

Where It All Began

An Inductive Study of Genesis

A Commentary on Genesis Chapter Four – A Story of Second Chances

Chapter four is the first of three chapters that contain the story of life between the Expulsion from the Garden and the Great Flood.

While the first three chapters of Genesis explore the origin and nature of the physical world, they might be more properly seen as an attempt to come to grips with how to explain how our rather unshakable belief in our freedom of choice and deliberation can exist outside of a universe in which we also acknowledge that each and every event (including, largely, mental events) has a pre-determined set of causes, both in the past, as well as into the future. Since both absolute determinism and man's sense of freedom of the will are truths whose very truth depends upon the falsehood of the other, we have what's called a paradox.

Despite the great benefits of living in a world in which there is natural law and order to count on, without freedom of choice, there can be no accountability or responsibility for our actions, and hence no "law and order", and hence no human society as we know it.

The author(s) of Genesis disguise this paradox in two stories, in the first of which man ("male and female") are created at the "top" of creation "in God's image," from which (among other things) we can understand that man's ability to communicate and freedom to choose set him above and almost outside of the created world, which otherwise seems to be entirely bound in "natural law."

The second story has man and woman created at opposite ends of the creation process. Man himself is created out of the earth itself and receives the breath of life from God. Except for this latter spirit-imparting act, man appears very, very earth bound, and is given the menial task of pulling weeds in Gan Eden. Freedom, in this second account, is not a gift of God,

but a Promethean defiance of God's commandment not to eat and acquire special knowledge.

In the second story, the yielding to desire and the choosing of "awareness" of good and bad results not in the threatened immediate death, but in awareness of self, as expressed in the notion of nakedness. Awareness of self, the text seems to say, is what makes us human. It gives us the knowledge of a qualities unknown to other species, such as "harshness", "good" and "evil." The notion of "self" also entails the knowledge of the possible finiteness of that self (and some argue the awareness of impending, ultimate death) in a universe which appears infinite and whose Progenitor (God) must be surely eternal and uncaused.

The next three chapters will show an ever increasing alienation and separation of created and finite selves from the uncreated and infinite Self. Acquisition of selfhood, self-consciousness, and awareness of our own ultimate demise, are the qualities that make us "humans" and not "mere animals." However, these same qualities are also a curse in which we become aware of the brokenness of our world and our alienation from each other and from God.

Chapter four begins not with a detailed description of the new life style of our first couple in this harsh new world outside the garden, but with an account of creation, human style, which results in the production of two more selves, Cain and Abel. This self-reproduction is emphasized by the author(s) in the strange use of the Hebrew verb **yada** (יָדָע) which means literally to know. As the Old Testament does have other, more graphic words to describe the sex act, so we should resist the urge to assume, as many have, that it is used for the purposes of modesty.

Rather, I suggest, it indicates that because of "self-ness", human sexuality

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becomes a union not just of bodies, but of two selves, which we find expressed in such human expressions as "intimate relations" and "getting to know the other person" and the like which seem quite odd when applied to sexual relations among other species.

The product of all this "knowing" is two more "knowers," Cain and Abel. Our text reveals very little about these two characters except that: (a) Cain was first born, and (b) Cain was a tiller of the ground and Abel a keeper of sheep. We should immediately take note of the marked similarity of this detail to other estranged brothers who appear later in Genesis, Jacob and Esau. In this latter case, the birth order is reversed, and the second born Jacob is the violent agriculturalist.

What are we to make of these two "job descriptions" which therefore do not appear to be accidental? Some commentators have relegated this to an anthropological statement concerning the natural and historical ascendancy of organized agricultural societies over those which are nomadic or pastoral.

But it seems to me to make more sense to consider the manner of being in the world and the way of thinking which distinguishes each way of life. To put it simply, nomads and pastoralists are dependent upon Providence (compare Psalm 23) whereas those who till the ground are the manipulators of nature, seeking security of supply in their ability to control their environment. This is a theme that will retain some significance throughout the rest of the Bible.

While undoubtedly more people in North America are unfamiliar with the story of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain than fifty years ago, still this is one of the best known stories of the Bible to untold millions, perhaps billions around the world. What can explain this extraordinary fact?

To begin with, what we should note about it is its rather strange explanation of

the motive involved. If Genesis were simply a rather clever anthropological accounting of origins of strife, one would probably expect entirely different motives. While two later stories of family strife, Abraham and his nephew Lot, and the brothers Jacob and Esau have to do with land use, inheritance, and primogenitor, this story of Cain and Abel does not involve a conflict about anything physical which normally be expected in a "primitive" culture, such as grazing or water rights, chattels, land, or wimmen.

Dare we suggest that this is not the simple struggle between two people for limited resources, but between two selves, a struggle between acceptance and rejection and of basic "self-worth?"

St. Augustine may have had his passage in mind when he suggested the now oft quoted maxim that every person is born with a God-shaped hole that only God can fill, and that it is the most inner and pressing urge of every human being to fill it, and who cannot rest until that quest is fulfilled. However, as nice as this sounds (especially to us hyper-religious types), this presents a number of logistical problems. If God fills my God-shaped hole, how can He have enough left over to fill yours, to say nothing of six billion other empty holes? Or again, how can something eternal and immeasurable be in one place and in one (or more) persons at the same time and still be "everywhere?" Also, it could also make as much sense to turn St. Augustine on his head and suggest that every human has a human shaped hole that can only be filled by other humans. A third, perhaps better, way of understanding the conflict is to read the text as putting forth the primacy of the relationship between the Parent and the child over that between siblings, and to see in the story a laying out of the primacy of the acceptance or rejection of the child by the parent(s) as being the primary conditioner of life response in human beings.

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Who among you has not witnessed or, God forbid, taken part in the destruction of a family following the death of the last parent, as siblings act out their long suppressed rage at their perception of being less loved than other members of the family?

There is also a widely held opinion that in the relationship of the parent-type to the child lies the foundational conditioner of our most basic notion and response to the God question, and by extension our feelings of self-worth (there's that word again) and at-home-ness in the universe, often not (or perhaps usually not) transcended or overcome for the rest of our lives.

Even the slightest damage to this most sacred relationship has the power to severely limit the productive relationships of the child with other selves forever, even if the damage is only "perceived," until the damage is resolved. Couched though it be in "God" language, the story of Cain and Abel remains an immensely powerful story about the primary motivations and impulses of all mankind, and the extent to which they distinguish us from other earth bound creatures.

Consider the words of Jesus quoted in Mark 7:14-23:

When He had called all the multitude to *Himself*, He said to them, *Hear Me, everyone, and understand: There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!* When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. So He said to them, *Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods? And He said, What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within,*

out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.

There remains much mystery in this tale of two brothers. For example, it is not clear just how "God" indicates his acceptance and non-acceptance of the two offerings. One commentary fantasizes that in the one case, the smoke ascended, but for Cain, the smoke of his offering descended. However, the text itself does not even suggest that the offerings were burnt. Perhaps the author(s) leaves out this detail to suggest not only just how powerful the emotions of acceptance and rejection are for all of us, but also to illustrate just how deeply and mysteriously they lie corroding inside us, crouching (to use the language of the text) inside of us like "sin" which "lieth at the door."

Cain becomes that "croucher" at the door who "rises up" [Hebrew **qum** - **קום**] against his brother and slays him.

The remainder of the chapter, understood in its simplest form, serves as a repetition of the lessons of Genesis 3. Immediately, as in Genesis 3 following the eating of the fruit, God enters the world in the asking of a question, "where is Abel thy brother" (4:9). This is followed by the same sort of excuse making which we witnessed in chapter 3, "Am I my brother's keeper?" You might be interested to note that the Hebrew word for keeper is from the same root as the verb used by God to describe Adam's job in the Garden – "to keep it". Since there is another common Hebrew word used to guard or preserve, this one surely also carries the notion that Cain is to "cultivate" his brother, a more pro-active idea.

In verses 4:10-11, God performs what seems to be a Second Expulsion against

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Cain, expressed in a renewed cursing of the environment. This sequence is often quoted as the first evidence of the notion of "eternal life" in the Bible, when God says that "the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."

This is followed in verse 4:13 by Cain's plea, "my punishment is greater that I can bear."

This in turn is followed in 4:15 with God's covering of Cain, much like the covering given to Adam and Eve in chapter 3.

The land to which Cain and his descendants go is called the land of Nod, from a Hebrew root which means "to wander". And the first thing they do, as all agriculturalists must do, is build a city to help guarantee their security of supply. (Verses 4:16-17)

What follows in verses 4:18-22 sounds like a natural consequence of the agricultural life – the division of labour. Natural, that is, until verse 4:23, in which you learn that Adam and Eve have another son to replace the original pastoralist, Abel. From this son, Seth, is descended Noah. If you're still with me here, you'll now be

puzzled at the language here which describes Cain's descendants as the "father of," for example, all those who dwell in tents, who have cattle, and so forth. All of their descendants were wiped out in the Flood.

Finally, there is a third reinforcement of the theme of murder, violence and the need for reconciliation and a "covering" for sin, in the brief story and poem of Lamech (verses 4:23-24).

The whole story which started in a human creation story that ended in tragedy, ends with the birth of Seth, who is "appointed" to replace Abel, and who will become the ancestor of the first "savior" of mankind, Noah, the "comforter." With the birth of Seth, the text says, "men began to call upon the name of the Lord." Perhaps this means that God will no longer intervene so automatically in the affairs of men in the future, and men will start looking for this missing God.

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