

St. Ephrem the Syrian / Ephrem Graecus

A Homily on Cain and Abel / Sermo de Cain, et de Abel caedo

(from codex 99 Pantocrator Monastery, Mt. Athos, fol. 375r - 396r)

Greek text: K.G. Phrantzolas, 'Οσίου Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου ἔργα, vol. 7, Thessalonica: To Perivoli tis

Panagias, 1998: 199-217.

*(page numbers of the Greek text indicated in brackets)*

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I desired to draw carefully from the divine words— from a pure well— the spiritual meaning of the deeds and sayings; and so I prayed to understand clearly. When I had collected my mind, at once I extended my focus to the very depth of the words. There I saw in a field young and handsome boys, entirely beautiful. They were going slowly; then arriving at a certain place, one of them ran up and killed the other.

And I, miserable as I am, was perplexed seeing this spiteful and unjust slaughter. I wanted to learn the reason why that one, with a fearless hand, killed the other. [200] I eagerly desired to be aloft in the air at the decisive moment and find out through the meaning of the words the true account. The slain boy lay there like a lamb in a field, and the slayer stood there without fear, and left unconcerned.

On account of this, my brothers, I rushed to the Scriptures, wishing to learn the truth about these two. The divine narrative watered me thoroughly with knowledge about these two; a filtered

image formed bit by bit of these two, the one who was slain and the slayer. Now, brothers, be spiritually receptive and open your ears to the hearing of the narration. For just as the shepherd leads the sheep to nourish them with life-giving water, in order to feed his flock, so too is the one speaking words of grace for the benefit of mankind.

These two, Cain and Abel, were children of Adam and Eve. They were born after the fall. The first born [Cain] was from the beginning self-willed. He heard his parents continuously recalling the expulsion from paradise and frequently crying over how they had been unworthy of such grace. Cain, observing these things, eagerly sought to be found well-pleasing. [201] They both brought to God sacrifices, the gifts of their own labors, so that they too might be worthy of the joy of paradise. Cain brought gifts of the earth to God— not the first-fruits, but the second, placing himself ahead of the one who gave the gifts. But his brother Abel offered all the most outstanding sheep from his flock to God. God who foreknows knew the thoughts of both, and the offering of Abel was found to be more acceptable and pure than the offering of Cain. God then accepted the sacrifice of Abel because of the purity of his heart; but he did not give heed to Cain's. God wished to lead him to the straight path and to make known to him that he knows his greedy heart. For our Lord seeks from us not gifts but a pure heart.

When Cain saw that his brother Abel's offering was accepted, he became very upset. He stopped worshipping and praying to God, and instead became angry and wrathful. But the compassionate God, who is slow to anger, wanted to lead him to the straight path and make him understand that if he repented, he would accept his gifts. God said to him: "why are you angry? On yourself, Cain, lies this sin." But Cain, not wanting to turn [202] his heart toward compassion, departed from the

presence of God with anger, saying: “I will go up to the mountains and I will open the heavens,<sup>1</sup> and there I will converse with God most high. God has grieved me and has honored Abel before me, the first-born; he favorably accepted his sacrifice, and has loved him more than me.”

God was looking from atop the mountains, while Cain with great daring was approaching to the gates of heaven and became angry against him. The mountains, seeing the great rashness of Cain, how he dared to approach the summit of those mountains, straightway turned into a plain. Cain, seeing the mountains becoming hidden in the earth and rising up again, was astonished in his heart. The strength of his body was exhausted so that he could no longer reach and ascend the mountains. For whichever mountains he wished to ascend, they perceived [this] and turned into a plain. This is because all things come about by the will of God, and his creations gladly obey their Creator.

So Cain, exhausted, sat in a certain place and said to himself: “what shall I do, since I am unable to reach the heavens? For I see that even the mountains fight against me.”<sup>2</sup> Behold, [203] I see a high mountain and heaven above it. If I wish to ascend, the mountain anticipates me and turns into a plain. What shall I do now? He resides in the heavens, and I am conquered. Everything is obedient to him. He resides in the heavens, and he sees everything upon the earth and rules over it; the darkness is unable to approach his light. For he walks upon the wings of the wind.<sup>3</sup> And how shall I aggrieve

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<sup>1</sup> It is common to imagine God residing on a mountain in ancient Near Eastern literature. A detailed discussion of how Syriac writers depict paradise as a mountain may be found in Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 49-52. This idea of ascending the mountain to confront God is also found in Isaac of Antioch’s *Homily on Abel and Cain*. See Glenthoj, *Cain and Abel in Syriac and Greek Writers*, 44-46.

<sup>2</sup> In a late 4th / early 5th century poem from the Bodmer Papyrus, in which Cain utters a lament after killing Abel, similar language is used: “Whither shall I go? Whither shall I flee? / Through the air? Across the track of the sea or the land? They know my crime. / Bit by bit the earth and the sea reject me.” Hurst and Rudhardt, *P. Bodmer 33*.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 17:11.

him, just as he aggrieved me by not accepting my offering? If I set on fire the mountains and the forests, they again regrow in greater strength. If I attack the wild beasts and cattle, they increase in number and they compound my grief. I observe that Abel's offering was accepted even before he approached the Most High. When we both stood there holding our sacrifices, the fire came down and received only his offering. But I was left holding my sacrifice in my hands. So I will aggrieve him, as he did me. Since I am unable to ascend to heaven to say what is in my heart, I have found a way to aggrieve him: his beloved Abel I will kill, and grief will afflict him, as it afflicted me."<sup>4</sup>

Cain, after thinking over these things, was moved to murder his brother, and he said to himself: "I will go to my parents, keeping this plan secret. [204] With flattering words I will deceive my brother, so that once I've found the right moment, I can draw him away from our parents and lead him into the mountains so that they will not grieve over him, since they won't see him dying. But rather I will go joyfully, so that I can draw Abel away from our parents without suspicion, and slaughter him like a sheep in the field, and I shall be relieved from my affliction. For we two are the only ones bringing sacrifices to the Most High from our fruits and livestock. And look, I and my sacrifices became loathsome on the earth, and my brother and his offerings were accepted. Once Abel has been eliminated, there will be no one else making offering to the Most High, and my grief will become joy."

When Cain deliberated these things by himself, he rose up and went to his parents, keeping his evil plan hidden. When he came to his parents he said: "now I realize clearly that my brother Abel is beloved to the Most High, because he loves God. So let him hasten to appease God on my behalf.

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<sup>4</sup> In an anonymous Syriac dialogue hymn, Cain expresses a similar motivation of avenging himself by

For what is more acceptable than this, to love God and to serve your parents? Because I have not done these things, therefore my offering was not accepted, as was the offering of lord Abel. Now let him beseech God with me, so that my offering too will be accepted.” With these words, [205] he went up to him with deceit and kissed his brother in the presence of his parents, so that he might take him from them.

Abel the guileless and true servant of God listened with delight and urged Cain to ascend the mountains and offer worship to God, saying: “even you know, brother, if you would listen: God does not say about the one who provokes him, that he will die— as you think, not having your hopes in the one God, the Creator. Don’t you see the tears of Adam and Eve, our parents, how they weep over their offense, having transgressed the commandment of the Creator, and are utterly unable to be comforted? Since they have transgressed the commandment of God, they by their own will have placed themselves in exile, and grieve over this from now on to eternity. But I recommend that you approach God without hesitation in prayer, so that you might not also finish out your days in sorrow— as our parents do. Look, brother, I say all this to you.”

Cain answered him and said: “I also know this, since I have made a mistake and have fallen into offense. But come with me as a brother; for I know that you are a friend of God. So pray for me and come with me without hesitation into the field, [206] so that we may offer a sacrifice to God. For it is a good thing to beseech God.” With other conciliatory words he persuaded his brother, and said— “look, my brother, I have told you what is appropriate: do not shrink from coming with me to bring a sacrifice to God.”

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attacking God’s friend (Brock, *Treasure-House of Mysteries* 53).

And Abel said: “it is more appropriate for you to go alone and say, ‘have mercy on me, O God.’<sup>5</sup> Approach with humility and say: ‘be merciful, Lord; I have sinned as an earthly man, as a mortal have I have gone wrong, as one who is weak I have fallen.’ Let your tears flow. Let your cry come to the gates of heaven. Put away all your wickedness and say: ‘I will die here, Lord, in the presence of your mercies, unless you pardon me.’ In such a manner repent before God who loves mankind, and you will receive pardon. For our God is such a God, who is patient and full of mercy, and accepts those who turn to him. Likewise I rejoice at your return to God.”

For the blameless and pure Abel recognized his brother’s wickedness. Although he advised him extensively in this way, he did not bend the hardness of his heart; instead, Cain was the more eager for the slaughter, and he said these things to Abel: “have compassion on me, my brother, and come with me to the field and entreat God on my behalf, in order that he be reconciled with me.”

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Having heard these things from Cain, Abel had compassion on him and said: “am I really the reason for your pleasing reconciliation to God? Come then, let us go quickly.” But Eve heard their frequent conversation— and when Abel rose up to depart, her heart broke and she said to them: “my beloved children, this is not the time for sacrifices. Truly, my children, my heart is greatly disturbed, and I am disturbed seeing you together and in trouble. What is this haste and what is this clamor of yours? Cain, where are you taking Abel? What is happening to you? Perhaps the serpent that deceived us has done this again out of envy, so that having deceived you, it will make you sacrifice before the appointed time? For now is not the time for a sacrifice.” Then Adam, seeing the

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 18:13.

peacefulness of Abel and the struggle of Cain, was sorrowful and said: “go, children, and having made the sacrifice, return to us.” Eve said to Cain: “look, my children, I am mother to both of you, and I am also worried by this, until you return home to me.”

When they went up calmly, they both cared about one thing— how to bring the offering to God. Having arrived in a certain place, Cain began to move against Abel. He changed his disposition and made rough [208] his manner of talk with Abel. He charged an unjust accusation against him and said these things: “come, tell me what is the reason that I am hated by God, and you are loved by him? Answer me quickly. Are we not both children of Adam? Why was your offering more acceptable than mine? And now for that reason you will begin to say ‘since God loved me more than my brother, he provided me with all of creation to enjoy as I wish.’ But I will make it that not only will you not enjoy it, but even your life I will quickly take from you, because you have become a thorn to me. With your insatiate desire you have desired all of my inheritance.” Then he moved against him, like a savage beast, grinding his teeth, ready to destroy him.

Then the blameless Abel, seeing Cain moving against him in this manner, was completely stunned. He fell down before Cain and entreated him with words of pleading, wishing to turn him toward mercy. Seeing him so hard-hearted and eager for the slaughter, he said to him: “Cain, are these the words you said to our parents? Did you not say, entreating them with tears, ‘I wish to pray to God as a pure person, but I have no access to him? Thus I want [209] to take Abel my brother— and a friend of God— with me, and I want him to come with me as a beloved brother and for him to fall down before the Most High, so that he may be reconciled with me.’ Indeed, you have deceived me, brother, with flattering words, in the same way that the crafty serpent in his knavery deceived our

parents. You have become for me, my brother, a terrible snake by the roadside<sup>6</sup> secretly emitting your poison. You have become, my brother, an evil farmer, who sees a fruitful plant, grows envious, and then destroys it and tears out its roots. You have become for me, my brother, like an inexperienced shepherd, who sees a good ram, then, being jealous, slaughters it. Tell me, what is my crime? Did you ever hear me talking about this land or its beauty, that I would take it as my inheritance? Look, my brother, I tell you now all these things are yours. Take them, I beg you. Grant me this only, to see our parents. But know that in no way have I hindered your sacrifice. For I have not said to the Most High that he should not accept your sacrifice; and isn't this why you are angry with me? God knows from the start the intention of each, and he knows your heart; before you form an idea, he knows what you are about to do. Relent, my brother, and accept my tears; allow me to kiss [210] the gray hair of Adam and the face of Eve. Look, their faces are before the doors, continually looking intently for when they might see us returning to them. What good is it for you if you now shed my blood?"

"Don't, my brother, I beg you— it will not be good for your soul. For you there will soon be an inquiry, and what sort of defense will you find for this before the face of God? Do not suppose that you can lie to God. It will become known before his eyes. For he searches out the hearts, and he sees into them. I beseech you, be done with the anger you have against me, and have mercy upon the gray hair of our parents. Have mercy upon me, your brother who falls down before you. Come, let us fall down in worship to the God who loves mankind, and do not think to add grief upon grief and sorrow upon sorrow. Do not blind the eyes of our father Adam, nor destroy the sight of our mother Eve. If you do this, where will you go, or where will you hide from the face of God? With what eyes will you look

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 49:17. "And let Dan become a snake on the road lying in ambush on the path."



upon our parents? And what will you say to them, when they will ask you about poor Abel? How will you open your mouth to give a defense to this piteous question? How will your ears endure it? How will your heart handle the inconsolable grief [211] of both of them saying to you, ‘where is Abel your brother?’ My brother, do not compel Adam to come here searching out where my body lies. And so finding me, how will he stoop down over me when he sees me lying in the field like a lamb that was slain?<sup>7</sup> Do you want Eve also to come and sing a funeral lament, anointing her gray hair with the blood of her son? Know, brother, what it is you are about to do; come to your senses and shed tears to God and don’t do this. But I say to you, the earth together with the whole world is before you to enjoy. It is enough for me to see your angelic face. With tears I beg you, but you, drunk in your rage, don’t pay attention. How can you have closed your eyes? How can you have shut up your ears? How can you have closed off your heart so as not to hear my words, but move to kill me unjustly?”

“I beg you therefore, my brother, that you tell Adam and Eve that they should come and see this new sight<sup>8</sup> and my bitter slaughter. And just as they enjoyed pleasure in paradise, and then became naked after disobeying God, they will see in this place my bitter slaughter, and they will grieve a second time. Just as they were cast out from paradise, in the same way they will grieve also over the corpse of the newly slain. Allow Adam to kiss my poor body in a final and pitiable embrace.”<sup>9</sup>

[212] “Receive, o earth, my blood, and cry out mightily to God, that I may be avenged soon. Guard, o earth, guard my body from the beasts and the birds, lest I become food for the beasts, seeing

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<sup>7</sup> See Isaiah 53:7 and Revelation 5:6, 5:12.

<sup>8</sup> This notion of the “new sight”— the first death— is picked up at length in Eve’s speech which follows.

that Adam is not here to cover me. O heavens, hear the piteous cries of the one unjustly slain and do not be silent. Weep for me, all the pleasant things of the earth. The sheep that I tended in the fields and hills, let them weep for me. The springs of the waters, let them weep for me. For no longer will I see them while grazing my sheep. May you lament for me as well, the meadow with its flowers, which I will no longer see.”<sup>10</sup>

After Abel said these words capable of softening even a stony heart, the unmerciful and compassionless Cain, like an adder<sup>11</sup> that plugs its ear, stood up. And like a beast he attacked the righteous one and considered how to complete the murder. The unmerciful one raised his hand, and with a single blow he struck down his very own brother. The wretched one rejoiced and then said to himself: “What has become of you, Abel, since your sacrifices were accepted? Look at what you suffered and look how the eager offerer<sup>12</sup> now lies! Yet I still live, while you are dead. What now remains for me, the wretched one? I must now consider what explanation to give to Adam and Eve about [213] Abel the offerer. For I know that both of them are standing in front of the doors awaiting us. When they see me returning alone, and since they do not know what happened, they will ask me what happened to Abel. If they begin to ask me why I am coming alone, I will answer them with a gruff response: why is it that you ask me about my brother? Does he not have the right to go wherever

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<sup>9</sup> In the funeral custom of the Byzantine tradition, the service ends with a final kiss. This is also reflected in the hymnody for the service: “Come, brothers, let us give a last kiss to the departed.” Δεῦτε τελευταῖον ἀσπασμόν, δώμεν ἀδελφοὶ τῷ θανόντι.

<sup>10</sup> Abel’s lament is full of rhetorical flourishes, in particular his use of *anaphora*, or the repetition of initial phrases.

<sup>11</sup> Compare the earlier snake comparison earlier. The phrasing here is similar to Psalm 57.5.

<sup>12</sup> This word “offerer” (προσκομιστής) is only found in Ephrem Graecus. The word appears a few sentences later in the genitive form (προσκομιστοῦ) again with Abel. The *Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzität* (ed. Trapp) cites this text as the only example of this word.

he wants? Am I my brother's keeper?<sup>13</sup> And then, having spoken so roughly to them, they will fear asking me anything else about him. Even if they are disturbed and vexed about him, they are unable to destroy me. Because they again are the only ones upon the earth, and there is no other person upon the earth who can confront me. The angels did not see me, and I am not scared by this, but I will go forth proudly.”

As the wretched one made plans to say this lie to his parents, the divine judgment of God now began to avenge Abel. Just as Cain was about to speak to his parents, he was confronted by the frightening voice of God. He then replied to the fearful judge and God: “am I my brother's keeper?” Again the divine voice spoke [214] to him: “O Cain, why did you kill your brother and secretly hide his blood, which cries out to me from beneath the earth? Why did you do this? How did he wrong you, by bringing his sacrifice with perfect righteousness? From the beginning you have been envious and malicious.<sup>14</sup> Now, accept the sentence that fits your crime, which you committed with envy and with murder and with guile. You will be groaning and trembling upon the earth,<sup>15</sup> so that all may know that you unjustly shed blood.”

Their mother was troubled by how long they were at the sacrifice. She came running to the plain and saw Abel lying on the plain like a sheep that has been slain and Cain groaning and trembling like a leaf in the wind. Halting in her steps, Eve did not know how to make sense of this

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis 4:9.

<sup>14</sup> If Cain has been envious and malicious from the beginning, this suggests that his actions were not the result of a choice but rather this fits his already established personality. Compare Eve's comments later.

<sup>15</sup> The Hebrew text of Genesis 4:12, which is the basis for most English translations, has Cain cursed with being a “wanderer and vagabond”; two Hebrew words are used with very similar meanings. But

new sight. For the child lay dead, but Eve did not know the manner of his death. She calls out to her son saying: “Abel, Abel, my child— what happened to you? You lie there as if asleep and you do not answer your mother. I see that a truly strange kind of sleep has befallen you. Your face, your countenance, it is all bruised. Your eyes do not lie still.<sup>16</sup> Your feet have become bent. Are you Abel, born from my womb, or have you become someone else? [215] Why are you so silent? Why don’t you speak to your mother? Have mercy on the fountain of my tears, have mercy on the breasts at which you have nursed,<sup>17</sup> and give me a word. What is this strange and unendurable sight? You, Abel, are silent, and you don’t speak to your mother; and I, singing my lament, return to Adam. I will weep and lament, my child, because you were carried off suddenly, like a sparrow, from my arms.” Then she turned to Cain and said: “why do you groan and tremble and why are you agitated, like a leaf in the wind? Why are you not standing still on your feet, and why are your clothes red? The blood that drips from your right hand— where does it come from? God, what is this new sight?” And she said to Cain: “maybe the Devil beguiled you and led you to fratricide, just like he beguiled me? Did he see you and make you the murderer and slayer of Abel?”

“Alas, I am ruined! With what eyes shall I look upon the elderly Adam, or what words shall I speak to him? If I should say what happened, I will not benefit Abel and I will accuse Cain. How can I

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in the Greek text (Septuagint) of Genesis, Cain is not a wanderer and vagabond, but he is “groaning and trembling” (στένων καὶ τρέμων) upon the earth.

<sup>16</sup> The meaning of this phrase is uncertain.

<sup>17</sup> In the Gospel of Luke (23:29) a woman in the crowd shouts out these words to Jesus. Here, however, it is spoken by Eve, in a manner similar to the maternal appeals used in ancient Greek literature. Hecuba appeals to her son Hector in this way (*Iliad* 22.80) and Clytemnestra pleads to Orestes in the *Oresteia* (*Libation Bearers* 896) in a similar fashion. The language in *Cain and Abel* is directly from the Gospel of Luke, but the idea of the mother asking her child to pity her with this appeal seems closer to Greek tragedy.

become the accuser of my offspring? I pity the life of this one, and I lament the death of that one.

This one stands groaning and trembling; that one lies silent, and his blood rushes out. The mother is no longer a mother; [216] she who rejoiced in her children [now] grieves over them.<sup>18</sup> What shall I do or what shall I say? Shall I have pity on Adam, because with a two-pronged hoe he tills the land and works hard so that he may eat his bread by the sweat of his brow?<sup>19</sup> Let me truly lament my own situation, because with travail I bore this one, who falls like unripe fruit cast down by the wind. But just as we took from the tree of deception, so too from the tree of deception he was led astray, because he destroyed this one and deprived himself of life. He is the first to make known death and he is become the first interpreter<sup>20</sup> of the promise of God. Since I gave birth to this one on account of the transgression, he displayed envy against Abel.”

“Alas, my child Abel, no longer will you come to your father bearing a lamb; no longer will you sing that expansive song; no longer will you stay awake watching over your flock. No longer will you stand upon the peaks of the mountains, and no longer will you wonder at the playfulness of the lambs. No longer will you drain the udders of the sheep full with milk!”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Eve’s lament shares qualities with the model speeches given in the *progymnasmata*, the handbooks of rhetorical exercises popular in late antiquity— especially model speeches of Niobe who was blessed with children and then lost them all. Aphthonius the Sophist in his *Progymnasmata* has Niobe say: “Childless now, once seeming blessed with children.” Niobe then ponders, “Where can I turn? What can I hold to?” (Kennedy, *Progymnasmata* 117). Libanius also gives a model speech using Niobe, where she that “there is no one to call me ‘mother’ any more.” Libanius, *Progymnasmata* 381

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 3:19.

<sup>20</sup> The word used here for interpreter is used in Genesis 42:23 in reference to Joseph’s encounter with his brothers. This present text, however, is unique in describing Cain as an interpreter. He interprets by making clear the meaning of God’s promise in Genesis 2:17 that with the eating of the fruit, death will come.

<sup>21</sup> Why does Eve end with lamenting his no longer being able to milk the sheep? We are given insight into the mother’s pain of losing a small child; what is emphasized is the pain of the sheep who has no

“The cause of my trouble is not the snake, nor the tree, but the hostility toward the law of God. For I reaped hostility and I reaped death. I lament [217] my offspring, since I have destroyed my son according to nature. Since I have rejected my Father according to grace,<sup>22</sup> I have lost paradise and found death. From paradise I took fruit and ate it; and from death I gained grief. Paradise cast me out, and Death received me. Because I ate the fruit of the tree, I reaped death.”

With us having concluded the narrative, let us send up glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

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one to drain its udders, like the nursing mother who finds herself bereft of a child and experiencing the emotional and the physical pain of that loss.

<sup>22</sup> This distinction between nature and grace appears frequently in writers of the 4th century. The thought here is similar to language in St. Athanasius' *Contra Arianos Oratio II* section 61. See also Epiphanius' use of nature / grace in *Ancoratus* 30 & 49 and *Panarion* vol. 3 pgs 200, 202, & 458.

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