

The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE
Viewing the ancient messages of our Bibles in their cultural & historical context. Understanding the journey of our biblical heritages.

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Am I My Brother's Keeper?

By Jim Myers

In the course of time Cain brought a gift to Yahweh of the fruit of the ground. And Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And Yahweh gazed toward Abel and toward for his gift; but toward Cain and toward his gift he did not gaze. (Genesis 4:3-5a)

Able brought his gift to Yahweh and was overjoyed as he returned to his animals. Yahweh loved his gift and the whole time didn't take His eyes off him. He would never forget that trip as long as he lived. Just imagine how happy that would make you. What would it be like to be in the presence of God, have His complete attention, and know how much you pleased Him? The only thing that should have bothered Able was that at the same time Yahweh had been focused on him, He completely ignored his older brother Cain and his gifts.

Put yourself in Cain's sandals. What would it have been like to stand there with your gifts and not be noticed? Why was your brother getting all of Yahweh's attention? What thoughts would have been going through your head? What would you have thought about the way Yahweh treated you? How would you have felt about your brother Able?

And Cain burned exceedingly and his face fell. And Yahweh said to Cain, "Why are you burning? And why has your face fallen? (4:5b)

Cain grew so angry that his facial expression reflected exactly what he was feeling inside. Yahweh, and probably anyone who saw him, didn't have to be able to read minds to know that he was angry. If Cain's gifts hadn't got Yahweh's attention, his anger did. Try to imagine what Cain thought when Yahweh asked him why he was angry. I bet it not only came as a complete surprise, but have almost left him speechless. What do you think about Yahweh's reaction to Cain and his gifts? Shouldn't Yahweh have understood why Cain was angry? Shouldn't Yahweh's role be considered too?

How different would things have been if Yahweh had simply acknowledged Cain and his gifts? Didn't He understand that Cain would be affected by how He treated him? After all, wasn't He God, while Cain was just a man? Did He really like Able and his gifts that much more or did the author have something else in mind as he wrote this story? Asking questions about the role of God may some people uneasy, depending on their particular biblical heritage. I remember how I felt when I first started participating in Bible studies led by a rabbi. He examined every thing and all questions were allowed, including God's role. I asked him about this and he answered by sharing a well known story from the Talmud.

On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward all of the arguments in the world [in favor of his position on a certain matter of ritual cleanliness], but they [his colleagues] did not accept them from him.

He said to them: "If the law agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it." The carob-tree leaped a hundred cubits from its place in the garden.

The sages replied: "No proof can be brought from a carob-tree."

He said to them: "If the law agrees with me, let this stream of water prove it." The stream of water began to flow backwards.

The sages replied: "No proof can be brought from a stream of water."

Again he said to them: "If the law agrees with me, let the walls of this schoolhouse prove it." The walls began to shake and incline to fall.

Rabbi Joshua leaped up and rebuked the walls saying: "When disciples of sages engage in legal dispute what is your relevance?" In honor of Rabbi Joshua the walls did not tumble. In honor of Rabbi Eliezer they did not right themselves, and are still inclined even to this day.

Again Rabbi Eliezer said to the sages: "If the law agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven." A divine voice came forth and said: "Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, for in all matters the law agrees with him!"

But Rabbi Joshua rose to his feet again and exclaimed: "It is not in heaven." [cf. Deut. 30:12; Rabbi Jeremiah explained, "The Law was given at Sinai and we no longer give heed to heavenly voices, for in that Law it is stated: 'One follows the majority.'" God's truth, divine law, is not determined by miracles or heavenly voices, but by the collegium of rabbis, men learned in the law, committed to the law and expert in its application to the life of the pious community."]

Some time later, Rabbi Nathan met the prophet Elijah and asked him: "What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do when rebuked by Rabbi Joshua?"

Elijah replied: "He laughed with joy saying 'My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me.'" [Crawford, World Religions and Global Ethics, p. 166; Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59a-b]

The rabbi explained that the problem with Rabbi Eliezer's approach was that rather than argue the case based on its merits, he attempted to influence the decisions of the others by miracles; including a bat kol (heavenly voice). The matter under discussion had been addressed in the Torah, which was given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai by God. The problem arose over how the words of the Torah should be understood, and was responsible for interpreting them. The conclusion was that it was the responsibility of the rabbis to interpret the Torah. But, the way that they should do it was to argue each case based on its merits, which required that everything be examined -- nothing was to be overlooked.

As the rabbi and I discussed this subject he asked, "If you heard a voice from the sky; how would you know it was God speaking? If you saw a miracle; would that prove that God was the caused of it? He then quoted another very famous passage from the Mishnah (Oral Law):

Moses received Torah from Sinai and handed it down to Joshua; and Joshua to the Elders; and the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets handed it down to the members of the Great Assembly.

They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise many students, and make a fence for the Torah. (Avot 1:1)

This is one of the oldest sections of the Mishnah and was probably known by Yeshua (Jesus). The rabbi explained that the Hebrew word translated "handed it down" actually means "handed down and relinquished the right to interpret it." Each generation receives the Torah with its interpretations from the previous generation. It is now their responsibility to receive them, accept them, study them, experience them, adapt to them and decide how to fulfill them. Each generation must also understand that what they do or do not do may have long term and unexpected consequences for generations to come.

Now let's return to Yahweh's response to Cain's anger and fallen face. What Yahweh next said was not only for Cain; it was for everyone that would ever hear the story. It probably came as a surprise to Cain, as well as to the ancient audience:

Surely, if you do well, you shall be upstanding; but if you do not do well, sin will be a ROBHEs at your door; its desire shall be for you, but you will be able to master it. (Genesis 4:6-7)

Check your favorite translation and see if it has a note about verse seven. The comments below are from A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part One by Professor U. Cassuto (p. 208). I believe you will find them very enlightening:

This is one of the most difficult and obscure Biblical sentences. In ancient times the Rabbis counted it among the indeterminate verses (B. Yoma, 52a-b, and parallel passages), because of the doubt in regard to the syntactic relationship of the word Se'ET (accepted???). In modern times the espositors have found the text so hard to elucidate that some, like Gunkel and Jacob, have actually abandoned all hope of understanding it, and have left part of it untranslated. The attempts made to interpret the verse in its entirety, or to emend it on the basis of the Septuagint, which is even more obscure than the Masoretic recension, have encountered numerous difficulties.

Professor Casuto then spends the next five pages working through the verse word by word. The translation of another key word, "ROBHES" (couching?) is also very important. Let's turn again to the comments of Professor Cassuto to help you understand its ancient meaning (p. 210-212).

When a lion rests on the ground we say that it couches, when it stands up on its feet, we say it rises up or that it lifts itself. Precisely the antithesis we can find in our verse. If you do well, that is, if you behave well and perform good works, you will be able to rise up and stand firmly on your feet, but if you do not do well, the opposite will befall you: not upstanding but couching on the ground.

The exact meaning of this couching we must determine by examining the clause. To begin with, it suffers from a grammatical irregularity: the discord between sin, which is feminine, and ROBHEs which is masculine. . . The ROBHEs, which is sin, will long for you (its desire shall be for you), that is, it will endeavor to have dominion over you, to keep you near to itself, and to make you couch on the ground just as it does. If once you start to sin, sin will draw you to itself more and more. . . .

It is similarly unnecessary to mention all of the interpretations offered in regard to the preceding expression, *at the door*. The verse simply says *door (entrance)*. . . It means, apparently, your door in a general sense, that is, the place through which you are wont to go in and out constantly; in other words, it will always be found in your path.

Now, having explained each difficult expression in the Divine utterance to Cain separately, we shall be able to grasp the connection between them, and the sense of the address as a whole:

Why, my son, are you grieved, and why do you hang your head? There is no cause for it; you have only to do well and then you will be able to stand firmly on your feet, with upright stature. But if you fail to do well and begin to sin, then the sin shall become a ROBHES unto you, and this ROBHES will long to bring you low and cause you to couch upon the ground like itself. Nevertheless you are not delivered into its power, and if only you have the desire, you can oppose it and overcome it and free yourself from its influence (*but you will be able to master it*).

Pay special attention to the comments about the ROBHES.

- (1) It will long for you.
- (2) Its desire will be for you.
- (3) It will long to bring you low.

If Cain's mother heard Yahweh's words to her son, she would have probably remembered what Yahweh had said to the serpent in the garden.

And Yahweh the God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field. On your belly shall you crawl, and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life. And I will put hatred between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He shall crush your head, and you shall crave his heel." (Genesis 3:14-15; Cassuto p. 161)

Her ROBHES had been her desire to be like God; her son's was his anger. She had been enticed by the serpent's words, which led her to do what she did. Would anger entice Cain the same way? Yahweh provided the way for Cain to master his anger. If he did what Yahweh said he would be protected from the threat that was ready to "spring upon him." Cain was told that all he had to do was "do well." What did that mean? The definitions for the Hebrew word translated "do well" (Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew Lexicon) are:

- 1) make glad, rejoice; 2) do good to, deal well with; 3) do well or thoroughly; 4) make a thing good, right, beautiful.

The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (p. 408) notes that the word is an alternative form of TOV, which is usually translated "good."

"TOV indicates that something is beautiful; pleasing to the eyes. The contextual use of the word in the opening chapters of Genesis is that for

something to be TOV it must protect life, preserve life and enhance the quality of life.”

Let’s take another look at what Yahweh said to Cain, but this time with the above meaning of TOV inserted.

“. . . you have only to protect life, preserve life and enhance the quality of life and then you will be able to stand firmly on your feet, with upright stature. But if you fail to protect life, preserve life and enhance the quality of life and begin to miss the mark, then the sin shall long for you, its desire will be for you, and it will long to bring you down . . .”

If you have a Christian biblical heritage your understanding of “sin” may be very different from that of the Jewish culture. In Hebrew “sin” is defined as, “to stray from the path” or “to miss the mark.” It is viewed like a stain, not an intrinsic state. Sin affects the ritual purity of a person. After one sins the goal is to remove the stain by TESHUVAH (repentance), which means to get back on the right path and do what God has instructed man to do. This includes acts of TOV -- acts that protected, preserved and enhanced the quality of life; specifically the lives those harmed by the sin. The fact that this was possible is reflected in Yahweh’s words:

“. . .but you will be able to master it.” (Genesis 4:7b)

Only Cain possessed the power to determine his ultimate destiny. The above debate between the rabbis and Rabbi Eliezer echoes the same lesson. Cain has been given Yahweh’s instructions, now he must decide how and whether he would do exactly what Yahweh had said. No one could do it for him.

And Cain appointed a place to meet Abel his brother. And it was when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. (4:8)

Why did Cain murder Able? Was it Able’s fault that Yahweh had paid more attention to him? Did he think Able did something to get Yahweh to ignore him? Cain did something that angry people have done many times. When they cannot do harm directly to the one that they are mad at, they harm someone or something that the person cares about. Apparently Cain realized that trying to do anything directly to Yahweh was not an option. Therefore, he decided to hurt Yahweh by harming something that He cared about – Able. If Able was out of the way the Yahweh should give him more attention. Well, he was right about that, because he would soon have Yahweh’s full attention.

And Yahweh said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" (Gen. 4:9a)

Didn't Yahweh already know what had happened to Able? He is God. Cain responds with one of the famous quotes in the Hebrew Bible.

And he said, "I do not **know**. Am I my brother's **keeper**?" (4:9b)

Two of the words Cain used hint back to the events in the Garden of Eden -- YADA (to know) and SHAMAR (to guard, protect or keep). His father had been told to **SHAMAR** (guard and protect) her and not to eat from the Tree of the **YADA** (knowledge) of TOV (good) and RA (evil). Did Cain lie or did he not understand what had happened to Able? This was the first time he had seen a dead person. The ancient audience may have been contemplating another question that Cain didn't ask -- Wasn't God supposed to protect His people? The ancient author doesn't answer either question.

And now **you are cursed from the ground**, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's bloods from your hand. When you till the ground, **it shall no longer yield its strength** to you; you shall be a **vagrant** and **wander** on the earth." (Genesis 4:11-12)

Both creation accounts share a common lesson – death came when one family member betrayed another. In the first account, a man betrayed his wife. In the second, one brother betrayed another. His father's decision not only led to their deaths, but ultimately the deaths of all of their future descendants. In the second, the result was the death of their son and his brother. God provided the instructions in both cases that, if followed, would have protected everyone's lives.

In neither case did God directly intervene to directly protect Cain's mother or brother. But after the harm had been done, God judged the guilty parties and punished them. Interestingly, in the first account God cursed the ground; but, in the second Cain was cursed "from the ground." The outcomes were the same. Once again the one who violated God's instructions was forced from his land.

The reason the people were forced from their homeland was that family members betrayed other family members. They made the decision to either commit an act that would take the life of another, or they remained silent, watched, and did not intervene to prevent it. Even though God had given them the instructions that would have saved lives, they chose not to obey. This was obvious in Cain's father's case, because he silently stood by and watched the serpent entice his wife to eat the deadly fruit. This may have also been the case with regard to Cain too. Where were Cain's parents during this event? Did they not notice that Cain was so angry or wonder where Able was?

The opening chapters of Genesis set the stage for the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. The pressing question on the minds of the Jewish people who had been deported to Babylon had to be – Why did this happen? It was during that period that the Hebrew canon was created and it appears that the author's

answer to that question was first and foremost on his mind too. The greatest potential danger to Jewish people does not come from those on the outside. Each tribal member's role is to guard and protect the other members of the tribe. The fall of Israel came as result of not being the keeper of their brother. God's promise was that as long as they obey His instructions they would dwell in their land safely. However, they must also understand that God will not intervene and prevent the consequences of disobedience.

I believe that this is the lesson that Jewish Yeshua (Jesus) fully understood taught his followers too. Remember what he said when he was asked which was the most important commandment?

Yeshua said unto him, " ` You shall love **Yahweh your God** with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, ` You shall love **your neighbor** as yourself.' **On these two commandments hang** all the **Torah and the Prophets.**" (Matthew 22:34-40)

The way one loves God is demonstrated by how one loves His people. This message is found in one form or another throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the Mishnah, the Talmud and the Synoptic Gospels. It is a lesson that each generation must learn and pass on to next. This is the light that the Jewish people are to take to the rest of the world. Which is more important to God – the correct religious doctrines or the fact that we guard and protect one another? Are you your brother's keeper? Is your brother your keeper? **BHC**

July Memorials

In Loving Memory

**MARJORIE
NEELLEY
PITNER**

**December 30, 1914
July 17, 2007**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to seek those
qualities of mind and heart which they
shared when we walked life's journey
together. May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and noblest
strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our loyalty to
those things which we valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion and our
biblical heritage. As long as we live, they
too will live; for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.*

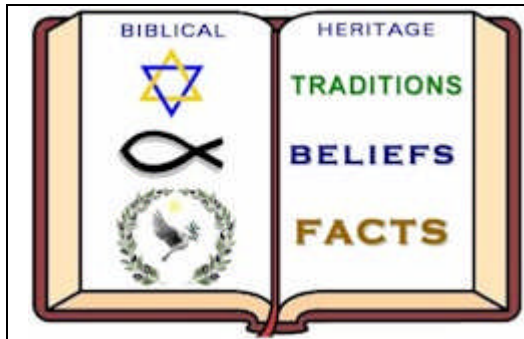
(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor Reflections - The
New Mahzor - The Prayer Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**FANNIE EDNA
GRAHAM
WARD**

**July 15, 1891
July 10, 1982**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*



BHC's Primary Objective

Protect, preserve, and enhance the quality of life by raising the awareness of our biblical heritages and by providing factual information about their origin and historical development throughout the centuries.

Thank you for reading this newsletter.

Matters of belief & faith are important factors in the quality of life we lead, because they affect the religious, political and social environments in which we live. They influence how we relate to other people by creating the moral and value systems we hold. The Bible and the heritages linked to it are held by over 2,000,000,000 people today. It is extremely important that they have factual information about the critical components of the Belief Systems that influence many of their daily decisions and create the realities through which they view life.

One of our most important missions is to raise the awareness of the power biblical heritages play in Belief Systems by providing factual information so people are able to accurately understand the origins and historical development of the biblical heritages over the centuries. Incorrect information leads to bad and harmful decisions.

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