

CAIN'S Downcast Face AND ACCEPTANCE

By Harry D. Champy III

THE STORY OF CAIN AND ABEL IS WELL known. Both offered sacrifices, but God did not look with favor on Cain and his offering. In response, Cain's countenance fell. Several words in the Hebrew text prove interesting, especially "his face was downcast" in verse 5 and "accepted" in verse 7.

Literally, the text says that his face "fell." The modern English idiom would indicate disappointment or sadness. However, does the Hebrew text suggest this modern usage? The common, regular Hebrew word to indicate a person's face is *panim*. It always occurs in the plural and may indicate the face's two, mirroring halves. As Old Testament scholar Victor Hamilton pointed out, "It is only natural that the face was considered to be extraordinarily revealing vis-a-vis a man's emotions, moods, and dispositions."¹ In Jeremiah 5:3, a "hardened" face describes defiance and a refusal to repent. In Job 29:24, a "smiling"

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face indicates joy and favor. In 2 Samuel 19:5, a “covered” face was a sign of defeat and loss. In Isaiah 13:8, a “flaming” face was upon those seized with terror and pain.²

The Hebrew word for “downcast” (*naphal*) also describes the action of falling. It is used of numerous objects: walls, bricks, branches, hailstones, fruit, fire, swords, blood, grain, dew, and the like. People can also fall, and the verb can describe people dying.³

What type of emotion was Genesis describing? Later, Cain’s emotions led him to murder Abel. In 4:6, God asked Cain why he was “angry” (Hebrew, *charah*). The basic idea behind *charah* is “to burn”; it usually refers to anger. However, a few passages use the word to indicate more than just pure anger: 1 Samuel 18:8 (Saul’s response to hearing women singing about David’s victories); and Jonah 4:1,4,9 (Jonah’s response to God sparing Nineveh and to the worm destroying the plant). These passages may be expressing depression or grief.⁴

Likewise, Cain’s reaction seems to be something other than anger. He was disappointed or depressed that God had not viewed his offering with favor, like He had Abel’s. Jealousy probably soon followed, moving him into the anger that caused the attack. Mayer Gruber, a professor of ancient Near Eastern studies in Israel, described the event as a “depressive episode” and argued that Akkadian literature used the phrase “his face fell” to describe depression or sadness.⁵

The exact combination of *panim* (face) and *naphal* (downcast), with *panim* as the subject, occurs only in this passage. The two words occur together in 90 verses; but in most of those, the verb is joined with a preposition and is used as a preposition, “before,” or a prepositional phrase, “on their faces.” The two words are used in several different contexts, most commonly describing to fall in battle or to fall on one’s face in reverence or worship.

Of these uses the closest parallels are Job 29:24 and Jeremiah 3:12. In Job 29:24, Job remembered his better past. He described how people respected him and sought his advice. Whenever he smiled at them, they would not cast down (*naphal*) the light of his countenance (*panim*). In Jeremiah 3:12, the prophet relayed God’s message that if the people returned from their sin, God would not cause His anger (*panim*) to fall (*naphal*) upon them. Jeremiah’s use of *panim* is interesting but offers no real insight to Cain’s situation.

In verse 7, God addressed Cain’s downcast face. If

Further Study

A COUPLE OF OTHER OLD TESTAMENT stories in which a person’s emotions showed visibly include Laban’s displeasure with Jacob (Gen. 31:2,5) and Nehemiah’s sadness over the destruction of the wall and Jerusalem (Neh. 2:2).

Cain would “do what is right” (Hebrew, *yatab*), he would be “accepted.” The prophets used the verb *yatab* when referring to changing one’s ways.⁶ The word “accepted” (Hebrew, *se’et*), is derived from the verb *nasa*. The basic meaning is “to lift up,” and it can be used in three basic ways: (1) to lift or raise literally or figuratively, (2) to bear or carry (like sin or guilt), and (3) to take away sin or to forgive.⁷ The use of this word seems striking with the “fallen” nature of his face. It seems to indicate an exact reversal, an uplifting, of his situation—forgiveness.

God was offering Cain the solution—but Cain’s response was to murder his brother. Ironically, after God confronted Cain and passed judgment upon him, declaring that the land would not produce for him and that he would be a restless wanderer, Cain declared that it was greater than he could bear (*nasa*).

Analyzing the words used and similar passages clarifies that Cain’s face visibly fell, bearing the weight of his poor choice of mere leftovers as an offering and his resultant disappointment. Such disappointment often warms up and turns to anger as it builds up internally against oneself or externally against others.

God gave Cain the answer to his situation. If Cain had changed his ways and turned back to God, he would have been lifted up—not just his face, but also the entire weight that he was bearing. In an age where self-destructed behavior and even suicide have become all too common results of such feelings, God’s words to Cain offer hope. The One who was lifted up on a cross can carry all our burdens and insecurities and can keep us from the sin that is crouching at our door.

1. Victor P. Hamilton, “פָּנִים” (*panim*, face) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Harris), ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), §1782a, 2:727.

2. Ibid.

3. “נָפַל” (*naphal*, fall) in Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1906; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 656-57.

4. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 224-25.

5. Mayer I. Gruber, “Was Cain Angry or Depressed? Background of a Biblical Murder,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 6, no. 6 (November/December 1980): 35-36.

6. Paul R. Gilchrist, “יָטַב” (*yatab*, be good) in Harris, §863, 1:375.

7. Walter C. Kaiser, “נָסָא” (*nasa*, lift) in Harris, §1421, 2:600-601.

Upper left: The Cain statue by Henri Vidal from Tuileries Garden in Paris, France,

depicts Cain with a downcast face.

Left: Baskets of various types of grains

on sale at an open-air market. Cain presented to the Lord an unacceptable grain offering.

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