

8. Seth's Brief Moment

Gen 4:25-5:32

But it was awkward to have human life begin with a murderer. Gen 4:25 goes back to Eve. She bears Seth, who became the father of later generations – until he in his turn was replaced by Noah:

Gen 5:32. And Noah was five hundred years old; and Noah begat Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Why the shift to Noah? Because Seth had his own problems as an ancestor. It is probably significant that Seth is not mentioned again, in any later text.¹ Some have suggested Numbers 24:17, Balaam's curse against Moab:

There shall come forth a star out of Jacob,
and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel,
and shall smite through the corners of Moab,
and break down all the sons of tumult.

The final phrase, *bene Sheth* (above translated "sons of tumult") can be read² as "all the people of Seth," or humanity in general, regarded as children of Seth. That reading is intrinsically problematic, and we need not linger over it.

Substituting Seth in the genealogy takes us back to Eve, and thus to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: knowledge leading to a godlike immortality. Was Seth himself a god? Perhaps; he had long been known as a god in Egypt.³ In later centuries, we hear of Gnostics, both Jewish and Christian, who sought immortality through knowledge of their inner selves, which remembered their heavenly origin, and could thus return to it. Such beliefs can be found: several of the 4c Nag Hammadi texts embody Sethian gnostic ideas.⁴ Still later appears the *Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life*,⁵ based on tree and plant mysticism, and once again, in its own different way, expressing a search for life.

Then the invention of Seth, to correct a genealogical embarrassment, may have led to something even more wayward: a solution (whatever be its origin) that did not permanently solve the problem to which it had been addressed.

And so we see the Canaanites patching their tradition; trying to get it right. With Noah, they finally *will* get it right.

¹The shortened list in 1Chr 1:1 (Adam, Seth, Enosh,[2] Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, [3] Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, [4] Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth) *entirely omits Cain*.

²Levine **Numbers** 201f.

³In Egypt, Seth was at first a monster: a rival, but later the replacement, of Horus. See Redford **Egypt** 14. 24. 36f. 47. 117f/

⁴Robinson **Nag** 7-10. The return to the child state as leading to knowledge of one's origins is also a prominent theme in the classical Chinese text *Dào/ Dǎo Jīng*.

⁵See Quinn **Quest**.