

## BETTER THAN THE BLOOD OF ABEL?

### SOME REMARKS ON ABEL IN HEBREWS 12:24

Kyu Seop Kim

([kyuseopkim77@gmail.com](mailto:kyuseopkim77@gmail.com))

### Summary

*The sudden mention of Abel in Hebrews 12:24 has elicited a multiplicity of interpretations, but despite its significance, the meaning of 'Abel' (τὸν Ἄβελ) has not attracted the careful attention that it deserves. This study argues that τὸν Ἄβελ in Hebrews 12:24 refers to Abel as an example who speaks to us through his right observation of the cult. Accordingly, Hebrews 12:24b means that Christ's cult is superior to the Jewish ritual. This interpretation fits exactly with the adjacent context contrasting Sinai and Zion symbols.*

### 1. Introduction

The sudden mention of Abel in Hebrews 12:24 has elicited a multiplicity of interpretations, but despite its significance, this topic has not attracted the careful attention that it deserves. Traditionally, scholars assert that 'Abel' (τὸν Ἄβελ) in Hebrews 12:24 refers to 'the blood of Abel'.<sup>1</sup> Most Bible translators also read 'than Abel' (παρὰ τὸν

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Ceslas Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, (Paris: Libraire Lecoffee, 1952–53), 2:409-10; Jonathan I. Griffiths, *Hebrews and Divine Speech*, LNTS (London: T & T Clark, 2014), 143-44; B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan, 1892), 417; Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 377; James Moffatt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1924); Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, BNTC (London: A & C Black, 1964), 233; R. Walter L. Moberly, 'Exemplars of Faith in Hebrews 11: Abel', in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 360; Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 658-59. See also Matt. 23:35, Luke 11:51.

ἄβελ) as ‘than the blood of Abel’.<sup>2</sup> However, the following questions have yet to be resolved: why does the motif of Abel (or his blood) appear unexpectedly appear within the context of the contrasting symbolism of Sinai and Zion in Hebrews 12:18-24, and why is Abel (or his blood) contrasted with Christ (or Christ’s blood) in Hebrews 12:24?

## 2. Previous Explanations

As a traditional solution, many interpreters believe that ‘speaking’ (λαλοῦντι) in Hebrews 12:24 evokes the ‘crying out’ (βοᾶ) of Abel’s blood in Genesis 4:10 (LXX). In this vein, some exegetes argue that the blood of Abel ‘cried out vengeance’, but the blood of Jesus communicates grace.<sup>3</sup> Grässer claims that the blood of Abel ‘cried out’ to God ‘from the ground’, but that Jesus intercedes for his people ‘in the heaven’, and therefore, Jesus’s blood is superior to that of Abel.<sup>4</sup> L. T. Johnson observes, ‘Abel’s blood crying out for justice is only a symbol of the victory over death and sin achieved by the death and exaltation of Christ’.<sup>5</sup> Cockerill writes that the blood of Christ conveys a superior message to the blood of Abel, because the blood of Christ brings salvation rather than condemnation.<sup>6</sup> Attridge contends that Abel is the first martyr (cf. 4 Macc. 6:29 and 17:21), and maintains that the blood of the martyrs has an atoning effect. He argues that, whilst the blood of Abel offers limited atonement, the blood of Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> So ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, NLT, Revidierte Elberfelder, Einheitsübersetzung, La Sacra Bibbia Nuova Riveduta (Italian). Some translations take it as ‘than Abel himself’ (Luther’s translation, La Nuova Diodati (Italian), NVB San Paolo Edizione (Italian), Nouvelle Edition Genève, en français courant).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Herbert Braun, *An die Hebräer* (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984), 114; Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, 2:409; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 361; Han-Friedrich Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 422; Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 469.

<sup>4</sup> Erich Grässer, *An die Hebräer*, EKKNT (Zürich: Benziger, 1997), 3:324.

<sup>5</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 333.

<sup>6</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 659.

encompasses complete atonement.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Koester hesitates to make a definitive conclusion on the meaning of τὸν Ἄβελ.<sup>8</sup>

However, the motif of ‘the blood (or death) of Abel’ is unexpected in the flow of the discourse with regard to contrasts between Sinai and Zion in Hebrews 12.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it is difficult to understand why the comparison between ‘Abel’ and ‘the sprinkled blood’ is posited in the climax within a series of heavenly Zion symbols. It seems clear that ‘Abel’s blood’ does not pertain to Sinai symbolism, and it is also doubtful that ‘Abel’s blood’ is related to the notion of condemnation in the given context. Any extant Jewish literature imposes the notion of atonement upon the death or the blood of Abel. Abel is not viewed as ‘a martyr’ in any extant Second Temple literature,<sup>10</sup> and further, Abel is not depicted as a martyr elsewhere in Hebrews (cf. 11:4). If the author intended to make a comparison between the blood of Christ and that of Abel, why did he not employ something like παρὰ τὸ τοῦ Ἄβελ αἷμα (than the blood of Abel)?<sup>11</sup>

Alternative readings are offered by Similie, Son, and O’Brien. Similie argues that, in the given context, ‘the sudden appearance of Abel here at the end of 12:24 may be a similar allusion to ‘the story of Abel’ that is told in Scripture’.<sup>12</sup> However, it is still unclear why the story of Abel in the OT is incongruously compared with the sprinkled blood of Christ in the context of the contrasting symbolism of Sinai and Zion.

Contrary to the majority interpretation, Son links ‘speaking’ (λαλοῦντι) with Abel’s prophetic action,<sup>13</sup> not with crying out of Abel’s blood. He argues that Abel represents the prophet of the old covenant in Hebrews 12:24, and that Christ symbolises the prophet of the new covenant.<sup>14</sup> However, nowhere in Hebrews is Abel described as a prophet, and it is also doubtful that, in the given context, Christ is

<sup>7</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 377.

<sup>8</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* AB (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 546.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 682; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1991), 474.

<sup>10</sup> Contra Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 469.

<sup>11</sup> See Gene Similie, “‘The One Who Is Speaking’ in Hebrews 12:25”, *TynBul* 55 (2004), 280.

<sup>12</sup> Similie, ‘The One Who Is Speaking’, 278-83.

<sup>13</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 659.

<sup>14</sup> Kiwoong Son, *Zion Symbolism: Hebrews 12:18-24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 101-2.

presented as a prophet. Rather, in Hebrews 12:24, Christ is delineated as the mediator of the new covenant.

Finally, O'Brien contends that τὸν Ἄβελ refers to the faith of Abel which is depicted in Hebrews 11:4.<sup>15</sup> O'Brien maintains that the reference to Abel might be related to 'the spirits of righteous persons' in Hebrews 12:23 and the author may have intended to 'draw attention to the whole sweep of redemptive history, from the righteous Abel to the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus'.<sup>16</sup> Yet, even though we accept this theory, it is hard to understand why the faith of Abel or the righteous one is contrasted with the sprinkled blood of Christ amongst the catena of Sinai and Zion symbolism.

### 3. A New Explanation

Accordingly, the reason for the unexpected reference to Abel in Hebrews 12:24 still remains enigmatic. This study will clarify three concepts in Hebrews 12:24: 'the sprinkled blood' (αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ), 'better' (κρεῖττον), and 'speaking' (λαλοῦντι). We will work towards a new explanation of the meaning of παρὰ τὸν Ἄβελ, as follows.

First, in Hebrews, Abel appears twice, in 11:4 and 12:24. In Hebrews 11:4, Abel is presented as an exemplar of faith in the list of 'heroes of faith': 'By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this, he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith, he still speaks' (NRSV). Even though Abel's death is briefly mentioned in Hebrews 11:4c, the focus of 11:4 is placed upon Abel's faith, which is exemplified by his acceptable cultic offering (a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, πλείονα θυσίαν ... παρὰ Κάϊν). The author of Hebrews does not explicitly convey the theme of 'Abel's blood' in Hebrews.

Second, we should note that Abel is contrasted with 'the sprinkled blood' (αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ), not simply 'blood' in this context, and 'the sprinkled blood' does not simply symbolise the death of Christ in Hebrews 12:24, contrary to the opinion of most scholars. The phrase 'the sprinkled blood' (αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ) in Hebrews 12:24 evokes 'the

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<sup>15</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 490.

<sup>16</sup> O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 490-91.

sprinkling of blood' in Hebrews 11:28: 'By faith, he [Moses] kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood' (Πίστει πεποιήκεν τὸ πάσχα καὶ τὴν πρόσχυσιν τοῦ αἵματος). The sprinkling of blood in Hebrews 11:28 signifies a cultic action performed on the day of the Passover according to the old covenant. Likewise, it is probable that 'the sprinkled blood' in Hebrews 12:24 also signifies the cultic sacrifice of Christ. Christ's cult is a common motif in Hebrews. In Hebrews 9:14, 10:19, 13:12 and 13:20, Christ offered his blood as the cultic sacrifice. In Hebrews 10:10, the saints have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ. In particular, the author writes in Hebrews 9:12-15:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling (ῥαντίζουσα) of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ (τὸ αἷμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ), who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant (διαθήκης καινῆς μεσίτης), so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant (NRSV).

In Hebrews 9:14, the blood of Christ is superior to Jewish cultic sacrifices. In Hebrews 9:13, 'sprinkling' (ῥαντίζουσα) signifies a cultic action, and this expression implies that 'the sprinkled blood' (αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ) in Hebrews 12:24 should be understood as a ritual term. Further, the concept of 'the mediator (μεσίτη) of the new covenant' (Heb. 12:24) is employed in the cultic context (Heb. 8:6; 9:15). So, we can infer that that αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ in Hebrews 12:24 refers to Christ's cultic offering, not simply to Christ's death.

Third, if we understand τὸν Ἄβελ as Abel's blood, this understanding does not accord with the context of the contrasting symbolism of Sinai and Zion in Hebrews 12:18-29. In the context of Hebrews 12:24, τὸν Ἄβελ is contrasted with the sprinkled blood (i.e., the cultic service) of Christ who is the mediator of the new covenant. Hebrews 12:22-24 is one sentence, and a series of datives (Heb. 12:22b-24) is connected to προσεληλύθατε (you have come) in Hebrews 12:22a. In this context, 'the sprinkled blood' (αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ) in Hebrews 12:24 is a part of Zion symbolism in Hebrews 12:22-24, and 'that speaks better than Abel' (κρεῖττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἄβελ) modifies 'the sprinkled blood' (αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ). Therefore, τὸν Ἄβελ should be understood within the context of contrasts between Sinai and Zion symbols. In Hebrews 11:4, Abel

offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain. In no verse of Hebrews, Abel is depicted as a martyr, and Abel's blood is not mentioned, as discussed previously. Instead, Abel is exemplified as a model person who faithfully offered the cultic sacrifice in Hebrews 11. Thus, in this vein, it seems apparent that τὸν Ἄβελ in 12:24 does not reflect Abel's death or blood, but Abel's cultic service in Hebrews 11:4 where it is contrasted with Cain's ('Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain', πλείονα θυσίαν Ἄβελ παρὰ Κάϊν προσήνεγκεν τῷ θεῷ). This context, therefore, enables the reader to conclude that Hebrews 12:24 denotes that Christ's cultic service as the mediator of the new covenant (Zion image) is superior to the cultic offering of the OT saints under the old covenant (Sinai image), which Abel's cult represents. That is, Abel faithfully offered his cultic sacrifice under the Sinai covenant, but the cult practised by Christ (Zion image) is superior to the cult practised by Abel (Sinai image) according to the old covenant.

Fourth, the author uses λαλεῖν (to speak) instead of 'crying out' (βοᾶ) as in Genesis 4:10 (LXX). For the following reasons, 'speaking' (λαλοῦντι) in Hebrews 12:24 does not reflect 'crying out' (βοᾶ) in Genesis 4:10. In the MT and LXX respectively, קָוָה and βοάω mean 'cry out'. However, it should be noted that λαλεῖν in Hebrews is used 16 times but never in the sense of 'crying out'. Instead, it conveys the sense of 'to declare', 'to confess' or figuratively 'to exemplify' in Hebrews, and is not used in the sense of speaking to God.<sup>17</sup> For example, Hebrews 1:1, God spoke (λαλήσας) to 'our ancestors'; Hebrews 2:2, 'For if the message declared (λαληθεὶς) through the angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty'; Hebrews 5:5, God speaks to Christ, not 'crying out': 'So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said (λαλήσας) to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"'. In Hebrews 11:4, 'he [Abel] died, but through his faith he still speaks (ἔτι λαλεῖ)', which means that Abel presents his faithful example (i.e., offering his cultic sacrifice). So, Abel's faithful example is not associated with his death, but with his cultic service. In this synchronic context, therefore, it seems clear that λαλοῦντι is not linked with Genesis 4:10 LXX.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 404.

<sup>18</sup> Contra Bruce, *Hebrews*, 283-84; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 573.

Fifth, the comparative adjective κρείσσων/κρείττων is principally used to compare ‘the new Christian faith’ with ‘the old Jewish religion’ or ‘the Jewish cultic institution’ throughout Hebrews (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24; cf. μείζονος in 9:11; μελλόντων αγαθῶν in 10:1). In particular, κρείττων is employed in order to contrast the Jewish cultic institution with Christ’s heavenly cult in 9:22-23 (cf. 10:34): ‘Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices (κρείττοσιν θυσίαις) than these.’ Furthermore, in 8:5-6, the author writes:

They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain’. But Jesus has now performed a more excellent ritual service (διαφορωτέρας ... λειτουργίας), and to that degree he is the mediator of the better covenant (κρείττονός ἐστιν διαθήκης μεσίτης), which has been enacted through better promises (NRSV, adapted by me).

In Hebrews 8:5-13, the reason for establishing the new covenant is elucidated. The new covenant (διαθήκη καινή) is the superior covenant to the old one (8:6, 7, 13). In Hebrews 8:5-6, Christ’s ritual service is contrasted with the Jewish cult under the old covenant, and Christ is described as the mediator of the better covenant (i.e., the new covenant). In Hebrews 13:12, 20, the blood of Christ is related to the new Christian faith. Therefore, the sprinkled blood in Hebrews 12:24 does not simply refer to ‘the death of Christ’, but signifies the cult of Christ through his sacrificial death which sanctifies his people according to the eternal covenant (e.g., 13:12, 20). In this vein, κρείττον λαλοῦντι in Hebrews 12:24 implies the comparison between the new Christian faith and old Jewish cultic practices.

Sixth, in any extant Second Temple literature, Abel is not viewed as a righteous witness or a martyr. Instead, in many cases, he is mentioned with reference to his sincere cultic offering. In Jubilees 4:1-6 (cf. 11Q12 1 6), Abel is murdered by Cain since Abel’s cult was accepted by God, but Cain’s not (4:2). Thus, in Jubilees 4:1-6, Abel is a faithful one who offered a cult sacrifice. In Testament of Isaac 5:4, Abel is blessed by God, since he offered the firstlings to the altar. In T. Issac 12:53-54, Abel is presented as a devout man, and God favourably

received his sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> In T. Isaac 4:37, Abel's offering is an exemplary cultic sacrifice accepted by God, and Isaac prays that his offering would be acceptable like Abel's. Thus, Abel is described as a sincere observer of the Jewish cult in several cases of Second Temple literature.

In *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini*, Philo recounts the reason why Abel's offering was accepted, but Cain's not. Abel's offering was accepted by God since it was ἀπαρχή (the first fruit) and πρωτοτόκος (the firstborn) in *Sacr.* 88. In *Sacr.* 73, the first fruit (ἀπαρχή) and the firstborn (πρωτοτόκος) is likened to an offering of the soul. In *De confusione linguarum* 124, Abel offers the firstborn of the flock to God, and Abel's cultic offering of the firstborn signifies 'confessing that even the causes which come higher in the chain of causation owe their existence to the Cause which is highest and first of all'.<sup>20</sup> In Philonic literature, Philo draws attention to the reason Abel's offering was accepted and the right of the firstborn son (πρωτοτόκια or πρεσβεία) is transferred to the younger one (Abel), and demonstrates that Abel was a sincere one who offered the firstborn to the altar of God.

In Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 1:53, Abel is depicted to 'present in all the things that were done by him, looked after virtue'. Abel's offering (i.e., milk and the firstlings) was accepted and God took greater pleasure in Abel's sacrifice, since his offering was in accordance with nature. Abel was killed by Cain since Abel followed reason and Abel's offering was valued more highly by God. In Josephus, *Ant.* 1:53, the focus is posited on Abel's sincere cultic action, and on the reason why Abel's offering was accepted by God.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in Second Temple literature, Abel frequently represents the one who sincerely offered his sacrifice (particularly, the firstborn) to God.<sup>22</sup> In Hebrews 11:4, the author of Hebrews also presents Abel as

<sup>19</sup> See also Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers 6:4.

<sup>20</sup> Loeb translation. Cf. in Apocalypse of Sedrach 1:17-18, divine love is the capital virtue, which dwells in Abel's heart.

<sup>21</sup> Similarly, see *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* 59:4.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, Abel's story is depicted in various ways. In T. Isaac 9:11, Abel is enumerated in the list of righteous ones with Seth, Enos, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, and Job, who were priests for dominion over Israel. In *Ascen. Isa.* 9:9, 28, Abel is a righteous one with Adam and Seth. In *Testament of Abraham Recension B* 11:1-2, Michael says to Abraham that Abel is the judge. In T. Ab. 13:2-3, Abel has the role of judge over the entire creation, examining both righteous and sinners. Some extra-



the worshipper who faithfully offered his sacrifice to God, and Abel's faith is directly related to his faithful cultic act. In this context, in Hebrews 12:24, τὸν Ἄβελ most probably refers to Abel's faithful cult presented in Hebrews 11:4.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study does not deny that 'blood' and 'Abel' together evoke their famous collocation in connection with his murder,<sup>23</sup> but it seems Hebrews 12:24b has a double force. So, this study argues that τὸν Ἄβελ refers to Abel as an example who speaks to us through his right observation of the cult. We have sound fundamentals to argue that, in Hebrews 12:24, the author intended to contrast the cult offered by Abel (i.e., the Jewish cult under the Sinai covenant) with the cult offered by Christ (i.e., the sprinkled blood), which leads to true salvation and sanctification according to the new covenant.

This interpretation fits exactly to the context contrasting the Sinai and Zion symbols in Hebrews 12:18-24. While Abel's cultic action was faithful, and even superior (πλείονα) to Cain's offering (11:4), his ritual was practised according to the Sinai covenant. By contrast, the heavenly cult was performed by Jesus Christ, the mediator according to the new covenant. So, it is highly probable that the reason Abel's cult is referenced in Hebrews 12:24 is that Abel's cult was depicted positively in Hebrews 11:4, and that the author felt the need to evaluate Abel's cult in comparison to Christ's cult for the sake of his readers who perhaps were at risk of compromising their faith, or of returning to their previous Jewish religion and its cultic practices.

Therefore, we conclude that, in Hebrews 12:24, τὸν Ἄβελ refers to Abel's cultic service in Hebrews 11:4, and that αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ κρεῖττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἄβελ should be translated as 'to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than *the cult practised by Abel*'.

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biblical narratives are delineated in terms of Abel's death (e.g., L. A. E. 23:1-5; L. A. B. 2:1; 1 En. 22:7; 2 En. 71:36; Apoc. of Ab. 24:5; T. Benj. 7:4; T. Adam 3:5).

<sup>23</sup> There are some textual variations in Heb. 12:24. Ⲫ<sup>46</sup>, L and the Syriac read the article in Heb. 12:24b as the accusative neuter article το instead of the accusative masculine article τόν (τὸν Ἄβελ). This reading may imply that some copyists understood Ἄβελ as Abel's blood (αἷμα; neuter) or Abel's sprinkled blood. The former option may support the traditional understanding of τὸν Ἄβελ in Heb. 12:24b (i.e., the death of Abel), and the latter option may espouse the argument of this work (i.e., the cult practised by Abel). However, there is nothing clear.

Therefore, Hebrews 12:24b means that Christ's cult is superior to the Jewish ritual, as conveyed in Hebrews 9:14.