him. These commentaries ask why wasn’t he killed. Certainly this would have been in keeping with the ethos of the biblical text that says “whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6).

When dealing with the episode of Cain and Abel another question comes to mind. How is it that Cain was placed in this predicament in the first place? God, by electing to prefer one sacrifice to another set the stage by which jealousy and the cycle of vengeance would be put into motion. In choosing one gift to another God has presented to Cain the need to choose also and decide how to deal with the insult. How would his relationship with his brother now be defined and what would be his relationship with God?

The dilemma suggested in this text isn’t dissimilar to the story of Adam and Eve. By placing before them the temptation of eating from the forbidden, they were placed in a situation of making a choice that would forever impact on their relationship to each other and their relationship with God. In both cases, the outcomes suggest that their relationship with each other have been altered forever and their relationship with God is in need of repair.

The text apart from raising these questions teaches us a lesson. The text suggests that Cain reacted impulsively when killing Abel. God chose to punish him severely but not so harshly as to have him killed. By so doing God reveals that humankind is capable of rehabilitation, even when guilty of murder.

