

Jordan Peterson's Confusion over Religious Symbolism: A Lesson from Cain and Abel

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Abstract

Jordan Peterson is a darling among conservatives and religious people alike. In defending religious belief as the only bulwark against a return to the dark ages, it becomes obvious that Peterson himself doesn't believe in what he preaches. People, he insists, should believe in the archetypal symbolism that is only revealed through a close reading of the Bible. If atheists would only read scripture with more sophistication they wouldn't so embarrassingly reject religion, and simultaneously threaten the very foundations of Western Civilization. It turns out that it's Peterson who comprehensively ignores symbolism. A simple Sunday school lesson shows this.

Jordan Peterson has quickly become the go-to public intellectual of conservatives and religious people everywhere. Recently it was reported that no less a worldwide celebrity than Cristiano Ronaldo asked for an audience with the polarizing and controversial psychologist. Peterson's tenacious defence of Christianity and his harsh criticism of atheism are embedded in his commitment to ancient psychological archetypes, many of which he mines from the Bible. He criticizes 'new atheists' for their lack of intellectual sophistication and their failures to interpret ancient Scripture accurately, and by this he means 'symbolically'. I will argue that it is Peterson, not atheists, who ignores or simply fails to understand the symbolism in biblical archetypes.

Even though many Christians have taken a shine to Peterson's enthusiasm for their worldview, it is well known that Peterson himself is

rather coy about the existence of God, the historical Jesus, and the historicity of the resurrection. It's indisputable that he's a champion of Judaeo-Christian *belief*, but the emphasis should be upon *belief*. He's very much in favour of people believing in (or simply accepting) the large narrative features, the symbolism, of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The erstwhile 'gospel' or 'good news' he endorses is more of an invitation to the great human adventure that he thinks is expressed inspiringly in so many biblical stories.

Peterson uses what he takes to be biblical metaphor and imagery to flesh out the general contours of human existence. The archetypal trajectory of 'human being' is to find oneself expelled from a garden of youthful innocence and naivety, and to choose a partner with whom to face an ominous and unforgiving world – like Adam and Eve. We have to make sacrifices and live with those consequences – like Cain and



Abel. We may face a flood of destruction wherein we must build an ark of refuge against the storms and apparent judgements of God – like Noah. We must liberate ourselves from the enslaving spirit of ‘Egyptian captivity’, embodying the heroism of Moses. A promised land beckons, but we may well have to wander in a desert of aimless toil before taking hold of it. We will have to wrestle with God – which is what the word ‘Israel’ means! Along the way our enemies may defeat us. Our friends might betray us or deny us. We may cry out, ‘My God, My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?’ We may well ‘die’. We may well descend into hell! But, just like Jesus, we too can rise again!

Peterson issues the same challenges without sonorous allusions to ancient Scripture. Similar life-lessons are taught by appeal to Disney stories like *Pinocchio*, and the *Harry Potter* series also gets pressed into service from time to time. But there is an undeniable academic gravitas that he likes capitalizing on from the literary

classics. Peterson’s own lack of historical and theological sophistication would be evident to most scholars of the Bible and of historical theology. Most would see his project for what it is, namely, the same old baked-over, warmed-up liberal theology that swept into mainline Protestant denominations (e.g. Anglicanism, Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, etc.) more than a century ago. This was all characterized by a rejection of historical creeds, opting instead for more existential, demythologized – let’s just call them relevant – interpretations of Christian tradition. The initial aim of liberal theologians was to make Christian faith look intellectually progressive to its ‘cultured despisers’. Wanting no part of ‘progressivism’, Peterson has similar aims. He too wants religious talk restored to a place of cultural respect, a respect he thinks new atheists have threatened.

Frequently, those singled out by Peterson for special criticism are people like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. These ‘new atheists’

are apparently naive in denying the existence of God and rejecting biblical ‘truth’. What they’re actually doing, argues Peterson, is undermining the foundations of Western Civilization in the acid bath of moral nihilism. They’re unaware, apparently, that their religious misunderstandings have catastrophic consequences for society. ‘God’ and ‘Good’ are synonymously indistinguishable for Peterson; one cannot reject the former without rejecting the latter. He is in no way coy, ambiguous or metaphorical about this! Our predicament is real. Atheism results in the moral degradation of the individual and will result in the moral decline of the West, unless Judaeo-Christian beliefs are protected.

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Peterson has generated the impression among his followers that his interpretations of the biblical text are profoundly insightful. Let’s look specifically at a passage from Genesis that Peterson claims to have personally ruminated over for many years before finally grasping its ‘true’ symbolic significance. Adam and Eve have been expelled from the Garden over that little episode with the talking snake and the forbidden fruit, known theologically as ‘The Fall’. They begin a

family with two sons, Cain and Abel. Here is the text from the New International Version:

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering – fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.’ (Genesis 4:2–7)

The question any child could ask about this story – and the question that vexed Peterson – is why did God accept Abel’s sacrifice and reject Cain’s? Was God simply being arbitrary? Was Abel just fortunate enough to earn God’s favour while Cain’s best efforts went for nothing?

This is precisely the interpretation that Peterson offers in his irrepressible ‘archetypal’ manner. You see, part of becoming an adult means that we engage in projects we take to be valuable and meaningful. Sometimes they work out and sometimes they don’t. Cain’s project failed, and he responded with jealousy and resentment towards his brother whose project luckily enough succeeded. Peterson’s epiphany is that we must all commit to something, acknowledging the possibility that our efforts will betray us. What the biblical narrative teaches is that the nature of the project itself matters less than how we respond to life’s inevitable setbacks. You can hear the conservative drumbeat of self-reliance and personal responsibility building in the background. I digress.

If one was simply a motivational speaker or self-help guru on YouTube, that message wouldn’t warrant robust moral analysis of the sort I think is important. The problem is that Peterson postures as someone with deep hermeneutical and theological insight – so much deeper indeed than

the sophomoric dismissals of annoying atheists. And the bigger problem is that countless numbers of religious people agree that he must be right. I think we should agree with Peterson about one thing: interpreting ancient mythology can be a painstaking business. With regard to the text above, there is no mention that Cain and Abel knew in advance which sacrifices would be pleasing to God and which would fail to meet divine expectations. Should we accept Peterson's self-help interpretation that our projects are arbitrary from a divine point of view? After all, there are many 'good' projects to which humans can commit.

Short consideration shows that Peterson comprehensively misses the plot! He does what is entirely predictable in religious circles, and tries, metaphorically speaking, to put lipstick on a pig – or in this case, possibly a sheep. He tries to salvage an ancient story with modern moral sensibilities – all the while convincing himself and others that he's ever so faithful to the text.

Most students of ancient Classics are taught to read, for example, Homeric epics or the Bible with the supposition that nothing in the text – not the tiniest detail – is accidental. The words and phrases in these ancient works didn't survive oral tradition and ultimately get recorded for no reason. Again, Peterson is right. There is a great deal to be mined from a close reading of the text. Something that Peterson seems to have missed, however, in his close reading is that there is a great deal to be mined from what is *not said* explicitly in this account. The silence should be interpreted in the light of an avalanche of cultural, anthropological and 'archetypal' evidence. Seen in this context, it's obvious that Abel wisely understood which offering might win God's favour, and indeed that Cain ought to have known better.

Unlocking the meaning of this story and rejecting Peterson's interpretation is found in the first line (Genesis 4:2): 'Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.' If we think about sacrifices in the most primitive and most archetypal sense, ancient mythology typically has gods wanting the sacrifice of a *life* – not the sacrifice of hard work. The tedium and monotony of hard work – for example, the myth of Sisypus

paradigmatically pushing a rock up a hill – is divine *punishment*, not a sacrifice. Humans should know this!

The well-known ancient Greek story of Prometheus, found in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogony*, illustrates this vividly. Zeus has triumphed over the Titan gods, including Prometheus's father, Iapetus. Any powerful, conquering and self-respecting god is deserving of sacrifices. Prometheus 'knows' this. 'Prometheus', meaning literally forethought or foresight, *anticipates* that triumphant Zeus will want sacrifices. We could well accept as an archetype that human beings, including Cain and Abel, *should know*, should anticipate, that a god worth worshipping is a god worth appeasing with a sacrifice. No one does what they want and serves God as they will. There was no 'liberalism' in the ancient world. For thousands upon thousands of years people all over the planet used sacrifices to mollify, appease, placate, cajole, entice the capricious forces of nature. Of course, this is all understood in terms of human agency trying to gain some leverage over that which is beyond human control. And Abel becomes the Judaeo-Christian archetype.

Back to our Greek story. Prometheus 'knew' that something needed to be slaughtered as a symbol of his submission to Zeus. But he tried to trick Zeus, offering him the choice between two different portions of oxen. The rest is Greek mythological history: humans get to keep the delicious cut of beef tenderloin and the gods get the carcass. In any case, the originators of ancient Greek mythology knew something had to *die* to provide the best chances of humans getting what they want! So too with the Genesis story. Cain exemplifies the inferior human efforts to curry favour with God through the sweat of his brow, his labour in the fields. While not a terrible 'offering', it wasn't as good as it could have been! Abel, knowing what was right, killed a most valuable possession: a firstborn from among his flock. An appropriately chosen head of livestock is a symbol of considerable value to the community sacrificing it. It's what makes a sacrifice a *real* sacrifice. It shows the gods just how serious we are about seeking your favour and avoiding your wrath (in the form of misfortune)!

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Unsurprisingly, the sacrifice of mostly non-human animals is a central feature of Old Testament theology, just as it is throughout Greek mythology. Uncomfortably for us in more civilized times, *human* sacrifice also got in on the action in antiquity. In Genesis 22, Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac. God intervenes as Abraham is about to wield the knife, supplying a ram to be slaughtered in place of Isaac. The New Testament celebrates Abraham as the ‘Father of Faith’: ‘By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises

was about to sacrifice his one and only son’ (Hebrews 11:17). In Exodus 32, angry that the stubborn children of Israel made a golden calf to worship, Moses commanded:

‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’ The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Then Moses said, ‘You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.’ (Exodus 32:27–9)

The message is clear: those prepared to do anything God desires may be included in a sacred priesthood. In a less well-known story in the Old Testament book of Judges 11, Jephthah wins a decisive battle against the Ammonites and makes the hasty promise to sacrifice the first thing that crosses his threshold. It turned out to be his daughter. Saddened that she will die a virgin – this apparently being the greatest concern to young girls facing death in the ancient world – she agrees that her father does the right thing in keeping his promise to God. Jephthah, like Abraham, is celebrated in the New Testament, Hebrews 11:32.

Lest anyone think it’s only Peterson’s much-loved Judaeo-Christian tradition that’s in for scrutiny here, I hasten to add a similar story from Greek mythology. In a variety of sources we read the story of King Agamemnon of Trojan War fame facing futility in battle. A prophecy is given to him that if he’s willing to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, the gods will cause the wind to blow, thus propelling his fleet of warships. If he refuses Agamemnon will face defeat. He reluctantly agrees that his daughter’s life is an appropriate price to pay. My point here is simple. The Old Testament has no monopoly on tales that are morally scandalous to modern sensibilities. Both Greek and Hebrew religious traditions had little moral difficulty valorizing humans willing to do *anything whatever* – including killing innocent people.

Let's now turn to the indisputable narrative core of the great Christian tradition, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even the most nominal Christians around the world know that Easter celebrates the trope of John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' The Doctrine of the Atonement is the more theologically sophisticated way of describing the meaning of Easter. Throughout Church history, explaining how the sins of humankind are atoned for in the eyes of a perfect and holy God has been given various interpretations. Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45 both refer to Jesus as one who 'came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many'. I Timothy 2:6 says that Jesus gave himself as ransom for 'all men'. Hebrews 9:15 says Jesus was a ransom to set people free from the sins committed under the old sacrificial covenant. Ransom Theory, as it came to be called, fell into disfavour in the early Middle Ages from theologians who couldn't make sense of who or what was in receipt of the ransom payment. Surely Satan had no real standing to keep human souls captive unless, forfend, God made payment himself!

Ransom Theory gave way to the Satisfaction Theory. Human sin has deeply offended God and this offence needs to be removed. God's holiness must be satisfied. John 1:29 has John the Baptist announcing Jesus as 'the lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world'. Sounding a bit too much like a divine honour-killing and hoping to sound less bloodthirsty, the Penal Substitution Theory was advanced as a moral upgrade to Satisfaction Theory. On this view, human sin is not dissimilar to a crime committed against a perfect judicial system. Because God is perfectly just, retribution must be paid to meet the demands of justice – crimes must be punished in any moral and civilized society. But, on the Penal Substitution Theory God magnanimously agrees to pay the penalty 'himself' by permitting 'his Son' to die in place of the sinful human race. It sounds sentimentally compelling enough, until one considers that only an immoral justice system would permit an innocent person to receive a punishment or serve a sentence intended for and deserving of a guilty person. It

turns out Penal Substitution Theory is not much of a moral improvement on Satisfaction Theory.

These three theories have been dominant accounts of the Doctrine of the Atonement for twenty centuries of Christian history. While theologians will argue over the details, rank-and-file Christians will roughly accept the dictum that 'Jesus died for our sins' and get on with their day. But surely rank-and-file Christians should at least be somewhat appreciative of theologians who down through the centuries sought to rescue the central idea of atonement from its inescapable moral difficulties. It's simply very hard to explain why individual Christians cannot atone for their sins via their own efforts (like Cain) and why Christ's 'sacrifice' was necessary to reconcile sinful humanity to a good God. Luckily, contemporary defenders of Christian faith have an ace up their sleeves, but it's even better when someone with Peterson's academic credibility can play it for them. Let everyone join the chorus: 'It's a mystery!' Peterson adds that it's a symbolic mystery, and no one should think too clearly or too literally about that. Why did God prefer Abel's sacrifice to Cain's? Why did he prefer blood to sweat? It's a mystery.

Is anyone today surprised that the general theological trajectory seeks to distance itself from ancient and medieval barbarism, finding refuge in intellectual obscurantism – I'm sorry, 'sophistication'? Genuine 'atonement' is completely removed from the Christian narrative, even if the language and ritual endures – *symbolically*. Jesus represents a life devoted to noble purposes like feeding the poor, healing the sick and loving thy neighbour. And as the great story goes, his popularity was envied and his ministry was misunderstood, and he was consequently unjustly crucified for his efforts. But, fear not! The spirit of Jesus rises again whenever rank-and-file Christians figuratively take up their own crosses and join with other Christians in the work of the church. The story of Jesus – though it need be true in *no* historical or metaphysical sense – is a flashing neon symbol of hope. Hope in the face of evil and ultimately hope in the face of death. Belief in an actual or physical resurrection is neither here nor there.

Jesus is best understood as a consummately good person whose *example* of ‘sacrifice’ can live on in countless generations of Christians.

If Jordan Peterson was asked which Theory of the Atonement he subscribed to he would probably be as coy as he is when asked simply if he believes God exists. Regardless, though, of his conservative posture, isn’t it obvious that he’s not actually interested in conserving any of the traditional beliefs advanced by the Church down through the centuries? He doesn’t believe that Jesus served as a ransom payment to the devil. He doesn’t believe that Jesus was the lamb of God, slaughtered to satisfy God’s standard of holiness. He doesn’t believe that Jesus paid a penalty for original sin that ought to have been paid by sinful humanity. Now, Peterson might object. He may well insist that he believes it all symbolically or that he accepts it all metaphorically. Surely, this insistence is consistent with him not actually believing a word of it, or believing it as much as any atheist. The truth of any of it or none of it is irrelevant, as long as people pay lip service to various Judaeo-Christian tropes. It also helps if these tropes are used to defend freedom of speech, small government, and an otherwise conservative political agenda.

Only conservative evangelical Christians and Christian fundamentalists are likely to believe that something truly and metaphysically transactional took place on that cross twenty centuries ago. And, of course, once Peterson and other liberal theologians have ‘baptized’ the story of the crucifixion in symbolism, then even conservative Christians can better hide behind the ‘mystery of the cross’. Remember, Peterson is the guy who wants to defend and conserve ‘archetypes’, as though there is something profoundly meaningful in reaching back into the mists of time and finding life-giving symbols. Well, a sacrifice in the archetypal sense is the offering of a life, characterized by the shedding of blood. The real shedding of blood is symbolic of something! Jesus is represented in the New Testament as ‘the lamb of God’ precisely because Christians believed they needed to meaningfully explain his death. The Christian euphemism is that Jesus died for our sins, but in point of theological fact it wasn’t just that he ‘died’. Everyone dies! Don’t you see,

he needed to be *killed*, like Abel’s offering. It would have accomplished nothing in the sense of ‘atonement’ for Jesus to have grown to a ripe old age only to die of natural causes. The Christian story is that he was slaughtered for our sins in the very same way Abel knew that only the blood of a valued life would win the favour of God. This might be theologically ‘sophisticated’, but it should strike religious people in exactly the way it strikes atheists, namely, as morally repugnant.

Defenders of ‘symbolic sacrifice’ will try to object, possibly by quoting Christian Scripture: ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’ (John 15:13). Modern religious people, and possibly Peterson, will say this is the true meaning of Easter! Jesus is an example of a person who laid down his life for his friends. Such an objection is an attempt to move the goalposts. No one denies that the voluntary sacrifice of one’s *own* life to save another’s is the paradigm example of *moral* sacrifice. We can all show immense gratitude to soldiers, firefighters, etc., who lose their lives in the line of duty – and for countless other examples of ultimate altruism. *Real* moral sacrifice of the sort exhibited by good humans should not be used to camouflage the Christian tradition that celebrates a death on a cross. Voluntarily sacrificing something for a personal conception of the good is one thing; celebrating the shedding of blood to curry favour with a god is quite another.

Let’s be very clear. Peterson aligns himself for moral reasons with a religion whose pedigree traces back through Christ’s sacrificial death, through the rituals of animal sacrifice, right to the archetypal story in which Abel is favoured over Cain. As religious stories go, it’s not terribly surprising or unique. The history of religion is largely the long and immature story of making sense of ‘sacrifice’. There are plenty of reasons for abandoning belief in religion, and one of them is moral. It is profoundly disingenuous to criticize atheists for their immorality and then ‘symbolically’ align oneself with a worldview awash from start to finish in blood and death! The fact that Peterson and other theological liberals can make all that disappear with their theological ‘sophistication’ is hardly surprising, but

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nor is it praiseworthy. In reality they simply mimic a morality that is humanist, not theist, at its core. If he wants to think metaphorically, it is Peterson himself who insists on offering the 'sacrifice' of Cain. Genuine adherents of the Judaeo-Christian tradition have known for millennia that's not much of a sacrifice. One wonders if Peterson really cares about religion at all. It seems rather obvious that he's sweating over a different agenda.

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