

7. Cain and Abel

Gen 4

The peopling of the earth was not the point of the Eden story, which told how men came to be grubbers of the ground, rather than guests in the garden. The peopling of the earth is taken up in the Gen 4 story, which focuses on Eve. Mankind now has a progenitress. Cain, like his parents, is a tiller of the ground. Eve's second son is Abel, a herder of sheep.

Both brothers make offerings, but only the offering of Abel, the younger, an offering of meat from his flock, is accepted.

Gen 4:5. . . . And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. [6] And Yahweh¹ said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? [7] If thou doest well, shall it not be lifted up? And if thou doest not well, sin coucheth at the door, and unto thee shall be its desire; but do thou rule over it. [8] And Cain told 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.

Notice how strange this speech is. First, it does not say why Cain's offering was not accepted. Second, what is the speech about? It amounts to advice to control one's temper, since sin will come if one is angry. We have, if only for a moment, what could be construed as an aetiology of sin; the reasons people do wrong things – just possibly, a flicker of the Canaanite view of things.

Cain continues his anger, and kills Abel. Yahweh now responds:

Gen 4:10. What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. [11] And now cursed art thou from the ground, which hath opened its mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. [12] When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee its strength; a fugitive and a wanderer shalt thou be in the earth.

So Cain, who like his parents is a tiller of the ground, kills his younger brother, the newcomer with his flocks.

Cain, though himself rural, will be made the ancestor of the herdsmen. And now we understand the name Cain. He is the ancestor of the tribe of Kenites, the wandering smiths, and one of the pastoral peoples who worshiped Yahweh. We are about to hear an origin myth of those peoples. Says the story teller:

Gen 4:16. And Cain went out from the presence of Yahweh, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

Nod ("the wanderer") is never mentioned again; its location is disputed. For the storyteller, Eden, the Garden of God, was at the center of the world, and Nod was somewhere east of it; just where, the story does not seem to care.

¹This and the other mentions of "Yahweh" in this story are anachronisms, as the story itself will presently prove. The later Yahweh party could not resist inserting them. From here onward, we will mostly retain them, as evidence of Yahwist tampering.

The rest of Gen 4 is taken up with this account of Cain in Nod:²

Gen 4:16. And Cain went out from the presence of Yahweh, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden. [17] And Cain knew his wife, and she conceived, and bore Enoch; and he builded a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch.³ [18] And unto Enoch was born Irad, and Irad begat Mehujael, And Mehujael begat Mehushael, and Mehushael 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 bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of such as dwell in tents and have cattle. [21] And his brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all such as handle the harp and pipe. [22] And Zillah, she also bare Tubal-cain, the forger of every cutting instrument of brass and iron; and the sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.⁴ [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 for wounding me,
And a young man for bruising me. [24]
If Cain shall be avenged seven-fold,
Truly, Lamech seventy and seven-fold.

We recognize the pastoral lifestyle. They dwell in tents, have cattle, make musical instruments (pipes are made of metal), and they are smiths, workers in brass and iron. They are mendicant, and they trade in the things they make.

Gen 2-3 was an aetiology of work, and of a people who live by farming; Gen 4 leads to an aetiology of those who live by herding or smithing or trading. The two together set before us those two contrasting lifestyles.

The origin of related but hostile peoples will be told again, in the story of Esau and Jacob (§14). In that version, true to the general pattern, the younger son usurps the position of the elder. This is the basic literary motif in the Bible. We have the takeover of the agrarian Canaanites by the incoming pastorals, symbolized over and over again. The newcomer supersedes.

²Nod, etymologically “wander,” may be Haran, from which the first wanderers, Abram and his family, came to Canaan. They entered opposite Shechem (**Atlas** 37). The later Yahweh tribe also entered from the east, but lower down, near to Jericho (§38). Thus we have the situation of northern entrants in Canaan, and southern ones in Judah. The aim of the Promise Story (§1) is to link these two as a single tradition.

³Etymologically “founder.” It may be, as some have proposed, that Enoch, not Cain, was the builder of the city, and that we have here a somewhat garbled older tradition.

⁴Etymologically “delightful.” Her mention here is unexplained and thus enigmatic. The other Biblical Naamah is an Ammonitess, mother of the northern king Jeroboam. “Naamah” is also the name of a town, whose location, as so often, is disputed. Here, as with Enoch, we may have a garbled older tradition. It is the way of older traditions to *become* garbled, as they are incorporated into the construction of later traditions.