

Genesis 4:1-26

Lesson 1

The narrative now moves to the scene of Adam and Eve in the harsh environment outside God's sacred garden. The amount of time that has elapsed between the events in chapter 3 and this narrative are of no consequence in the story and therefore we are not given any indication of the time span. The focus here is not upon history but on the condition of humanity. This chapter and the previous chapters have some common threads that continue to run through them these themes are: free will, personal responsibility, and inevitable punishment for doing wrong.¹

This narrative focuses upon greed and unbridled ambition and the fact that there are consequences to allowing these things to dominate life. In the previous chapter the sin was primarily against God, here the results of eating the fruit will continue to grow and death will actually come and the breakdown of relationship will

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, in The JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 30.

continue to grow exponentially. Here brother will turn against brother and it is of note that the “fruit of the soil” is prominent in this story as the “fruit of the tree was in the previous story.²

The story that is told here contains so many layers that attempted explanations are very likely to hinder and miscommunicate rather than elucidate. Care should be taken to allow the telling of the story to communicate to the listener appropriately.³ This is really important for all narrative, but here it is critical. It will be important to read the text completely through and allow the listener some time to process this text.

The name “Eve” appears here for the last time in the Old Testament. This chapter divides into four distinct units: Cain and Abel (1-16), the Genealogy of Cain (17-22), the Song of Lamech (23-24), and Seth and Enosh (25-26). The theme that ties together these seemingly disparate narratives is the theme of the development of civilization.

² Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 31.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *The Interpretation series* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 55.

These developments number seven and are agriculture, sheep-breeding, urbanism, pastoralism, music, metallurgy and religion. The very symbolic number seven is used repeatedly in this section: “sevenfold” vengeance, Lamech is the “seventh” generation from Adam, his song refers to “sevenfold” and “seventy-seven;” the number of people mentioned in total from Adam to Lamech’s offspring is twice seven, and the name “Abel” occurs seven times as do the words “brother” and “name.”⁴

This chapter demonstrates the results of not following God and provides background for how God’s “good” creation has become so distorted by the time of the Israelites of the Exodus. The narrative that we have here in chapter four is extremely “terse” and “sketchy” there are indications that this narrative was accompanied by additional information that was known to the Israelites in some form. Questions such as whom did Cain marry and of whom was he afraid indicate that this information was likely common knowledge and presented no problem to the Israelite

⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 31.

community.⁵

4 ¹Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gained a man with the help of the LORD.”

The expression “to know” in the Old Testament is not essentially an intellectual activity, not simply the objective contemplation of reality. It is rather experiential, emotional and more than everything else it emphasizes relationship. This verb has a range of meaning that includes involvement, interaction, loyalty and obligation. It can be used of the most intimate and hallowed of relationships between a man and his wife and also of an intimate, though in no way sexual relationship, with God. This verb is never used of animal copulation.⁶

There is assonance taking place taking place between the name of Cain (קַיִן) and the verb for “gained” (קָנִיתִי) (*Canithi*) which would have given a very poetic ring to this verse. This form of phonetic allusion will continue in this

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 31.

⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 31.

text such as in verse 8 and 15. This verse contains some very difficult wording in the acclamation of Eve. It could mean that Eve has gained a man “with” the help of the Lord, or it could mean that she gained a man “as” the Lord.⁷

Obviously the meaning of these two options say something totally different. In one instance Eve is praising the Lord in the other she seems to be comparing her abilities to the Lord in that she created a man, like God had created a man.

The first of these is the more likely, but there is ambiguity in the text that remains, and certainty is not possible here. There is not a single instance of the definite object marker (אִתּוֹ) meaning “with the help of,” in all of the Old Testament.⁸ Perhaps the ambiguity was intentional and just as is so often the case with humanity the tension that exists is left in place. This tension may be a signal that trouble lies ahead for Cain.⁹

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, in the Word Biblical Commentary Series (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), p. 101.

⁸ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary* (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 103-104.

⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis A Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 97.

There is no real certainty about the meaning of the name “Cain”.

² Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.

The absence of the phrase “she conceived and bore” has led to the tradition that Cain and Abel were twins, since there is no indication of Eve conceiving a second time. The Hebrew name “Abel” (אֲבֵל) means “breath, nothingness.”

The name may reflect the fleeting nature of his life or it may simultaneously contain a reference to his vocation in that Syriac (*hablâ*) means a “herdsman.” Since mankind was a vegetarian until after the flood the function of keeping animals, apparently was for milk, wool and perhaps hides.¹⁰

³ After a year Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,

The two sons subsisted by the toil of their hands unlike the former existence of their parents in Eden.¹¹ The opening phrase of this next verse can refer to an indefinite

¹⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 32.

¹¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 32.

period of time as the word literally means “days” (cf. 24:55; 40:4), but it can also refer specifically to a year (cf. Leviticus 25:29; 1 Samuel 1:21, etc.). It seems to be slightly more natural to take it as referring to a year in this context. It is almost always the case that the introductory phrase that is used here, “after” (אֲחֵרַי מִקֵּץ) is followed by a precise period of time (cf. 8:6; Exodus 12:41). In addition, it seems natural that the sacrifices would be brought at the end of the agricultural year.¹²

4 and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,

The brevity and sparseness of this account has been a source of continual questioning. Questions such as why did they offer sacrifices at all since God has not requested them? Why does God regard one and not the other? Is there something in the nature of either the giver or the sacrifice that causes one to be acceptable and the other not to be acceptable? The worship of Yahweh is presumed, verse 26

¹² Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 103.

not withstanding. Both brothers offer a sacrifice in keeping with their occupation, which seems fitting. It is of note that we are specifically informed that Abel offers “firstlings” whereas Cain simply offers of the “fruit of the ground.”¹³

It appears that both brothers had reason to anticipate acceptance of their gifts. There is nothing in the text to indicate that God must choose one over the other or discriminate in any way between the two offerings. There is no hint of hostility between the brothers or between them and God. According to Brueggemann, “This is simply a family at worship.”¹⁴

⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

As far as the text is concerned the trouble in this story does not begin with Cain but with Yahweh who “had no regard” for the sacrifice offered by Cain or for Cain himself. According to Brueggemann, “Inexplicably, Yahweh chooses – accepts and rejects.” He goes onto say that “conventional”

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 56.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 56.

interpretation is too hard on Cain and not hard enough on Yahweh. He believes it is Yahweh who transforms a normal offering into a life and death situation for us and about us. He says the capricious freedom of Yahweh is essential to the plot here. He says we must resist the effort to explain the text and let it stand as it is written. There is nothing in the text that prefers cowboys over farmers. There is nothing here that would disqualify Cain.¹⁵

Calvin, and those that have followed after him malign Cain and give us a reason for the rejection of his offering and introduce a moral element into the text. Brueggemann suggests that the rejection of Cain is not reasoned and that this is necessary to get the point of the story. "Life is unfair." "God is free." "There is ample ground here for the deathly urgings that move among us."¹⁶ He would seek to blame God for the conflict between the two brothers.

Often our worldview and our view of God very heavily affect our interpretation of the text. Amongst churches of

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 56.

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 56.

Christ we claim to let the text speak for itself, but here is a place where our resolve is sorely tested. We want God to be easier to understand, we want God to be gentler and less adversarial than the text here literally seems to permit. Even in the Targums (the early Jewish, Aramaic translations/commentaries of Scripture) avoid introducing interpretation too early into this story.¹⁷

The more traditional way of interpreting the text here is to insert a moral theme that perceives in the text a hint that the heart of Cain was not open and giving in the way that Abel's was. The hint is in that Abel gives of the "firstlings" while Cain simply gives of the "fruit of the ground." In this interpretation Abel demonstrates a "quality of heart and mind that Cain does not possess." The idea that we then take from the text is that the heart of the worshipper must be genuine and truly devoted to God.¹⁸

Certainly this ideology is taught in scripture the question is does the text here overtly teach this? I would

¹⁷ *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Targum Onqelos.*

¹⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 32.

suggest that it does not with assurance state this. It is certainly true, but the lesson here is perhaps is more complex as life truly is and better understood as reflecting the nature of God, life and the human heart rather than simply focusing on humanity here. I realize that the more common interpretation for us is easier to arrive at and appears to make God simpler to understand, but I would suggest to you that comfort is seldom something that God allows when it comes to our understanding of His nature.

⁶The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?”

In this verse Cain is questioned by God in much the same way as Adam and Eve were questioned in the Garden after eating of the forbidden fruit. Literally it reads his “face” fell here as in the previous verse. Danger is near for Cain and God provides a warning in asking the question.

⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

This verse is filled with syntactical difficulties and the

precise reading is virtually impossible here. The gist of what is being said here is a forewarning of Cain of the very dangerous potential that his anger brings. Very importantly this verse expresses that mankind has a choice and moral autonomy. He can subdue his primal passions by an act of will and if he does not they will rule over him.¹⁹ This issue is an abiding argument among Theologians through the centuries, but this verse clearly gives an indication that human beings have a choice and they have the ability to make the right choice and moral strength does not appear to be beyond them.

⁸ Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

In this verse we have the horrible deed recorded that is the direct result of sin entering into the world. Cain’s depression gives way to an irrational and violent act. The man and the woman had tried to gain immortality through the bringing of children into the world but their first-born

¹⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 33.

instead actually brings the first death into the world. It should be noted that an act of piety descended into murder and death as so often has been the case throughout human history.²⁰

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?”

This verse once again demonstrates the very close relationship between humanity and God as a conversation takes place between God and Cain. Notice also that the deed seems to be followed very swiftly by God’s request of Cain as to where his brother is. In this verse a perennial human trait is demonstrated, but also an expectation from God. We as humans want our independence from each other and yet in reality this is not possible. The expectation from God is that we have a responsibility for each other as is demonstrated in His question. Of note also is that Cain lies directly to God. The question of how far this responsibility goes is open to much debate.

²⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, pp. 33-34.

10 And the LORD said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!”

God cries out in horror at what Cain has done, almost as if this were completely unimaginable for him. The Hebrew text uses the plural form of “blood” here which has been taken to mean not only that the blood of Abel cries out to God, but also all of his potential offspring who will now not be born cry out through his blood which is also in a sense their blood. The guilt for Cain then is not only for his brother but for all these offspring as well. “Whoever takes a single life destroys thereby an entire world.”²¹

11 And now you are more cursed than the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.

In the pronouncement of judgment against Adam and Eve in the Garden God did not directly curse them, but here the situation is different in that God does directly curse Cain. The curse aligns the punishment with the result of what Cain did, he cursed the holy ground of the earth by his

²¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 34.

heinous act and now that ground that had once yielded him food will be cut off from him. The earth itself becomes the instrument of the Cain's punishment. The consequences of this curse will become clear in the next verse.

12 When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

Genesis Rabba 22:26 states that Cain is not condemned to death at this point because death had not yet been experienced by anyone and Cain had no way of knowing that his blow would extinguish the life of his brother. That would mean that he is guilty of homicide and not murder.²² Whether this is totally correct or not God does demonstrate extraordinary mercy in his sentencing of Cain and yet Cain still cannot see this as the next verse will demonstrate.

13 Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!"

This verse can be translated in a number of different

²² Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 34.

ways. The more traditional way is the way this is cited above, but the word translated as “punishment” can also be translated as “sin.” The meaning of the verse is changed dramatically depending upon which of these senses is accepted.²³ Remorse does not appear to be present in any way from Cain so it most likely that Cain finds the “punishment” unbearable and not the “sin” that he has committed as the following verses will demonstrate Cain is deeply concerned for himself and does not demonstrate any remorse for his actions.

14 Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.”

Here we have Cain complaining of his sentence and expressing concern for himself but there appears to be no actual remorse over the death of his brother. Sometimes what is not said is as important as what is said. This verse leaves open the question of whom he fears will kill him until

²³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 34.

later when we get to the genealogy. It is there that we will learn of the other descendants of Adam and Eve. A crime against another human being is simultaneously a crime against God and so in this instance that aspect of the crime is punished by the face of God being hidden from Cain.²⁴

15 Then the LORD said to him, "I promise! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

The manner of the Lord's response to Cain's fear is of note. The initial term (אָבִיר) that I have translated as "I promise" but sometimes is translated as "not so" and frequently introduces a solemn declaration. The language here has two aspects, one is similar to royal proclamation that has the force of law, the other is that it is intended to comfort Cain in his fears.²⁵ Despite what Cain has done the care and concern for him are still expressed by God in this proclamation.

²⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 34.

²⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 35.

The “mark” put upon Cain has often been misunderstood. It is likely that some form of physical mark such as a letter, or a word was placed upon him. In *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* the text indicates that a letter representing the name “Yahweh” was placed upon him. It is perhaps similar to the mark that is mentioned at Ezekiel 9:4-6, and serving a similar protective function to that of the blood on the doorposts from the paschal lamb when Israel was in slavery in Egypt. This sign appears to demonstrate God’s continuing care and concern for Cain despite his actions and his hardness of heart.²⁶

Within both Christian and Mormon circles the mark placed upon Cain was often thought to have been that his skin was turned dark. This, for some gave them an excuse to differentiate their treatment of people with dark skin and those of light skin. This interpretation has largely been repudiated not only by modern authors but even by ancient authors such as Origen who states that all the descendants

²⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 35.

of Cain perished.²⁷

16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Cain is literally sent away from the “face” of the Lord and settles in a land that literally has the meaning of “wandering.” The story that begins with events intended to draw Cain closer to God have ended in him being driven from the presence of God into a lonesome existence of exile.²⁸ He is driven further east of Eden.

17 Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch.

This verse marks the beginning of a new section in the story: the first killing has taken place and God has passed the sentence. A human being has been killed, but life must continue and humankind proliferates. Cain and his descendants are now listed to seven generations. In the genealogy only the first-born is mentioned until the seventh

²⁷ Origen, *Sermon on Numbers*, 18.4.

²⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 110.

generation, where it is segmented and more than one branch is included. This list includes brief narrative material about the arts of civilization that are dispersed periodically.²⁹

The genealogical list contains a silent polemic against the mythological concepts of the ancient world where major advances were attributed to divine or semi-divine figures. In Mesopotamian tradition there were seven *Apkallu*, or mythical sages, that were half-fish and half-man. They rose out of the sea to reveal sciences, the social system, writing and art to humanity. *Enlil* the air god, created the mattock; *Enki-Ea*, a god of watery chaos, was closely associated with magic and its practice along with wisdom, the arts, crafts and music. For the Egyptians it was the god Thoth who invented the scales and the balances; Osiris who taught humanity agriculture and the arts of life; Ptah was the patron of artists, craftsmen and men of letters. Other cultures had similar myths.³⁰

²⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 35.

³⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, pp. 35-36.

This tendency is tacitly rejected in this chapter. The seven days of creation are in some sense paralleled by these seven generations of humanity. Mankind became a co-partner with God in creation. There is also a negative aspect to ascribing these developments to the line of Cain. The technological development of humanity often outruns the moral development of humanity. The line of Cain will not be mentioned again in the Old Testament and even his death is not recorded. The same can be said of his descendants as the entire line passes into oblivion.³¹

Verse 17 begins with a reference to the wife of Cain and begs the question of her origin. *Jubilees* 4:9³² and

³¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 36.

³² "And Cain took his sister, 'Awan as a wife, and she bore him Enoch at the end of the fourth jubilee. And in the first year of the first week of the fifth jubilee, buildings were constructed in the land. And Cain built a city and he named it with the name of his son, Enoch. And Adam knew Eve, his wife, and she bore nine more children." O. S. Wintermute, "Jubilees" in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 61.

Sanhedrin 58b³³ have Cain marrying his sister. Though the narrative of Genesis does not specifically state this it leaves no other possibility open. Cain was the founder of urban culture. Since the soil was accursed to him he put the soil to use for totally different purposes.³⁴

18 To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech.

19 Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.

Lamech is apparently the first polygamist and it is at least possible that attributing the achievement to a descendant of Cain may be meant to indicate condemnation

³³ “Come and hear! Why did not Adam marry his daughter? So that Cain should marry his sister, as it is written, For I said, the world shall be built up by grace. But otherwise, she would have been forbidden [to Cain]? — Once however that it was permitted, it remained so.

R. Huna said: A heathen may marry his daughter. But should you ask, If so, why did not Adam marry his daughter? — In order that Cain might marry his sister, that the world might be built up by grace. Others give this version: R. Huna said: A heathen may not marry his daughter; the proof being that Adam did not marry his daughter. But that proof is fallacious: The reason was that Cain should marry his sister, so that the world should be built up by [Adam's] grace.”

³⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 36.

of this practice.³⁵

²⁰ Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock.

²¹ His brother's name was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe.

²² Zillah bore Tubal-cain, who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.

²³ Lamech said to his wives:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;

you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:

I have killed a man for wounding me,

a young man for striking me.

**²⁴ If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.”**

³⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, pp. 36-38

²⁵ Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.”

²⁶ To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD.

This verse is notable as it is considered to be the point at which people began the practice of prayer. In some senses it is noteworthy that it is separated from the practice of offering sacrifice. In other Near Eastern religions the two are very closely connected and the practice is more closely aligned to a magical practice than a prayer. By this I mean that there was sense in which they sought some form of direct manipulation or at least bribery when they combined these two practices. The separating of them here indicates a very different practice in relation to Yahweh.

Synopsis

This narrative takes the story of humanity from the point of their exclusion in the garden to the beginnings of urbanization and what we might term as civilization. The reactions of humanity when confronted with the disappointments of life is demonstrated in the unfolding of this story with the development leading from the rejection of God to anger and then to homicide. There also seems to be an undertone of hostility in this text against the rise of civilization as a mark of rebellion and hostility toward God and relationship with Him.

God continues to demonstrate his merciful and tender care toward Cain even in his hostility, sin and selfishness. This section perhaps also demonstrates the futility of civilization and technology as the ultimate solution the problems that face mankind. The more they develop these areas the further from God and the less dependent on him they will become.

Main Points

- The continued rebellion of man against God and moral conduct.
- The continuing concern and care of God for humanity in spite of their hostility and determination to make poor choices.
- The rise of civilization and technology among the ungodly line of Cain.