

Barclay's Comments on Messianic Jews 11:4-7

But it may well be that the author to the Messianic Jews is thinking not only of the story as it is in Genesis but also of the legends which gathered round it in Jewish folk-lore. The Jews themselves found the story puzzling and elaborated it in order to find a reason for God's rejection of Kayin and for Kayin's murder of Hevel. The earliest legend tells how every time Eve bore children she bore twins, a boy and a girl, and that they were given to each other as man and wife. In the case of Hevel and Kayin, Adam tried to change this and planned to give the twin sister of Kayin to Hevel. Kayin was bitterly dissatisfied. To settle the matter, Adam said to them: "Go, my sons, sacrifice to the Lord; and he whose sacrifice is accepted shall have the young girl. Take each of you offerings in your hand and go, sacrifice to the Lord and he will decide." So Hevel, who was a shepherd, took his best lamb to the place of sacrifice; but Kayin, who was a tiller of the ground, took the poorest sheaf of corn he could find and laid it on the altar. Whereupon fire descended from heaven and consumed Hevel's offering so that not even the cinders were left while Kayin's was left untouched. Adam then gave the girl to Hevel and Kayin was sorely vexed. One day Hevel was asleep upon a mountain; and Kayin came upon him and took a stone and crushed his head. Then he threw the dead body on his back and carried it about because he did not know what to do with it. He saw two crows fighting and one killed the other, then dug a hole with its beak and buried it. Kayin said: "I have not the sense of this bird. I, too, will lay my brother in the ground," and he did so.

The Jews had still another story to explain the first murder. Kayin and Hevel could not agree as to what they should possess. So Hevel devised a scheme whereby they might bring an end to contention. Kayin took the earth and everything stationary; Hevel took everything moveable. But in Kayin's heart there was still bitter envy. One day he said to his brother: "Remove thy foot; thou standest on my property; the plain is mine." Hevel ran to the hills but Kayin pursued him, saying: "The hills are mine." Hevel took refuge on the mountains but Kayin still pursued him saying: "The mountains, too, are mine." And so, in his envy, he hunted his brother until he killed him.

At the back of this story lie two great truths. First, there is envy. Even the Greeks saw its horror. Demosthenes said: "Envy is the sign of a nature that is altogether evil." Euripides said: "Envy is the greatest of all diseases among men." There was a Greek proverb which said: "Envy has no place in the choir of God." Envy leads to bitterness; bitterness to hatred; and hatred to murder. Envy is that poison which can poison all life and kill all goodness. Second, there is this strange and eerie thought that Kayin had discovered a new sin. One of the old Greek fathers said: "Up to this time no man had died so that Kayin should know how to kill. The devil instructed him in this in a dream." It was Kayin who introduced murder into the world. There is condemnation for the sinner; but there is still greater condemnation for the man who teaches another to sin. Such a man, even as Kayin was, is banished from the face of God.

So the author to the Messianic Jews says: "Although he died for his faith, he is still speaking to us." Moffatt finely comments: "Death is never the last word in the life of a righteous man." When a man leaves this world, he leaves something in it. He may leave something which will grow and spread like a canker; or he may leave something fine which blossoms and flourishes without end. He leaves an influence of good or ill; every one when he dies still speaks. May God grant to us to leave behind not a germ of evil but a lovely thing in which the lives of those who come afterwards will find blessing.

In the Old Testament the life of Enoch is summed up in one sentence: "And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Gen 5:24). Many legends gathered around his name. He was said to be the first man skilled in tailoring and in sewing and that he instructed men how to cut out skins in the proper shape to make garments. He was said to be the first to teach men to make shoes to protect their feet. He was said to be the first to put pen to paper and instruct men from books.

Legend tells that with Enoch the Angel of Death made a compact of friendship. Enoch made three requests of him. First, to die and come back again so that he might know what death was like. Second, to see the abode

of the wicked so that he might know what the punishment of the evil was like. Both these requests were granted. His third request was to be permitted to see into Paradise so that he might see what the blessed enjoyed. This also was granted, but Enoch, having been granted a glimpse of Paradise, never came back to earth again.

The simple statement in Genesis has a kind of mystical quality. In itself it does not say how Enoch died. It simply says that in God's good time he passed serenely from this earth. There were two specially famous interpretations of the death of Enoch.

(i) The Book of Wisdom (Wis 4:10ff.) has the idea that God took Enoch to himself when he was still young to save him from the infection of this world. "He was taken away while he lived amidst sinners.... He was snatched away lest evil should change his understanding or guile deceive his soul." This is another way of putting the famous classical saying: "Whom the gods love die young." It looks on death as a reward. It means that God loved Enoch so much that he removed him before age and degeneration descended hand in hand upon him.

(ii) Philo, the great Alexandrian Jewish interpreter, saw in Enoch the great pattern of repentance. He was changed by repentance from the life that is apart from God to the life that walks with God.

The author to the Messianic Jews reads into the simple statement of the Old Testament passage the idea that Enoch did not die at all but that in some mystic way God took him to himself. But surely the meaning is much simpler. In a wicked and corrupt generation Enoch walked with God and so when the end came to him, there was no shock or interruption. Death merely took him into God's nearer presence. Because he walked with God when other men were walking away from him, he daily came nearer to him and death was no more than the last step that took him into the very presence of that God with whom he had always walked.

We cannot think of Enoch without thinking of the different attitudes to death. The sheer serenity of the Old Testament statement, so simple and yet so moving, points forward to the Christian attitude.

(i) There are those who have thought of death as mysterious and inexplicable. William Morris wrote:

"Death have we hated, knowing not what it meant."

Bacon said: "Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark." To some, it has always been the terrifying unknown giving rise to what Hamlet called "that dread of something after death."

(ii) There are those who simply have seen in death the one inevitable thing in life. Shakespeare makes Caesar say in Julius Caesar:

"It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come."

And in Cymbeline he writes with a strange fatalistic beauty:

"Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.
"Fear no more the frown o' the great,
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke:
Care no more to clothe and eat;

To thee the reed is as the oak:
The sceptre, Teaming, physic must
All follow this, and come to dust.
"Fear not more the lightning-flash,
Nor the all-dreaded thunder-stone;
Fear not slander, censure rash;
Thou hast finish'd joy and moan:
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee, and come to dust."

Death is inevitable and there is nothing to be gained by struggling against it.

(iii) Some have seen in death sheer extinction. It was that loveliest of Roman poets, Catullus, who pled with Lesbia for her kisses because the night was coming:

"Lesbia mine, let's live and love!
Give no doit for tattle of
Crabbed old censorious men;
Suns may set and rise again,
But when our short day takes flight
Sleep we must one endless night."

To die was to go out to nothingness and be lost in an eternal sleep.

(iv) Some have seen in death the supreme terror and the unmitigated evil. In Measure for Measure Shakespeare makes Claudio say:

"Death is a fearful thing.
Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world....
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death."

To Claudio the worst and bitterest of life was to be preferred to death. W. S. Gilbert wrote in The Yeomen of the Guard:

"Is life a boon?
If so, it must befall
That Death, whene'er he call,
Must call too soon."

Robert Burns wrote of the early death of Highland Mary:

"But oh! fell death's untimely frost
That nipt my flower sae early!"

There are those who have seen only the grim terroriser and despoiler in death.

(v) Many have seen in death release. Weary of the world and of life, they have seen it as escape. Keats said that he had been "half in love with easeful death." Shakespeare in one of his sonnets cried:

"Tir'd with all these, for restful death I cry."

Nicholas Rowe wrote: "Death is the privilege of human nature." The Stoics held that the gods had given men the gift of life and the still greater gift of taking their own lives away. Swinburne best of all caught this mood of world-weariness in The Garden of Proserpine:

"From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever,
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.
Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light;
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight;
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal
Nor days nor things diurnal;
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night."

There are those for whom death is good because it is the end of life.

(vi) Some have seen in death transition—not an end, but a stage on the way; not a door closing, but a door opening. Longfellow wrote:

"There is no Death! What seems so is transition;
This life of mortal breath
Is but a suburb of the life elysian,
Whose portal we call death."

George Meredith wrote:

"Death met I too,
And saw the dawn glow through."

To such death has always been a call to come up higher, a crossing from the dark to the dawn.

(vii) Some have seen death as an adventure. As Barrie made Peter Pan say: "To die will be an awfully big adventure." Charles Frohman, who had known Barrie so well, went down with the Lusitania in that disaster of 7 May 1915. His last words were: "Why fear death? It is the most beautiful adventure in life." An old scholar who was dying turned to his friends: "Do you realize," he said, "that in an hour or two I will know the answers for which we have been searching all our lives?" To such death is the adventure of supreme discovery.

(viii) Above all, there are those, like Enoch, who have seen death as an entering into the nearer presence of him with whom they have lived for so long. If we have lived with Christ, we may die in the certainty that we go to be for ever with our Lord.

In this passage the author to the Messianic Jews lays down in addition the two great foundation acts of faith of the Christian life.

(i) We must believe in God. There can be no such thing as religion without that belief. Religion began when men became aware of God; it ceases when they live a life in which for them God does not exist.

(ii) We must believe that God is interested. As the author to the Messianic Jews put it, we must believe that God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him.

There were those in the ancient world who believed in the gods, but they believed that they lived out in the spaces between the worlds, entirely unaware of these strange animals called men. "God," said Epicurus as a first principle, "does nothing." There are many who believe in God but do not believe that he cares. It has been said that no astronomer can be an atheist; but it has also been said that an astronomer is bound to believe that God is a mathematician. But a God who is a mathematician need not care. Men have called God The First Principle, The First Cause, The Creative Energy, The Life Force. These are the statements of men who believe in God, but not in a God who cares.

When Marcus Aurelius was asked why he believed in the gods, he said: "True, the gods are not discernible by human sight, but neither have I seen my soul and yet I honor it. So then I believe in the gods and I honor them, because again and again I have experienced their power." Not logic but life convinced him of the gods. Seneca said: "The first essential of the worship of the gods is to believe that there are gods... and to know those gods who preside over the world, because they control the universe with their power, and work for the safety of the whole human race, while they still remember each individual person." Epictetus said: "You must know that the most important thing in reverence for the gods is to have right beliefs that they are and that they order all things righteously and well."

We must believe not only that God exists but also that he cares and is involved in the human situation. For the Christian that is easy, for God came to the world in Jesus Christ to tell us how much he cares.

The Old Testament story of Noah is in Gen 6-8. The earth was so wicked that God decided that there remained nothing to do but destroy it. He told Noah his purpose of judgment and instructed him to build an ark in which he and his family and the representatives of the animal creation might be saved. With reverence and obedience Noah took God at his word and so in the destruction of the world he was preserved.

As is usually the case, legend adds many a detail to this story. The author to the Messianic Jews must have known these legends and they must have helped to add vividness to the picture in his mind. One story tells how Noah was in doubt as to the shape he was to give the ark. God revealed to him that it was to be modelled on a bird's belly and was to be constructed of teak wood. Noah planted a teak tree and in twenty years it grew to such a size that out of it he was able to build the entire ark. Another story tells that, after he had been forewarned by God, Noah made a bell of plane wood, about five feet high, and that he sounded it every day, morning, noon and evening. When he was asked why, he answered: "To warn you that God will send a deluge to destroy you all." Another story tells that, when Noah was building the ark, the people laughed at him and counted him mad. But he said to them: "Though you rail at me now, the time will come when I shall rail at you; for you will learn to your cost who it is that punishes the wicked in this world and reserves for them a further punishment in the world to come."

Even more than Hevel and Enoch, Noah stands out as a man of faith.

(i) Noah took God at his word. He believed the message which God sent him. God's message might look foolishness at the moment; but Noah believed it and staked everything on it. Obviously if he was going to accept that word of God, he had to lay aside his normal activities and concentrate on doing what his message commanded. Noah's life was one continued and concentrated preparation for what God had said would come.

The choice comes to every man either to listen to or to disregard the message of God. He may live as if that message is of no importance or as if it is the most important thing in the world. We may put it in another way—Noah was the man who heeded the warning of God; and because he heeded he was saved from disaster. God's warning comes to us in many ways. It may come from conscience; it may come from some direct word of God to our souls; it may come from the advice or the rebuke of some good and godly man; it may leap out at us from God's Book or challenge us in some sermon. Wherever it comes from, we neglect it at our peril.

(ii) Noah was not deterred by the mockery of others. When the sun was shining, his conduct must have looked like that of a fool. Who ever in his senses built a great hulk of a ship on dry land far from the sea? The man who takes God's word may often have to adopt a course of action which looks like madness.

We have only to think of the early days of the Church. One man meets a friend. He says to him: "I have decided to become a Christian." The other man replies: "Do you know what happens to Christians? They are outlaws. They are imprisoned, thrown to the lions, crucified, burned." The first man replies: "I know." And the other says despairingly: "You must be mad."

It is one of the hardest challenges of Christianity that we have to be prepared to be sometimes a fool for Jesus' sake. We should never forget that there was a day when his friends came and tried to get him to go home because they thought that he was mad. The wisdom of God is so often foolishness with men.

(iii) Noah's faith was a judgment on others. That is why, at least in one sense, it is dangerous to be a Christian. It is not that the Christian is self-righteous; it is not that he is censorious; it is not that he goes about finding fault with other people; it is not that he says: "I told you so." It often happens that simply by being himself the Christian passes judgment on other people. Alcibiades that brilliant but wild young man of Athens used to say to Socrates: "Socrates, I hate you, for every time I meet you, you show me what I am." One of the finest men who ever lived in Athens was Aristides, who was called "the just." But they voted to banish him. One man, asked why he had so voted, answered: "Because I am tired of hearing Aristides called 'the just.'" There is danger in goodness, for in its light evil stands condemned.

(iv) Noah was righteous through faith. It so happens that he is the first man in the Bible to be called *dikaios* (<G1342>), righteous (Gen 6:9). His goodness consisted in the fact that he took God at his word. When other men broke God's commandments, Noah kept them; when other men were deaf to God's warnings, Noah listened to them; when other men laughed at God, Noah reverenced him. It has been said of Noah that "he threw the dark scepticism of the world into relief against his own shining faith in God." In an age when men disregarded God, for Noah he was the supreme reality in the world.

Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT).