

Where It All Began

An Inductive Study of Genesis

A Commentary on Genesis Chapter Four – A Story of a Murder/Suicide

Greetings friends far and near

First of all, for the near friends. We have decided to hold the next Wednesday evening class on Thursday evening. I belong to another organization which meets on the first Wednesday of every month. My inability to attend that evening puts the evening at risk, since I have the key and Vicki cannot always be sure if she can show up if I give her the key. When we meet, we will consider if we will meet on the Thursday following the first Wednesday each month, or not meet that week. Other evenings present attendance problems for other participants.

In class, we are supposed to be doing a review of the first seven chapters of Genesis which we covered last fall and winter. Well, here we are at the end of October, and we're still in chapter 4!

However, when one builds a building, one is not allowed to put up the basement walls until the building inspector has come and inspected the footings you've poured. Although I must confess that I once built a building and when we poured the footings, we were about one cubic yard of concrete short of finishing the pour at the end of the day. We quickly scoured the premises for every rock and brick we could find and dumped it into the form to fill it up. We then waited for an hour before calling the inspector so that the concrete would be set. It looked fine to him until he noticed how remarkably clean the job site was. You'll be happy to know that he let us proceed and that now, 25 years later, this building still stands straight and true.

Anyway, we've sent you the various papers that Vicki and I have been inspired to write as

a result of our discussions in the class regarding the first two chapters of Genesis.

In the past three weeks, we've been discussing what Christian theology generally terms "the Fall", namely the origin and entrance of sin into the world and into the nature of Adam. We chose to ignore this and look at what the text itself seems to be saying, which I covered in my essay on Chapter 4.

Currently, we are mulling over the story of Cain and Abel (also covered to a certain extent in my essay). The class has noted that the conflict, remarkably, is not, as one might expect if the book were written by an anthropologist or other scientist, about possessions. Cain was not jealous of Abel because he had sheep or because Abel's sheep were wandering into Cain's grain fields and eating up all the profit. My wife is fond of pointing out that so far the only woman mentioned is their mother Eve, so they can't have been fightin' over the wimmen.

Interestingly, it would rather appear, at least on a superficial level, that the first murder was the result of a religious war. On that level, we might well note that religion and world view seem to continue to play a major role in the most vicious and atrocious wars and conflicts to this very day. Here we should take care to note that the text does not make note of any impetus for the "religious" acts of Cain and Abel, specifically from God.

Nor does the text indicate or prescribe the form in which the "offering" appears. Some Rabbinic tradition holds that it was a burnt offering. But the text is silent. No altar is described, nor hilltop, mountaintop or sacred grove: no meetinghouse, cathedral, mosque or temple is portrayed. No silent waiting, no

Where It All Began

An Inductive Study of Genesis

praise band and raised up hands, no swelling organ greet the brothers, nor erudite homily or discomfiting sermon. There is no altar call, and no Eucharist.

Perhaps, as Hugh suggested, they learned of "God" from their parents. Perhaps, as St. Augustine suggests, this longing for God's approval and blessing is built into us. Certainly God is very present in this scene. However, does God have a body? We only hear his unincorporated voice speaking. Can we assume, as in Genesis 3:8, God is "walking" around here on this stage? Or is this voice perhaps a voice in Cain's "head"? "Where is your brother?"

Much depends upon these verses. What are we to make of God's caution to Cain in 4:7, that if "thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?"

Much of these early chapters becomes clearer to us if we recognize that the Author(s) are trying to present the human condition in a way which is both foundational as well as one that will help understand the issues which may help lead forward. If we understand that the first two chapters present, in two stories, both the free and the predestined aspects of human nature, then perhaps this paradox which comprises the full nature of "self" (that aspect of humans unique to them as opposed to all other animate and inanimate creatures) is what (1) presents the chief cause conflict between humans as the conflict between "selves", (2) explains why and how we can conceive as the Sufficient Reason and Cause of the World also as a Self, with whom, like Job (chapter 23)¹ we are in both conflict AND

¹ Then Job answered and said:
"Even today my complaint is bitter;
My hand is listless because of my groaning.
Oh, that I knew where I might find Him,
That I might come to His seat!
I would present my case before Him,

awe!, and (3) lays out the battleground in the self between the determined and indeterminate realms of our souls.

So we are left with the question – just what does it mean to "do well?"

And fill my mouth with arguments.
I would know the words which He would answer me,
And understand what He would say to me.
Would He contend with me in His great power?
No! But He would take note of me.
There the upright could reason with Him,
And I would be delivered forever from my Judge.
"Look, I go forward, but He is not there,
And backward, but I cannot perceive Him;
When He works on the left hand, I cannot behold Him;
When He turns to the right hand, I cannot see Him.
But He knows the way that I take;
When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.
My foot has held fast to His steps;
I have kept His way and not turned aside.
I have not departed from the commandment of His lips;
I have treasured the words of His mouth
More than my necessary food.
"But He is unique, and who can make Him change?
And whatever His soul desires, that He does.
For He performs what is appointed for me,
And many such things are with Him.
Therefore I am terrified at His presence;
When I consider this, I am afraid of Him.
For God made my heart weak,
And the Almighty terrifies me;
Because I was not cut off from the presence of darkness,
And He did not hide deep darkness from my face.

Where It All Began

An Inductive Study of Genesis

Darcy wanted to know why God made us this way. The example I gave was of a mother who placed a large bowl of chocolate chip cookies in the middle of a table around the edge of which she placed carrots, celery, whole wheat bread and the like, then cautioned her children that they could anything from the table except the cookies. Just why did God put those two trees in the Garden? Even your Mom put the cookie jar as far as she could out of your reach.

To find that sin entered the world through a devil-snake really just begs the question: who created the snake?

At least in the stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, we see the emergence of the concept of self as determinate of what it is to be human. It is not language and speech, nor intellect and rationality which separate us from the "animals." But it is in the consciousness of selfness and personhood that lie the "knowledge of good and evil" and the possibility of sin. Suddenly, with the emergence of self, we are conscious of other selves, and the finiteness of our own self. We contemplate the being and non-being of our self. We project our self onto the world and its other denizens. All of a sudden we picture the family cat as having a self, despite the fact that it cannot see its "self" in the mirror. Even our goldfish become persons though they have no more memory than a carrot. To all of God's other creatures, to kill or not to kill, to eat or not to eat, has only to do with compulsion, and nothing to do with freedom and choice of good and evil.

Thus our sin-nature is bound up with our free-nature. It is the human paradox: if we were not free, then we could not sin, because to sin means to be accountable for sin. Thus we are doomed to be free, and free to sin.

But we have not answered Hugh's question about what it means to "do well." Nor do I

believe that this answer is provided to Cain. After all, he goes away and "rises up" and kills his brother.

A favorite Bible quiz question of mine is to ask, what ultimately happened to all of Cain's descendants?

Immediately after the cursing of Cain, the text of Chapter 5 opens with the words of a new creation in which Adam and Eve have a third son, named Seth. Unlike Adam and Cain and Abel, the text does not give Seth a job description. But in the eighth generation, Seth becomes the great⁷ grandfather of Noah, the comforter, who was righteous and walked with God in his generation. Cain's descendants are all wiped out in the Flood. We are not descended from a murderer. But we do not have a job description and we do not know who we are "ourselves" or what it means to "do well", yet.

The text does not presently answer Hugh's question, but only shows a way forward. A way that will eventually, after many harrowing experiences and narrow escapes, burning deserts, triumphs and bitter disappointments, up two mountains: Sinai and Calvary.

Ed Alexander
Hamilton, Ontario
October 29, 2006