

General Comments on Genesis 4-5

Good Families, Bad Families; Good Cultures, Bad Cultures

These chapters present two contrasting patrilineal genealogies, one bad (ch. 4) and one good (ch. 5). The underlying message is the influence of parents over their children, particularly bad parents (cf. Exod. 20:5-6, Exod. 34:7, Num. 14:18). Evil proliferates among Cain's lineage as they get into partying, weapons and murder. Contrasting this is Seth's lineage, who calls on the name of the Lord and walks with Him, ultimately bringing about Noah, who saves humanity (ch. 6).

The chapters also clearly suggest the formation of human society along the lines of normative behavior. In ch. 4, the Lord expels Cain and he forms a separate lineage from that of Adam in ch. 5. Two different parallel genealogies are presented, even though Cain is the son of Adam, he is cut off from it because of his behavior. Two societies presented based on the behaviors present among them.

Implicitly addressed is the extinction of Abel's line, as he has none because he is murdered, and replaced by Seth's line, hence 4:25. The murder of one person is the annihilation of their entire lineage if they have no heirs. Also note Cain is entirely dropped from Adam's lineage, which starts at the end of ch. 4 and runs through ch. 5.

General Comments on Genesis 4

Comments on Genesis 4 will address only the text of this chapter, not the related text of PofGP Moses 5. See the comments on Moses 5 to address the contents of that text.

For additional scriptural references to the story of Cain and Abel, see Hebr. 11:4, 1 John 3:12, Jude 1:11, Hela. 6:27, Ether 8:15, D&C 124:75, all of which portray Cain in a negative light.

Traditionally, the story of Cain and Abel has been interpreted in terms of farmers versus nomadic herders (e.g., Speiser in the Anchor Bible Commentary on Genesis), but modern commentators (e.g., Nahum Sarna in the JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis, Everett Fox in The Five Books of Moses, and Robert Alter in The Five Books of Moses) dismiss or reject this

reading. There is much more to this story than "farmers and shepherds don't get along".

Post Garden Life: The Lord, Serpent and Agency

After Adam and Eve are exiled from the garden, the history of man continues with the first two men naturally born outside of the garden. Eve bears Cain and is grateful to the Lord for him, but Cain is not zealous for the Lord, while his younger brother Abel is. Cain offers a poor sacrifice and is rejected by the Lord, so the Lord warns him to change his behavior. Instead, Cain gives into his passions and murders his younger brother. The Lord confronts the unrepentant Cain for his actions and curses and exiles him.

The underlying theology in this story of fratricide is that of life and death outside the garden, and the continuing roles of the serpent and the Lord. The serpent melts into the background but is still actively deceiving and urging sin, while the Lord remains prominent, overtly warning and punishing. Neither the adversary nor the Lord have retired from human affairs in a post-garden setting, as both remain actively engaged and interested in humanity. The adversary seeks death and destruction, and the Lord seeks life and justice. But neither overwhelms human agency, as men are left to choose what they will.

Abel chooses to worship the Lord with the best he has. Cain chooses to murder his brother. While men are free to choose what they do, they are not free from the consequences of their actions. Cain is called to account for murdering his brother, and is bitter when he is punished. In every way, Cain chooses to be the worst, and that is his choice to make. The Lord values the agency of man, but has to step in when humans get so bad that all of humanity is jeopardized, which we see here when Cain murders Abel, and then again in ch. 7.

An implicit message in this chapter is the Lord was telling the truth and the serpent was lying with respect to death when they spoke with Adam and Eve in the Garden. The Lord warned them they would die, and the serpent said they wouldn't. Now, the Lord actively works to prevent human death while the serpent is actively encouraging it.

The Initiation of Sacrifice: Delayed Gratification

The present story explores how selfishness is an

existential threat to human society. The conflict revolves around ritual sacrifice, which Abel willingly makes, and Cain grudgingly makes. Ritual sacrifice is a form of delayed gratification, the idea that sacrificing something now can benefit you later. This is a uniquely human behavior that helps create a productive and cohesive society where people ideally act selflessly for others instead of selfishly for themselves.

Cain is jealous of Abel, so he murders him, and the result is he is estranged from human society because the Lord curses him and because he fears for his own life. The underlying message is human society is built up by selflessness and destroyed by selfishness, the ultimate manifestation of which is murder, which not only destroys the life of the victim, but also the life of perpetrator. The murderer is still alive, but they are cursed by God, their own conscience and by all other humans who now mistrust them.

The ethics of the story are built around Cain's rhetorical question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" In human society, if we answer "No" then we are like Cain, but if we answer "Yes" then we are like Abel. The ideal is we make the best sacrifices and selflessly help those around us, and not grudgingly offer poor sacrifices, attack those who make us look bad, and complain when we are found guilty of our crimes and ostracized for being antisocial. The unpleasant reality of human society is there are good people who will be victimized by evil people. And while the good suffer at the hands of the evil, the evil suffer their entire lives being cursed by God and shunned by fellow humans. Notable entries in Cain's family generations are evil, where notable entries in Seth's family generations are very good.

Purpose of Ritual Sacrifice

In a modern context, we see animal sacrifice as brutal or barbaric. But, in reality, animal sacrifice was simply making the routine practice of butchering an animal for human consumption a religious ritual. There were different types of sacrifice, and the most commonly performed ones were effectively sacred barbecues with shared portions for all present. The exception would be burnt offerings, which were entirely consumed in fire. All others were ritualized cook outs.

The theological purpose of ritual sacrifice was twofold. First, it was intended to represent the expiation of sins for

the one making the sacrifice, the literal scapegoat, with obvious messianic applications. Second, life is given up to perpetuate life in another. At the most fundamental level, the humans need to eat something that was alive in order to themselves live. All humans need to eat plants and/or animals to stay alive. There is nothing a human can consume to live that was not formerly alive, or produced by something living. The human life is prolonged at the expense of another life.

The human is clearly not eating the life of another, hence the symbolic prohibition of eating blood. The blood represents the life of the animal, which is poured out on the ground (cf. Gen. 9:2-5) as an offering to the Lord.

An additional practical purpose was intended to bring people together to share a communal meal, where people who might not have anything or enough to eat could eat.

In a modern context we rely on professional butchers to process the meat we eat. In an Old Testament context, particularly in the time of the Torah, that was not the case. By the time we get to the New Testament, professional butchers were widespread, and in many cases that was a problem, because through Rome-occupied Middle East, the Romans largely ran the butcheries and they were affiliated with the local pagan worship centers, rendering the meat unclean to observant Jews. This forced them out of the convenience of professional services. This would be akin to us today being unable to purchase meat and having to raise animals and butcher them ourselves in order to eat meat.

When we think of animal sacrifice, we should not see it as something barbaric. Rather, we should see it as a routine act that was co-opted by religious ritual. In the specific case of Cain and Abel, Cain withheld his offering out of selfishness, where Abel selflessly offered up the fattest firstlings of his flock, so all could partake.

Comments on Genesis 4

¹ And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD. ² And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. ³ And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. ⁴ And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel

and to his offering: ⁵ But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. ⁶ And the LORD said unto Cain, why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? ⁷ If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. ⁸ And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

v1-8 Adam and Eve have two sons, one is a shepherd and one is a farmer (v. 1-2). Cain the farmer sacrifices some of his produce to the Lord (v. 3). Abel the shepherd sacrifices the best of his flock to the Lord, and the Lord favors Abel (v. 4). The Lord does not favor Cain, and Cain is angry (v. 5). The Lord questions Cain as to why he is angry (v. 6), and points out that if his sacrifice were good then it would be accepted as such, and if it is not good then he is in danger of sinning against the Lord, but he can still change (v. 7). Instead of repenting and offering a good sacrifice, Cain murders Abel (v. 8), who makes him look bad.

v1 "Cain", the name means "smith", as in a metal worker, as is referenced in his descendant Tubal-Cain in v. 22. The name is also a word play on Eve's statement "I have gotten" which in Hebrew is "qaniti".

v3-4 Where Abel brings the fattest firstlings of his flocks, Cain withholds and does not share much. By implication, Cain's offering were paltry or mediocre, not the best he had to offer. Cain was selfish and kept the best for himself. The issue here isn't that the Lord prefers animal sacrifice over grain or vegetables. The issue is the intent of the one making the offering. Cain is selfish and Abel is selfless.

v6-7 Everett Fox in his The Five Books of Moses (Schocken Books, 1995) translates these verses as follows:

YHWH says to Kayin:
Why are you so upset? Why has your face fallen?
Is it not thus:
If you intended good, bear-it-aloft,
But if you do not intend good,
At the entrance is sin, a crouching-demon,
Toward you his lust-

But you can rule over him.

Robert Alter in his The Five Books of Moses (W. W. Norton and Company, 2004) translates these verses as follows:

And the Lord said to Cain.
 "Why are you incensed,
 And why is your face fallen?
For whether you offer well,
 or whether you do not,
At the tent flap sin crouches
 And for you it is longing
 But you will rule over it."

The Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (1985) translates it as follows:

And the LORD said to Cain,
"Why are you distressed,
And why is your face fallen?
Surely, if you do right,
There is uplift.
But if you do not do right
Sin couches at the door;
Its urge is toward you,
Yet you can be its master."

Regarding these verses, the JPS Torah Commentary says:

The Hebrew text bristles with difficulties. Yoma 52a-b designates the passage as one of those in which the precise syntax cannot be decided. It seems to be a forewarning to Cain of the dangerous potentialities inherent in his present mood. The underlying idea is that man is endowed with moral autonomy, with freedom of choice. He can subdue his primitive passions by an act of will; otherwise, they will control him.

Everett Fox's rendering is addressing the Hebrew translated to "crouches" or "couches". The Hebrew term suggests an animal laying down. Perhaps the intent is to conjure the image of the serpent from ch. 3, laying at Cain's door trying to tempt him, which Fox seems to be invoking this with his "crouching-demon".

The construction of the Hebrew of the last line of v. 7 is curiously similar to the last line of 3:16, as compared:

thy desire *shall be* to thy husband,
and he shall rule over thee (3:16, Lord speaking to Eve)

And unto thee *shall be* his desire,
and thou shalt rule over him (4:7, Lord speaking to Cain)

The comparison seems to be suggesting that with the Fall, the ideal between the man and woman of them being one flesh falls apart and the non-ideal result is the woman will be subservient to the man. With humanity being outside of the garden and subject to sin, the Lord is warning Cain the serpent desires to have him, but he still has ability to choose whether he will be subservient to sin.

⁹ And the LORD said unto Cain, where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? ¹⁰ And he said, what hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. ¹¹ And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; ¹² when thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. ¹³ And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear. ¹⁴ Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. ¹⁵ And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

v9-15 After Cain murders Abel, the Lord questions Cain as to his brother Abel's whereabouts, and Cain evades the question saying Abel isn't his responsibility (v. 9). The Lord again questions Cain, letting him know He knows what has happened (v. 10). The Lord curses Cain with losing his livelihood of farming because the land will not produce for him, resulting in him having to wander for wild food (v. 11-12). Cain complains to the Lord saying it is too much (v. 13), and everyone will want to kill him (v. 14). The Lord responds obliquely by saying the Lord will take vengeance on anyone committing retributive manslaughter against Cain, and He places a mark on him so people will know to avoid him (v. 15).

Note the Lord doubles down on identifying Abel as Cain's brother, repeating the word for emphasis to emphasize the evil nature of the murder. When Cain complains about the Lord's judgements on him, the Lord ignores the complaint and doesn't reverse any of His decisions, but He creates a mitigation to help prevent additional murders by placing a mark on him.

Also note the only person Cain is sorry for is himself, and he blames the Lord for punishing him too harshly. Never does Cain apologize or feel badly for what he has done to Abel.

v11-12 Where Adam has to deal with cursed ground that he has to till and earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, Cain is now directly personally cursed by the Lord and the curse is much worse than that Adam has to deal with, as the ground will not produce anything for Cain because the ground was forced to drink Abel's blood. The imagery is suggestive of the curse following a natural course of action where the earth is responding to Cain's injustice and punishing him personally for the offense committed against it. Cain made the ground drink Abel's life blood, so now the ground is withholding its life from Cain.

v14 "everyone that findeth me shall slay me", according to the story, there are only four people on earth; Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel. Yet, Cain is concerned about being killed by these other people. This necessarily implies there are others present.

v15 The Lord does not enact the death penalty as a consequence of murder until after the Flood (cf. 9:6). At this point in time, the Lord is apparently more concerned about the effects of retributive killing decimating the society, so He warns potential vigilantes off by threatening them with sevenfold vengeance, implying the Lord's hand being involved against the vigilante.

"mark upon Cain", the nature of the mark is a point of speculation, but is likely something superficial, visually observed, and obvious so when seen by others they know to avoid and not kill him. It could be as simple as the infamy of being known as a murderer, as it is clear from v. 25 others are aware of him killing Abel. The purpose of the mark is to warn others that if they kill Cain then "vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold" and it becomes known among the society, as Lamech invokes it in v. 24.

¹⁶ And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden. ¹⁷ And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch. ¹⁸ And unto Enoch was born Irad: and Irad begat Mehujael: and Mehujael begat Methusael: and Methusael begat Lamech. ¹⁹ And Lamech took unto him two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. ²⁰ And Adah bare Jabal: he was the father of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle. ²¹ And his brother's name was Jubal: he was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ. ²² And Zillah, she also bare Tubalcain, an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron: and the sister of Tubalcain was Naamah. ²³ And Lamech said unto his wives, Adah and Zillah, Hear my voice; ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech: for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt. ²⁴ If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold.

v16-22 Cain permanently leaves the presence of the Lord and moves away from the rest of the family (v. 16). Cain goes on with life, having children, none of whom appear to be spiritual in any way, and the notable of which are metal workers who make musical instruments and weapons (v. 17-22). Last noted in the family tree is a murderer even worse than Cain, who kills two people and thinks he will profit thereby (v. 23-24) There is nothing to suggest these people are even remotely religious.

v16 "the land of Nod", Alter states, "Nod in Hebrew is cognate with 'wanderer' in v. 12."

v17 "he builded a city", in the history of Genesis, cities are places of pride and sin, in this case the first city is founded by a murderer.

v21-22 Create musical instruments and making edged weapons is presented in a negative fashion, suggesting the lineage of Cain likes to party and fight.

v21 Isaiah presents similar instruments in a negative connotation, cf. Isa. 5:12, Isa. 24:8.

v22 The name Tubal-Cain loosely translates to "better-smith", meaning he is a better metalsmith than Cain. Fox translates the line "burnisher of every blade of bronze and iron" and alternately adds "craftsman of every cutting edge of copper and

iron". The JPS translates it "who forged all implements of copy and iron".

v23 The KJV is poorly translated. A better translation would be: "a man I kill for wounding me, a lad for only bruising me" (Fox) or "For a man have I slain for my wound, a boy for my bruising" (Alter) or "I have slain a man for wounding me, and a lad for bruising me" (JPS). The meaning is Lamech has killed a man who wounded him and a boy who merely bruised him. He is bragging about being a murderer and thinks the curse from God that is seemingly offering Cain protection will now be even more protective to himself because he killed twice as many people.

v24 Lamech is clearly perverting the curse the Lord lays on Cain. The Lord's intent is to stop the cascade of retributive killing that could result in social collapse. Lamech sees it as some kind of mystical curse or extraordinary infamy that will ward off people from killing him, which is not the Lord's intention at all. Note Lamech isn't cursed with a mark by the Lord to protect him. The Lord is leaving Lamech to his own devices, subjected to retributive killing, unprotected by the Lord's mark.

²⁵ And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew. ²⁶ And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.

v25-26 Adam and Even have another son to replace Abel, who was murdered by Cain (v. 25). Seth also has a son. Following this lineage, they call on the Lord (v. 26), unlike Cain's lineage.

The tragedy is Adam and Eve lost both Abel and Cain when Cain murdered Abel. Seth effectively replaces Abel in Adam's genealogy, and then Cain is entirely dropped from Adam's genealogy.

v25 "Seth", the names means "substituted" or "placed" as in "put in the place of".

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