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HEBREWS 11:4 AND THE SACRIFICE OF ABEL

In my recent article "The Offering Of Abel" I explained that Abel did not perform a sacrifice when he brought an offering of "the firstlings of his flock" to Jesus Christ (see Genesis 4:3-5). It was "an offering" and not "a sacrifice". There is no evidence in the Bible that any animal sacrifices were ever performed before the flood. That article discusses this matter in more detail.

But this raises a question. In Hebrews 11:4 the Apostle Paul states that Abel "offered unto God a **more excellent sacrifice** than Cain". Doesn't this mean that Abel did perform an animal sacrifice?

So let's examine this question more closely.

HEBREWS 11:4

Here is this verse.

By faith Abel offered unto God **a more excellent sacrifice** than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of **his gifts**: and by it he being dead yet speaks. (Hebrews 11:4)

So what is Paul actually saying here? Let's be careful that we don't read our presumed answers into Paul's statements. And let's consider the following things:

The noun "Abel" is only mentioned 9 times in the whole Old Testament, with 5 references to the man Abel, and 4 later references to specific geographic places named Abel. None of these Old Testament verses in any way tie into our discussion here. My article "The Offering Of Abel" already discusses those verses that have a bearing on our subject.

In the New Testament the man Abel is mentioned only in the following 4 verses:

That upon you may come **all the righteous blood** shed upon the earth, from **the blood** of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom you slew between the temple and the altar. (Matthew 23:35)

From **the blood** of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, who perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation. (Luke 11:51)

And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to **the blood** of sprinkling, that speaks better things than *that of Abel*. (Hebrews 12:24)

By faith Abel offered unto God **a more excellent sacrifice** than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaks. (Hebrews 11:4)

That covers every New Testament reference to Abel.

Apart from Hebrews 11:4, the other verses all refer to "**the blood**" that was shed. Now the Apostle Paul

himself, in the lead-up to chapter 11, said:

For **it is not possible** that **the blood of bulls and of goats** should take away sins. (Hebrews 10:4)

With this earlier statement in mind, would Paul really have referred to a theoretical sacrifice consisting of "bulls and goats" by Abel as "a more excellent sacrifice"? Was Paul even speaking about the one or more **animals** that Abel had brought to Jesus Christ? Or was Paul speaking about something else?

Consider that King David in the Old Testament already understood that the animals that were sacrificed to God didn't really mean very much to God.

For **You desire not sacrifice**; else would I give *it*: **You delight not in burnt offering**. (Psalm 51:16)

[Comment: As an aside, while David clearly understood that God does not "delight in burnt offering", that didn't stop David's son Solomon from bringing "**a thousand burnt offerings**" upon one specific altar (see 1 Kings 3:4), which I suspect would have taken several weeks, if not longer. Even at 20 burnt offerings per day on that one altar, it would still have taken 50 days to perform 1000 burnt offerings. And it is not really possible to perform 20 burnt offerings on one altar in one day. David would not have gone to such an extreme. David had a better understanding than his son Solomon.]

Now Paul had the same understanding as David, that God doesn't really want animal sacrifices. That's why Paul stated that animal sacrifices cannot really take away sins.

So let's see what Paul was telling us. Let's examine Hebrews 11:4 phrase by phrase.

1) Abel offered: This means that **Abel brought something to God**. Abel presented something to God. What he presented we will see shortly.

2) By faith: This means that Abel had faith in God regarding what Abel presented to God. Now this expression "by faith" already provides a clue as to what Paul had in mind. We don't have faith in offerings that we bring, and we don't have faith in animals we may bring as sacrifices. **Financial offerings and animal sacrifices don't require any faith**. That should be self-evident, because even carnal Israelites could tithe and give offerings and bring animal sacrifices, without ever establishing any real relationship with God.

3) A more excellent sacrifice than Cain: So according to this statement Cain also brought "**a sacrifice**". Paul here tells us that both men brought "a sacrifice" to God. But Cain didn't bring any animals. Abel brought animals and Cain brought fruits/vegetables, and Paul refers to both men bringing offerings and also both men bringing "a sacrifice".

What this means is that when Paul here used the word "sacrifice" he was not thinking of "animal sacrifices". Just like David, Paul was thinking that "**the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit**" (see Psalm 51:17), a humble and repentant attitude.

The "more excellent sacrifice" that Abel brought was **his life!** His blood was shed, because his brother Cain envied Abel's righteous conduct and behavior. Animals are never "more excellent" than other offerings. The Greek word "pleion", here translated as "more excellent", refers to: "greater in either quantity or in quality". Here it refers to "**greater in quality**". It was his life that Abel gave as a sacrifice to God.

By comparison, the "sacrifice" Cain brought was a sinful attitude, one of not "doing well" (see Genesis 4:7), one of becoming a murderer.

4) By which he obtained witness that he was righteous: Abel wasn't righteous because he brought an offering consisting of animals. Abel was righteous because he gave his life. I would not be surprised at all if, when Cain attacked him, Abel made no attempt to defend himself, kind of like Zacharias being murdered between the temple and the altar (see Matthew 23:35 above).

5) God testifying of his gifts: This is a reference to "and the Eternal had respect unto Abel and to his offering" (see Genesis 4:4). So here Paul refers to the offering Abel brought as "**gifts**". Notice that. Paul doesn't call what Abel brought "a sacrifice". No, Paul calls what Abel brought "**gifts**".

Now to the final part of this verse.

A GRAMMATICAL TECHNICALITY

Here is the last expression: "and by it he being dead yet speaks".

Question: what does "it" here refer to?

The Greek text for "by it" is "di autes". "Di" (i.e. dia) means "by" or "through". And "autes" is the **feminine genitive singular** of "autos" (the personal pronouns for: he, she, it).

The important thing to note here is that this pronoun is feminine and singular.

Now there are two nouns used in this verse to which "it" could theoretically apply. Those two nouns are:

1) Sacrifice = Greek "thusian" = feminine accusative singular of "thusia".

2) Gifts = Greek "dorois" = neuter dative plural of "doron".

This means that "it" cannot refer to "his gifts", because the Greek word for "gifts" is both neuter and plural. It means that "it" clearly must refer to "his more excellent sacrifice", because the Greek word for "sacrifice" is both feminine and singular.

Now we might just have said that "it" refers to the sacrifice, because that should be obvious. But the point is that in the Greek text this is even clearer.

So now we can rewrite the last clause. This is what it looks like:

"and **by his more excellent sacrifice** he being dead yet speaks".

So what is Paul saying?

Paul tells us that Abel brought **two things**: he brought "gifts" and he brought "a sacrifice". The "gifts" were the firstlings that Abel brought. And "the sacrifice" Abel brought was his own life. In this last expression Paul says that "**by it**", by his sacrifice, **Abel died!** He brought **his life** as a sacrifice, and he died.

This is in line with all the other New Testament references about Abel. It is always **Abel's blood** that is the focus. And the blood stands for the life of a person.

Abel is dead because of the sacrifice he brought to God, not because of the gifts he brought to God.

Abel gave his life. His life was "a more excellent sacrifice". More excellent than what?

More excellent than any animal sacrifice!

And certainly more excellent than any fruit & vegetable offering that Cain might have brought. Cain also should have dedicated his life to living in willing submission to his Creator-God. But Cain didn't do that. He had a different spirit. And the sacrifice of Cain's spirit was totally unacceptable to God.

This also ties in with all the other examples of faith that Paul presents in Hebrews chapter 11. Some of those examples gave their lives in sacrifice to God, and **all of them were willing to give their lives**, had that been required of them.

It should now be clear beyond any doubts that Paul was most certainly not thinking about the animals that Abel might have brought as "gifts" to God, when Paul spoke about Abel's "more excellent sacrifice". That more excellent sacrifice was Abel's life.

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