



5 Ways

to hear the text afresh

When Cain kills Abel in Gen. 4:9, we are told it occurred in the 'field'? Why a field? Why this small detail? In traditional Jewish approaches, small details invite creative interpretation. Think about it: what significance might be attached to 'field'? Would it make a difference if the crime took place in a different place?

Friedman notes the appearance of the word for 'field' in other bible stories involving rivalrous brothers. As brother attacks brother, the word 'field' acts as a kind of connector back to the original crime of fratricide. [Note: your bible translation may differ to some references below.]

1. In the Genesis story of the rivalrous brothers Jacob and Esau, Esau is introduced as 'a man of the field' (Gen. 25:27)...
2. ... and two verses later, just prior to their conflict, Esau comes to Jacob 'from the field' (Gen. 25:29).
3. Also in Genesis, Joseph reports a dream which acts as a catalyst for the murderous intentions of his brothers: "There we were binding sheaves in the field" (Gen. 37:7).
4. In Judges, the war between the tribe of Benjamin and the other tribes is described as brother against brother: 'Shall we again take the field against our kinsmen the Benjamites...?' (Judges 20:28, NJPS.)
5. In 2 Samuel 13-15 the 'woman of Tekoa' comes to King David to convince him to pardon his son Absalom who has killed his brother Amnon. She describes two brothers fighting 'in the field' (2 Sam. 14:6).

Note: See too the reference to 'field' in Luke's Gospel (15:25) in describing the tensions between the prodigal son and his older brother.



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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Genesis 1:1—6:8

Bereshit:
'in the beginning'

Why reflect on Torah?

Welcome to our *Light of Torah* series. In the spirit of the Second Vatican II which ushered in a new era in Jewish-Christian relations, this resource encourages Christians to learn from the Jewish people, especially from their tradition's vast knowledge and experience of the Scriptures. As we follow the Jewish lectionary, over the course of one year we will visit each of the five books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

If you are joining our Torah journey for the first time, welcome! Be patient as you find your way with the biblical texts and the method. It can take some 'getting used to', but as we enter into conversation with the Jewish commentators you will soon find yourself developing a new alertness to the sacred text: its questions, its puzzles, its dilemmas and layers of meaning.

If you are a seasoned *Light of Torah* reader, great! The fresh insights of this cycle will be feeding your growing familiarity with the Torah. As you are aware, each Torah portion contains countless paths of reflection, and a lifetime of study opportunities.



Torah Portion

For the start of the Jewish calendar of Torah readings.

Genesis 1:1–6:8

The story of Cain and Abel is a tale of sibling rivalry with archetypal significance for understanding human conflicts. Read the story closely in Genesis 4:1-16. Share with a friend your initial reactions to the text. Then let's continue to ponder it with the Jewish sages.

Tasting Torah

And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard (Genesis 4:4-5).

Why is Cain and his offering unacceptable? The text doesn't say outright, but the creative reflections of the sages find a reason. According to Rashi,¹ the fruit of the ground brought by Cain in v.3 was 'from the poorest' of fruits. Contrast this with 'the firstlings' of Abel's flock, 'their fat portions' (v.4). Note too that Abel brings from 'his' flock, whereas Cain's gift is 'the' fruit. Abel gives something closely identified with himself, whereas Cain makes no such personal sacrifice. See how a close reading of the text—attention to a single contrasting word—can affect our interpretation and draw us into the sacred story.

Touching Torah

If we follow this line of reasoning, then, in relation to his brother's gift Cain's effort is shown up as inadequate. It is not a question of talent, but generosity, care and respectful effort. Cain, you could say, is 'caught out' by God. Where more is reasonably expected, he falls short.

What should be the response of one who is 'caught out,' whose poor behavior is exposed by someone with the authority to make the judgment? Surely it should be to admit and correct the error according to one's abilities. But Cain responds differently. *Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell* (v.5). He is consumed by a rage that is written all over his face.

Depthing Torah

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? (v.5)

From a certain angle, God's question appears to be an annoying reference to the obvious. But, to the sages, no detail is meaningless. What do you make of the question? Sforno² explains it thus:

'And why is your countenance fallen? If a fault can be remedied it is not right to bewail the past, but one should strive to mend matters for the future.'

In this light, we can detect both a warning and encouragement in the Torah's words that follow:

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it. (v.7)

In other words: Cain, own up to your actions. Your mistake isn't dire; you can be forgiven. But if you don't, greater sin will follow. With freewill comes a critical choice: to take responsibility for poor behavior, repent and make better choices in future; or to continue the destructive path, and play the 'blame game.'

Doing Torah

Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him (v.8). Continue to discuss Cain's choice, with particular attention to the way he turns the blame on God in verses 13-14.

Consider Cain and Abel stories in the world today, on the domestic scene and international stage. What timeless message does the Torah offer?



Faith & Life

A high school teacher says:

A fight broke out in the playground where I was the teacher on duty. Two very big boys, identical twins, were at each other's throats. When I finally dragged them apart, I said: 'OK. Now tell me what's going on here.'

'He called my mother a.....'

I said, 'Wait a minute, this doesn't make sense. You guys must have the same mother.'

'Yeah,' said the boy.' And that's why I want to kill him!'

1. Rashi: French Torah scholar, 11th c.
2. Sforno: Italian-Jewish scholar, 16th c.

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2001); Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (NY: Mesorah, 1995, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda, n.p.d). Scripture: NRSV.